

Chapter 124: The last stretch.

There was a trail up leading to a ridge facing the entrance to the lone mountain. Viv knew they would have to climb that then walk down to the merl's hidden city. They immediately set out, Sidjin strangely giddy.

The trek led briskly uphill. With their gear, it would have been an extremely challenging task, but here Viv had a power of 21 and she was fit. It merely counted as more than a nice afternoon stroll.

The Deadshield Woods smothered them with its pervasive aura, yet Viv never felt it move and they were never sidetracked. The path was rocky and most barren, leading her to believe that the woods might only teleport them around if they couldn't see where they were going. Kind of like... quantum thingies. She was in an uncertain state so long as she could not observe the treeline.

Given how magic here worked, it might even be true.

The morning turned into afternoon, then into early evening as they proceeded to basically climb a small mountain chain. They didn't see any merl or signs of them, but Viv fully expected that they'd be spotted by sentinels far above and would soon receive a visit.

The pair set upward into a small valley cut off from the wind. It was already chilly here, but Sidjin was a dear and soon they had a ward system complete with temperature control and, at Viv's request, non-lethal measures. They fell asleep side by side, confident nothing out there could pierce their defenses without waking them up.

The next morning, there were still no signs of the merls.

Viv led the way as they approached the ridge. She recognized some of the rocks and gullies she had passed on the way down almost four months before. The stiffly inclined terrain made progress challenging. Thankfully, her lover came in clutch once more. He would shape stairs out of the mountainside on regular occasions with nothing more than a wave of his hand. That was probably for effect too. Viv let him flex and teased him when he did so. Even then, the pair was starting to worry.

They reached the last hurdle when they stepped onto a plateau with a small pine forest and a very deep lake of glacial blue water. Viv felt some resistance and looked down, finding a transparent thread drifting in the cold wind. She shivered.

"Hmm, I think I stepped into... a spider thread. And it might have been an alarm."

"It was definitely a spider thread, darling."

Sidjin pointed up. There were webs around some of the trees, the dense lattices still holding morning dew.

“Oh,” Viv said. “Oh no.”

A moment later, a massive eight-legged creature emerged from the edge of the meadow. It was similar to the warrior spiders Viv had faced back at the village, though lighter in color and a bit leaner. The monster clicked and hissed.

On its back, a merl sat.

“Hello hello!” it said in Enorian.

Sidjin greeted him happily in a tweeting tongue. it felt strange in the mouth of a human, but it was obviously working. The merl seemed excited.

“He says he’s normally posted below but they retreated when the necrarch roared. Sometimes, it goes out to hunt and the merls who stay are never found again. He’ll gladly lead us to... are you alright, darling?”

“I hate spiders I hate spiders I hate spiders I hate spiders I hate spiders I hate spiders I hate spiders I hate spiders I hate spiders I hate spiders I hate spiders I hate spiders I hate spiders I hate spiders I hate spiders.”

“It’s perfectly fine. Our friend Gillis here says the shamans have domesticated a brood mother. The merl are using the spiders as mounts and beasts of burden. It is perfectly safe!”

“But why? Why?”

“I didn’t realize you had something against spiders, darling.”

“They tried to eat me. Many times. Does that count? Also, giant spiders? How are you fine with that?”

“It will be fine. Gillis offered us to ride Spindlecalf. That’s... how he calls the spider.”

“Fuck the hell no.”

“He’ll gather his squad and then we’ll get on our way.”

“Do they also ride spiders?”

“... yes?”

“Can I burn the entire valley down?”

“You don’t have the red mana to do that.”

“Dammit.”

The merl patrol walked back on their mounts. It annoyed Viv that eight legs made the monsters much more stable. They moved effortlessly while Viv... did not. Sidjin and herself had to accelerate to match even their slowest speed. This changed after they passed the ridge and the ground flattened a bit more. Giant spiders were apparently not that fast on flat ground, a bit like the merls themselves. Or at least, not their cruising speed.

The squad stopped around mid morning to feed their mounts from gourd containers filled with some sort of slurry that smelled strongly of fruits and nuts. The humans swapped fresh veggies for their own meat jerky, much to the merls delight. Those were young ones, Viv realized. They were at the edge of the third step. It was possible that they had changed recently to match their new spider-handling capabilities.

Soon enough, the first of the tree-built structures and hanging fields appeared, a sign of return to merl civilization. The laborers showed the same mix of excitement and fear they had the first time Viv had passed through. There were no signs of more spiders, which comforted Viv.

“He says the spiders live in the deep woods, not far from the capital city of Peace-at-last. Sikoua in their language. He says that the spiders accept a symbiotic relationship, that is, he used a metaphor to indicate that. However, there are limits to what the brood mother is willing to do. Relocating is one of them. There are a few spiders in Sikoua. They are used to move goods quickly between floors. Oh, and make silk.”

“If I find a spider in my hair, I’m burning the whole place down.”

“I’ll make a repulsor ward, it stops anything below the weight of a small nut from entering. You’ll be fine.”

Viv grumbled incoherently. Spiders. She hated spiders.

Sidjin was recognized for the first time in the outskirts. A female Merl came and touched his hands, caressing the fingers with reverence. She also showed him her first grandchild. Viv found the moment moving. After that, a small procession followed Sidjin as he moved closer to the pit where Sikoua was hidden. More and more adults came to pay their respect, to express their gratitude. The name of Sidjin was on every lips, well, beak, and runners carried the message far and wide.

Tweek waited for them by the city entrance.

When the two saw each other, Sidjin raced forward to hold the reverent shaman in his embrace, while Tweek took only a few stumbling steps forward. Viv watched the old merl’s thin arms lock around her lover’s broad back with an indescribable feeling of pride. She could see from an angle that Sidjin was crying.

It took a minute for them to separate. When he did, Viv caught the fallen prince’s expression on the smooth part of his face, the one without the scar. Like that, in the shiny light of noon,

he appeared so young and so hopeful, a far cry from the hardened survivor she had grown to love. He must have looked like that in the early days of the beast tide, full of hope. Before his nation cracked them on the bottom of Glastia's long wall. He really had the prince charming persona going for him.

Viv felt a strange feeling of possessiveness fill her heart. She wished she could capture this happy Sidjin to preserve it in amber when he woke up in screams in the middle of the night. She also felt a little envious that someone else could trigger such a reaction, but it was an ugly feeling and she smothered it quickly. That envy was soon replaced by anger at those who had made a bleak world bleaker through the selfish blade of self-interest at any cost. It made her a little bit mad.

She saved that tiny ember of wrath for later, choosing instead to wear her most brilliant smile. Today was a happy day. Revenge had no place in it. Instead, she mingled and talked with those few who could speak Enorian. It was a bit difficult to admit being 'Sidjin's mate' instead of Viviane Saint-Lys, certified badass and teenage dragon wrangler extraordinaire. It would be fine for one day. Three hours at least. Two hours.

There was, of course, a party. At first, Sidjin tried to translate for her but she insisted he just had fun. This was his moment. Tweek and himself spoke in a mix of merl and northerner. It was the first time she'd heard him speak his native language for so long. His voice felt deeper, but maybe that was his imagination.

They talked, they drank, they moved to the statue where Sidjin both laughed and cried. They teared up talking about the departed and drank to every saved family, every recovering clan. They feasted on meat and fruit and a strange bread made from a tree's inner pulp. Viv was content staying as an outsider, for now. Towards the middle of the night, Sidjin made a spell demonstration to the amazement of the locals. The celebration spread throughout the city like a wildfire. By the early hours of dawn, the primitive rendition of Sidjin had been replaced by a cartoonish version of himself by his own hand. He had even spelled the chin to be as square as a brick for 'extra virility'. The two humans made love until dawn then they promptly fell asleep. The party calmed down the next day.

Sidjin spent the next day building a teleportation circle and talking to his dearest friends. Fortunately for the fallen prince, the merl had a hangover tea that did wonders for the plastered mage. As for Viv, she had made sure to stay hydrated throughout the night and had thus escaped his cruel fate. The merl were going to be granted the tools to reach civilization. Sidjin had the right to one teleporter for personal use according to his contract, This would be it. As promised, he would not profit from it financially.

Viv was a little surprised since the merl had favored isolation so far, but the spiders changed the deal. The merl still had a dearth of elites after the mauling they'd taken on the walls but siege tarantulas had a tendency to even the scales on account of weighing upward to three tons. It was time for the merl to trade and obtain iron when they could. Sidjin would help them. And if anyone tried to bother them, they would have to contend with the woods, the spiders, the merl... and Sidjin.

Before they left a day later, Tweek and the elders gifted the couple rolls of royal spider silk. It was one of if not the most expensive fabric on Param by surface. It took to enchantments almost as well as silverite did. Viv already had designs to get herself a new battle robe. Soon after, they left, with Sidjin promising to return often.

Viv returned to Helock on a beautiful autumn evening. It had been cold and rainy in Losserec. Her day also felt a little shorter, the sun setting a little earlier. Viv was one of the few privileged people on this planet to experience jet lag. Or teleportation lag. She was back to having first world problems.

There would be no academy break for the next six months. Instead, the students were expected to travel on various missions to prove their abilities in their selected subjects. This allowed mage apprentices to serve their own nations, and for the freshly recruited wild talents to get a taste of what they could expect after graduation. Most of those would then join their patrons permanently while a few would switch allegiance, and those who preferred to work alone could take the time to find their paths. It was a well-practiced method.

As for Viv, she would accept or refuse Elunath's offer by the end of the semester. She judged it unwise to wait until she started to die to do so, and Solfis had described the process in detail. Her organs would start failing one by one, at first temporarily and then for extended periods of time. Her existence would become miserable rather quickly. Even the support of the Academy and the elemental fruit she had consumed would only mitigate the symptoms. No, there was little reason to extend her agony since she would be unable to find valuable things to sell the archmage. She just had to work twice as hard while she was still hale and gaining power.

This led her to Elunath's receiving room, alone, where the chiseled mockery of a man waited for her with his perfect physique and his barely veiled condescension.

"Hello. You are here, so I assume you have something for me?"

"Yes. How much would you give for this interesting find?"

Viv picked a sealed box and slammed it on the desk, unlocking it a moment later. A chilly aura of death and rage filled the pristine office like a stain on a porcelain cup. Elunath's perfect face twisted even further, which Viv thought couldn't possibly be done.

"Where did you — Nevermind, I suppose I can guess what kind of ruins can produce such a terrible artifact. Please tell me you have not wielded it?"

"I'm more of a knife girl myself."

"Of course you are. Just know anyone who touched that is probably being eaten alive and turned into an aberration right now. What a dreadful weapon. I will be conducting an aura analysis then destroying that thing, as you should have if you had any brain."

Viv didn't reply, merely smiled instead.

"I will buy it off you for seven years. And only because I want it off the streets. There is nothing good to be drawn from something so vile. It is an antithesis to everything this world stands for. A cancer."

It was comforting to see that despite the stratospheric opinion Elunath had of himself, he still possessed some common sense.

"That leaves you with seventy-three years, three months."

"I have a collection of texts that will allow you to decipher primitive human and ancient Harrakan."

"I already have sufficient knowledge of old Harrakan," Elunath said dismissively.

"Even the idioms?" Viv asked with fake surprise. "The important events as well? Cultural references?"

"Give it here," the man replied in a tired voice.

Viv waited for a few minutes while Elunath leafed through the first of the collections Solfis had prepared. He moved faster than any scholar could, thanks to stats fuckery, but Viv could still tell when he stopped longer than usual after finding an insightful translation. He also had a quick glance at the primitive runes dictionary.

"Nine months for the Harrakan one, but only because it will allow me to use the ancient human translator to its utmost. I will admit... it is a tremendous find. I will give you twelve years for that, as there are some precious northern texts I can cross-reference... hmmm. Yes. In any case, congratulations. Sixty years and six months. Do you have anything else?"

Viv showed the core. As soon as it cleared the bag, Elunath's eyes widened with envy.

"Ah, what a magnificent specimen. Necrarch, yes? An old one?"

"Very old."

"Yes. What an extraordinary find. It is almost a waste... but no, this will guarantee the success of the operation. It is worth twenty years, as I said before. You have just saved me quite a bit of time and expenses. And proven yourself immensely resourceful. Well done."

Elunath extended his hands, but Viv declined the request.

"I'll hold onto it. For now."

She saw a hint of fury in the man's eyes for the tiniest moment, an instant so fleeting she might as well have imagined it. It was as if the overwhelming presence he emanated had solidified and she was hitting a wall. Yet, his composure never broke.

"Very well, it is your right. The end result will be the same in any case... unless you lose it."

"Very few people know I have it at all, and I trust all of them to keep it secret," Viv replied politely.

The two stared at each other, hidden behind their smiles.

"If you think this is best. Anything else?" Elunath asked.

Viv turned up a few precious resources, including necrarch claws and a few mana-saturated ingots of precious metal. They would have value for a smith and she supposed Elunath might find an interest in them. In the end, her time was reduced to thirty-seven years.

It was much better than she anticipated.

"That's all for me," she finished with as much calm as she could.

"Very well. My turn then?"

"Hm, yes?"

"Yes? Or yes."

Viv resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She hoped there would not be any time left on their contract, or the servant contract would make her life... difficult.

"Yes, you may begin," Viv replied.

Elunath swallowed his anger once more. It occurred to Viv that she should really try to control herself. There was no need to provoke every authority figure she came across. Just half would be fine.

"I seem to recall that you would not be adverse to some covert activity, so long as it remains righteous. Am I correct?"

"Yes, although I would prefer to learn more before agreeing to anything."

"Naturally," Elunath smiled. "It so happens that the Skaima family has been gaining a lot of influence recently. Now, I do not begrudge lesser clans the drive to improve their lot. Helock depends on a healthy competition to ensure the wiliest and most capable politicians of each generation rise to the top. Unfortunately, the Skaima's ruling couple has been resorting to... shortcuts. Several of their opponents have disappeared recently, assassinated by a fairly competent mage. After careful observations, I have determined that the Skaima have been relying on something called a hidden branch. Are you familiar with the term?"

“You mean a secret group?”

“No. The expression is Helockian. It refers to a hidden branch of the family tree, a talented mage trained in secret so that they may follow a path of both mage and infiltrator. Someone tries this every few generations. It seldom ends well. Can you guess why?”

“I assume they are not treated very well.”

“Precisely. In order to maintain the cover, they must be pariahs with little official talent. The discrepancy between their usefulness to the family and the recognition they get in return always leads to disaster. Either they take revenge on the leaders or they make mistakes. Grow too cocky. I have identified the man whose status and attitude do not match as Jin Skaima. You will intercept his carriage as it returns from a nearby village and attack it, posing as highwaymen. Your mission is to get him to demonstrate his magical abilities in front of the other occupants, nothing more.”

“You mentioned highwaymen, plural?”

“Indeed. You will render assistance... oh, let me be perfectly honest. Your role is to manage young Sonagi while he holds Jin Skaima back. You certainly have the ability to manage Skaima yourself. Unfortunately, your brand of sorcery is too specific and you will easily be recognized. Sonagi has an even distribution of several elements he uses rather well. You need to handle everything else for this operation.”

“Can I bring outside talent in? I don't have experience in brigantry.”

“You may use all the resources you deem fit so long as the job gets done. Oh, and another thing. Should you or your allies be compromised...”

Elunath let her finish the sentence.

“You will deny all knowledge of our actions?”

“No, I will kill you in your cell.”

“Ah. Well.”

“This will grant you another ten years. If you succeed.”

“I accept but I have a question. What if Jin Skaima decides to kill the other passengers and blame it on us. Remove the witnesses?”

Elunath huffed a little laugh.

“It did not take you long to figure that out. The other passengers will be a noble family, a local one. If Jin dares kill them, I will... strongly advise the bereaved to investigate him. He will fall, no matter what. As long as you get him to use his power. Rob him of all his

belongings. If necessary, humiliate him. People like him are very sensitive to humiliation by someone they consider their lesser.”

“I understand.”

“Good. This file contains the details on the operation, itinerary, schedule, patrols, all you need. Do not take too long with the robbery or you may have pursuers. Oh, and contact Sonagi quickly. He needs time to... get ready.”

“What’s the issue with him?”

“He will tell you himself if he feels like it, though as for the symptoms, you shall notice them rather quickly. Off you go then, I have another appointment.”

Viv left without a word. Lani was waiting in the antechamber. One of Elunath’s servants, Lani was a blue mana mage with very pale skin. She always wore blue robes whenever Viv had met her.

“You should avoid provoking him,” she whispered once they were far enough away.

“You were eavesdropping?” Viv asked back. The door had been closed.

“No but we have grown with him as adults and mages so we are more sensitive to his mood. Elunath tends to keep score. Your service will be easier if he has a better opinion of you. Although, no matter what, make sure it is short.”

“Is there something you’d like to tell me?” Viv asked after a short moment of silence.

“I would be some alderman’s wife latching an eighth child to my teat now if he had not found me, not a respected scholar of the arcane. He rescued us from a mediocre life. All of us. But you are different. You are prideful. Probably noble-born. Taking orders will not come naturally to you, and you are too old and stubborn to be molded. If it only takes a few years, you can endure it.”

Viv watched Lani as she walked but the woman averted her gaze, her spine ramrod straight. They passed by another woman Viv had not met. This one was tall and tan with a powerful brown aura. A sari-like cloth covered her lithe body. She was taller than Viv. The woman sneered at Lani on the way. Viv waited until they were close to the entrance to ask her next question.

“How long is your contract for?” she asked.

“Another twenty-three years.”

“By the gods! This is horrible...”

Lani smiled a bitter rictus that never reached her eyes.

“We do not all have the luxury to choose. Even as a servant here, I have more freedom and power than any woman from the village. My skin is not dry from the salty wind and my hands are free of calluses. My room does not stink of fish gut and unwashed bodies. I am one of the privileged few. This is the world you live in now, Viviane the Outlander. Never forget that.”

The door closed on Viv.

“This isn’t my Harrak,” Viv replied to the thick pane.

“This isn’t the world I’ll build.”

Viv returned to the hospital in the afternoon and stayed there until late at night. As expected, there was a wave of new amputees to take care of. She worked relentlessly, only stopping to have the priest heal the scars on her hand, the result of the necrarch’s spell. The witch was not beyond some cosmetic surgery. They also smoothed the dragon scar on her arm, the one Arthur had given her with her first fire. Viv thought it looked super cool and it had an emotional value as well. The next day, she returned to the five fishes inn where Solfis was waiting alongside his second, Lim the fell-handed. She had her arm in a sling.

“Your doing?” Viv asked as they sat around a table.

//Lim has recently faced some challenges to her management.

//Fortunately, she has managed to outlive enough of the competition to stay ahead.

//I have provided a permanent solution to most issues upon my return.

//You may consider the situation resolved and our position in Helock strengthened.

“Ok good, because I need to commit highway banditry.”

//Are we diversifying, Your Grace?

“It’s for Elunath.”

Lim the fell-handed went over the plan Elunath had proposed and delivered her verdict immediately.

“It is completely retarded,” she uttered in broken Enorian. “Made by a man with a swine for a father.”

“Can you elaborate?”

“This place, good, but no tree. Plan says put tree on the road. No tree around. Have to fell tree then drag it. This place has traffic. You are seen long before the carriage can be stopped. It is bullshit stupid.”

“What do you propose then?”

“You will have mage, yes? Have mage use brown mana, make ground soft and sticky. They all know this spell. It stops the carriage. Then we come out.”

“We?” Viv asked.

Lim shook her head, frizzy hair drifting with the movement.

“You are stupid. Highwaymen are always at least five or six. You need eyes on the victims and someone to grab the valuables. Any less, guards suspicious. Who is the target?”

“Jin Skaima.”

“No,” Lim insisted. “The target is the nobles and their gold. We are here for the gold. We have a minor talent mage with us. The target reveals he is a mage. We poison him, run. They go back. He is caught.”

“Oh, misdirection. I like that. And you said we would poison him?”

In lieu of an answer, the dark-skinned woman produced a needle from thin air. A single drop of transparent poison dripped down its length, landing on her ink-soaked nail.

“I poison.”

“Why didn’t you try it on me?” Viv asked, suddenly suspicious.

When Viv had first met Lim, she had been after the kidnapped Arthur. Lim had guided her through the Helockian underground without resisting.

“I see you cut assassin above you like meat on the market square. You blocked his knife with a steel shield. Always have dark armor around you. Always look at me. Never too close. I checked. No safe opening.”

“Huh.”

“It was well done. Very smart for a caster. I approve. Now, when we stop the nobles, I poison Jin. That way, he cannot fight when he wants to fight.”

//Lim’s path allows her to activate the poison she injects as she desires.

//Increasing or halting its effects.

“What fucked up path needs to manage poison?”

//Lim is a blackmailer.

//Her entire path is dedicated to forcing people into doing things they do not wish to do.

//By any means necessary.

Lim smiled. It wasn't Viv's first time fighting with assholes on her side but Lim certainly took the cake.

"We will have to train first," Lim said with conviction. "You are not highwayman material."

"Well, thanks I guess."

"No. I do not mean the mind, or the guilt. I mean that you walk wrong. Talk wrong."

Lim tsked softly before reclining in her chair. She stared at Viv with a strange intensity that Viv found unsettling when compared to her otherwise plain appearance. Lim cultivated that plainness like a careful garden. She was dressed in a low level clerk robe, didn't wear jewelry besides a simple ring, and held her black hair back with a simple band. No makeup smoothed the harsh lines of her face. Viv could have walked by her a hundred times without thinking much about it. Only now, in the recess of the tavern's secret room, did she look like the predatory mind she was.

"You walk like war mage. You look at men or things when you want. You do not move around groups that might hurt you. You do not look at a powerful man and think, must I bow? How deep? There is no fear in your head and no bend in your back. This is wrong. Highwaymen are scared. They must always run. If you wait for too long, mounted guards find you, you die. You sell to the wrong person, you die. Your share is too big, or too small, you die with a knife in your ribs. Except, you are a woman. So you are raped first. Then, you die. You want to be a highwayman? You need to be very afraid and a little crazy. I can show you. But you cannot be you."

"Alright. Fine, whatever. We can practice a bit while we wait for the carriage. Please arrange the details and find me men, I need to go fetch our mage."

//I shall send an urchin to help you.

Finding an address in Helock was not as easy as counting street numbers. First, most streets had no name. Second, if they had a name, it was called the three whores alley or the stiff pisser lane. As Viv found out, one of the places had those two names at the same time, depending on who you asked. It would have been easy enough to find a house in a richer part of town. Find the closest major estate then walk in the indicated direction, asking staff or reading names.

Sonagi didn't live in a nice part of town.

"Are you sure it's the right way?" Viv asked her guide.

The street boy's face turned into a rictus of abject terror. Viv immediately felt like shit.

"It is ma'am, am not lost, swear on my mother, I do. Just two more turns. Two more turns! Please!"

“It’s fine, calm down. I am... merely surprised.”

“Oh. Yes, weird place for a mighty mage, beg your pardon. It’s old Gyrna’s slum. Cheap but clean and ordered. She got sons and those got cudgels. It’s the best for those who are down on their luck. You still need to pay on time. Or else, cudgels.”

“Huh.”

Surrounded by dilapidated houses, Gyrna’s ‘pension’ was a high-walled compound made by blocking off three of the four ways of some backstreet crossroad. The brick and cement partitions looked amateurish yet sturdy. Someone had made a token effort to paint one side, at least. A pair of thuggish guards only a few evolutionary stages below sapience watched them approach. They were clean in rough cotton clothes and wore the cudgels she’d been warned about. After tipping the urchin since she could find her way back by herself, she stopped by them and removed her hood, giving them time to understand who, or what, she was.

While the pair exchanged their lone neuron back and forth by means of bovine glares, Viv inspected the place. Gyrna and her brood had turned the center of the crossroad into a garden with a couple of sickly trees and bushes, now denuded of their leaves. Someone had swept the ground recently. It wasn’t filled with detritus like the rest of the street.

The two thugs were at the stage where they were looking at each other in alarm. Viv decided they were ready enough for communication.

“I am here to see Sonagi. Kindly lead me to him,” she said.

After two seconds of delay, the first grasped his cudgel in a death grip and tried a reply.

“No killing on property grounds.”

“If I were here to kill, I would not be waiting for you to guide me. Now, you, please lead me to Sonagi. I am with his employer.”

“Uh? Ah, alright. Then. Yeah. You stay there, Nug. I’m going.”

The guard walked resolutely towards the back of the property. It was silent in the late morning as, she suspected, most of the dwellers were actually working. Sonagi’s quarters were at the back on the ground floor, sharing this side of the block with a frowning, veiled woman who squinted at Viv as she passed. The first thing that struck the witch as she passed by was the smell.

While the rest of the compound smelled as fresh as possible for something stuck in a filthy metropolis that engaged in fishing, the stench of rancid booze and the reek of those who digested it permeated the air. Viv undid the half-decent ward on the door without much issue, then she opened. Then she took a step back.

A veritable cloud of alcoholic sweat almost made her gag. It was dark here, the light of the sun reflecting on a crystalline landscape of empty bottles. Some still hid dregs of potent liquor. A shape was sleeping in the cot, the only furniture besides a broken wardrobe held upright by some violation of the laws of gravity. Viv approached, then reconsidered.

“Is there water here?” she asked the thug.

The man smiled and nodded. They had a well in a corner with a wooden sign warning that releasing wastes within would be punished with instant expulsion. Viv started to draw water but the thug stepped in, voluntarily filling and carrying the load for her. She only picked it back up at their destination. After asking the thug to step back a bit, she upended the entire thing on the sleeping man’s form.

“Arg! You asshole, I’ll fucking kill youuuuuuu!”

“Wakey wakey motherfucker,” Viv greeted congenially.

“You bitch. If it’s money you want, I don’t got any. Now... fuck off!”

Viv felt a kinetic spell latch on her chest and push. It would have smashed her out of the door if she had not coated herself in mana beforehand.

Viv was starting to suspect the thug had helped her to see at least one haughty fucker brought low. Fortunately for Viv, she had been brought low before and came prepared.

The man’s control despite the circumstances spoke of great skill backed by effort. His eyes cleared a bit.

“Ah. Fuck.”

He sat down and waited for her to speak.

With some light on his features, Viv finally got to see the man who would cover her back. In theory. He had a soft, almost dreamy face with large brown eyes that would have made him cute in another life, but the ravages of poor living were obvious. His eyes were bloodshot, his skin yellow and pallid, drawn taut over hollow cheeks and topped by a dirty bird nest of light brown hair. The stained shirt falling from his gaunt frame revealed a skeletal shoulder blotched by sores and a bruise. He stank to high heaven.

“So... has the council finally decided to finish me off? I see no guards.”

“I’m here about a job. A common acquaintance led me to you.”

“A job? Oh. Oh! Shit, you’re one of his girls! Of course. My bad I... Let me just get. Urgh.”

Viv watched him blearily sort through trousers and shirts she would not use to soak piss off street paving.

“Would you mind waiting outside?” he asked “I got to take a dump and I drank my fill yesterday so... you know. Gonna smell worse.”

Viv slammed the door shut behind her.

There was perhaps four days left before the attack.

There... might be a problem.

Chapter 125: Evil deeds.

Viv's father used to say that criminals were not stupid. It was just that the police rarely ever got the smart ones. Viv intended to be smart.

Breaking the law around Helock was pretty much a death sentence if caught. There would be no slap on the wrist for a fake bandit attack done for a decent cause. The Paramese courts of law and their enforcers didn't do extenuating circumstances. The only thing awaiting her would be a noose and possible torture before. Both Lim and Solfis expected the attention to shift quickly to Jin Skaima and his clan, but there would be a few hours when the guards would want to catch the daring highwaymen hunting so close to the city walls. They would get no mercy. Only higher ranking officers would realize this was a targeted hit, much later.

And so Viv prepared.

Lim procured disguises, which Viv wore before just to make sure everything was fine. They left the city to practice the maneuver on some empty road near the shore. Even then, Lim's crime family posted sentries so no hunters or foragers could spot them and report strange occurrences. They left nothing to chance.

And if Viv thought the lack of cameras and overall low technological level would make her task easier, she was dead wrong. In the countryside, there was no such a thing as a stealthy escape. If she crossed a village, people would know and recognize a stranger in their midst. Foresters could find tracks. Locals knew all the hiding spots. There were always marauding bands of children to notice a campfire trail. No, every last aspect of the plan had to be carefully managed up to and including the escape vehicle (a horse-drawn carriage) and the hide hole. At least Lim's associates had skills to hide their tracks.

Then there was Jin Skaima himself.

Viv researched the man and she had to give it to Elunath, he might be an asshole but Skaima was much, much worse. It was nice for her to better the deal while ridding Helock of

such a psycho. Jin Skaima used red and gray mana to form overheated blades of energy he used to slice at great speed.

Viv had mostly seen red mana specialists create fire, but obviously red mana could be conjured as such, the same way she called for black mana. That's what Jin Skaima liked to do. He also liked to make those blades explode no matter who was around. Each of his hits came with an increasing amount of civilian casualties. He had even slain a child, though since the victim was poor, no one had made a fuss yet. Truly, Jin was a piece of shit that she would have no regret sending to the gallows. If that was how executions worked here.

Elunath had picked well.

The last problem was Sonagi, Nagi to his 'friends'. The man was halfway competent when he was just in the sweet spot between sober and buzzed. Sober wouldn't do, and drunk was worse. The dodgy healer who had brought him into a semblance of functionality had warned that the disgraced mage needed to be dosed with booze on the regular. Going cold turkey might just kill him outright.

It wasn't that he was unwilling either. Viv could see traces of fear and hope in the scruffy, washed up mage. He had even bathed for the occasion. It was just that a week wasn't enough to make up for months of self-abuse.

"How do you know Elunath, anyway?" Viv asked one afternoon that they were resting from another exercise.

"He didn't tell you?" the man replied, guarded.

Then a moment later, he sighed.

"Not that it's important, or that I'm important. Fuck, it doesn't matter. You are looking at the winner of the Academy's dueling club from 1306 to 1309, when I graduated. At your service."

Nagi gave a mocking bow, sickly limbs extended with shaking grace. He had used the Helockian way of measuring time, proving him to be a native. Every kingdom measured theirs according to their own significant events so that was a mess.

Meanwhile, Viv was calculating. Most people stayed at the Academy for three years at most unless they intended to become researchers. Nagi didn't strike her as a researcher. It meant that he had won every year he was there. Not just that, but he had gone toe to toe with third years as a freshman and Viv had seen third years top contenders during the demonstration matches. They were no pushovers. She had no reason to believe they'd been any worse during his time.

"Were you a free candidate?"

"Nope, I attended a prestigious school, sponsored by the Dorenean clan of practitioners. I was to join them as well."

That meant he was the normal age, sixteen or so. Not like Viv, who was on par with the oldest students and brought to her dueling class years of knowledge and experience in killing people.

“Ok, I’ll bite. You were an extremely promising candidate. What happened?” she asked.

“What else? I got cocky. Helock likes magical might but it lacks tradition even more. And I didn’t know that. My mother was a washerwoman. My dad... well she couldn’t tell me.”

“Secret?”

“No, by oath. He paid her for sex.”

“Okay.”

“But I’m fucking up again, ruining the story. I killed another kid. He was a monster and he had it coming but he was connected and I wasn’t. So the duel was deemed illegal and, well. Yeah. Elunath saved my life so I could take care of my mom.”

“She’s still alive?”

“Yeah, she’s still alive,” he replied, a bit shocked. “Oh yeah, stupid. I talked about her in the past. No, she’s kicking. She just retired from washing. It’s a young woman’s job here. If you know what I mean. We don’t meet much. One of the demands from the bereaved family was that I pay the weregild. So I do. Every time I win in the arena, they take everything I don’t immediately donate to mom or drink down at the arena bar. Can’t even afford a fucking shirt.”

‘How much do you owe?’

“With the interests, should be... two hundred and seventy gold talents right now?”

Viv whistled.

This wasn’t a personal debt. Hell, it wasn’t even corporate bonds. That kind of money was government budget. Nagi would never get out.

At least not legally.

“Have you ever considered —”

“Doing illegal stuff? Hell yeah. Oh, maybe I didn’t mention it. They have my mother. She’s doing well for now, but they have an eye on her. If I escape or I stop paying or they find out I haven’t kept my nose clean...”

He mimicked slicing a throat.

“Course they’re giving me a break now since Elunath probably asked them nicely, but once we’re done here, maybe I’ll get a few nice meals and some new small clothes and it’s back to getting punched in the jaw by thugs for three silvers a pop.”

“Wait,” Viv asked, “you’re not dueling mages?”

“Course I am, but people pay more to see me get tossed around and I need to get my mom her third of the winnings”

He shrugged.

“It’s always the same. I beat mages, get beaten in matches where I can’t use my full power, then I drink. They like it. Like to see me win against cocky newcomers and then get beaten by an old, fat laborer here because he got caught sniffing his mistress’ dirty skirts.”

“Well, thanks for telling me your life story, I guess. So Elunath is keeping you under his elbow for redemption.”

“No, there will be no redemption. The enemy family is powerful. They do not forgive or forget.”

He shook his head, grabbed for the flask by his side and took a gulp under Viv’s dubious eye.

“Hey, it’s time. I needed a little pick me up.”

Eye-watering liquorous emanations burnt Viv’s eyes. It was ‘a drink for men’ as they say.

“Are you two done chatting? Time’s up,” Lim said.

The two stood up for more practice, but Viv was considering her options. Maybe Nagi’s value wouldn’t be limited to the current operation, after all.

Viv found an afternoon to relax with the time-honored tradition of shopping. This time, she would get herself a new armored robe.

With the loss of the skin suit and the robe Varska made, Viv was relying on hand-me-downs and borrowed gear. The following semester would require her to participate in field expeditions in the boonies, not to mention the raid in the deadlands. She needed an upgrade.

Only two tailors in all of Helock could build her the battle robe she wanted. It took her two separate letters of recommendation to get in, one from the medical faculty and one from Sidjin. She provided the spider silk which was the main component and it still cost her upward sixty gold talents, helmet included. It was a fucking fortune. Worth it, though, she hoped. The measurements and instructions took most of an afternoon to go through, during

which she worked with a prim old couple, one the tailor and the other the smith. They were polite and professional. It would take a moment to get finished, but that was fine.

Finally, the time came to commit robbery, and she couldn't wear her real gear.

Viv spent the night before at their hideout with Nagi, just to make sure he wouldn't miss anything. It was clear the occasion was stressing him out and the rationed booze got drunk as soon as it was delivered. As for her, she dyed her hair and prepared a minor glamour she had enchanted herself on a piece of cloth, which would color her eyes dark. She would be using a small crossbow, a northerner cheap weapon. It was a piece of shit compared to the real Yries weapons of war, but it was perfect for unskilled people and lethal at close range. Lim checked and between this and some peasant clothes, she looked the part.

The group departed on their escape cart near noon disguised as transient workers from the coast. They looked ratty enough from a distance not to arouse too much suspicion. After hiding the cart in a prepared recess in the forest, they moved up to wait by the main road. The small group made sure to stay hidden and at a distance.

"Some guard paths have a way to tell an ambush is waiting," one of Lim's goons had explained. "We can't get too close and you can't look for too long or they might find us out. Then the crafty ones talk to the guards and they get a cut if we're found and hanged."

Now the time had come to wait. And wait. For the action. It was amazing how much warfare had in common with banditry.

The main thoroughfare followed the river Shal east towards Helock, and that was where they would be attacking. The bend they had selected was masked from the shore by a thick forest. There was quite a lot of traffic at that time, mostly distant villages sending in late harvests of fruits and tubers. Travelers came by as well, including a few apprentice mages with or without escorts. Nobles moved with a large entourage which forced the group to hide deeper. That was a point of failure of the plan. Viv had already decided that they would retreat if Jin Skaima's carriage happened to travel near such a convoy. There was nothing they could safely or reasonably do.

Fortunately, it didn't happen.

"Is that it?" Lim asked.

Viv was looking at a lone carriage bearing the crest of the family carrying Skaima home, which happened to be a fish. A guard and driver sat at the top of the box-like vehicle. It was also decently decorated while a few crates were carefully attached to its roof.

"That's it," Viv whispered.

She signaled Nagi who started casting. The packed earth and stone road in front of the carriage turned to mud.

The rest of the attack group was sprinting out of cover before the soil was done turning into sticky clay.

“Hey, something’s wrong!” the driver said.

The guard stood, grabbing a crossbow similar to what Viv was using, but he made the mistake of looking ahead while Viv and her companions were rushing from the side. The hardiest ruffians clocked the driver and swarmed the guard before he could even swing the weapon. Viv kicked it aside.

Two of the men busied themselves binding the guard while Viv kept an eye on the driver. The other two strong lads plus Nim and Nagi dragged the Skaima out of their carriage with practiced violence. There was a terrified teenage girl and a young boy, Viv noted.

The driver saw the girl cry and reached for his inner vest pocket, so Viv backhanded him using power to enhance her strength. He fell to the side with a split lip.

“Don’t,” she barked in accented northerner.

Even this had been practiced. Viv was starting to pick up the language, especially the street variety. She still couldn’t speak it though.

“Right, you know what’s happening,” Lim said. “Hand over your valuables and we won’t hurt you. Hey, pretty boy! You listening?”

The blackmailer snapped her fingers under the nose of a young man with sharp traits dressed in a rich doublet who fit the description of Jin Skaima. The children’s parents by his side were in control of their fears but Jin was positively fuming. Viv followed the exchange from the side while pointing her weapon at the now trussed helpers. It was impressive to see a master at work.

“What, the pretty rich boy wants to say something? What do you want to say, pussy? Extend your hand.”

He did not react, so she slapped him. Viv knew Lim must have already injected him with her poison to be so brazen.

“I said, extend your hand. That’s right, you useless little dog. Well done. See, you can follow directions.”

She grabbed a precious ring from his resisting finger and pulled quite painfully, then she looked him in the eye.

“Nice one pussy. Now drop your pants, I wanna see those pockets.”

Viv could hear him grit his teeth. One of the thugs slapped the back of his head while the other was very politely collecting the purse of the family but letting them keep their heirlooms.

Another look down confirmed that the guard under Viv's supervision wasn't moving. So far so good.

Then Viv looked up and saw a fisherman running from the opposite direction, back towards Helock, his discarded basket spilling his catch on the ground.

They were on a clock.

One of the thugs signaled Lim, who redoubled her effort. Viv felt the woman's mana stir and so did Nagi, if his flinch was any indication. Lim was using a skill. Jin was the target. His entire face was now the color of a tulip while tears of rage welled in his eyes. He was almost ripe.

"Damn, you're broke, small guy. Why is it you useless wastes of skin always burn all your money."

Lim went farther, cupping Jin's balls with her hands. That almost made Viv blush from the sheer audacity. That crazy psycho was molesting an assassin mage in broad daylight!

It was also, apparently, too much for poor Jin. He screamed in rage.

The thug behind him pushed him forward then ducked out to cover, and not a second too soon. A large blade of incandescent mana whistled through the air where he had been, leaving behind a trail of superheated air.

"Shit, poison delay," Lim said

One of the stones embedded in Jin's doublet shone brightly. Enchanted, no doubt. More blades emerged over the irate mage's head.

"I'm going to enjoy this," he said, face twisted in a rictus of rage.

And then, the most peculiar thing happened. One of his swords was undone, then another. Jin's face fell.

Everyone else started to run. The passengers picked up the kid and raced away, which was fine. The plan needed them to be alive so they could testify. Viv stayed long enough to free the guard and driver so they wouldn't be caught in the fight. It wouldn't have felt right otherwise.

The delay let her watch a true mage duel when it wasn't fought across a plain from fortified positions. It was... different.

Viv's control over her mana didn't stop at her skin. Rather, she could manipulate it with extreme precision to a length of about her wrists all around her. This helped stop magical attacks. By contrast, Elunath dominated the entire room he stood in. Jin and Nagi were close enough to each other that the spells barely had time to form before a counter came from the other side. It was much less flashy than the other battles she'd seen unless one had great mana perception. And Viv did.

What she saw was two masters at work, striking and deflecting with blinding speed. Nagi used blue mana made slightly solid, somehow, to break the complex blade constructs while Jin kept attacking with increasingly violent flurries of shard, which bounced harmlessly on a sticky brown shield that seemed uniquely suited to stop that sort of impacts. The pair was evenly matched, but only for a few seconds.

Jin was a specialist, a one trick wonder who relied on surprise and blinding speed to achieve his results. Nagi, however, was a prodigy. He quickly picked up on Jin's technique, then simply used increasingly efficient ways to disable his efforts.

After ten seconds, Nagi was dissolving the blades before they could fully form. Jin's face was a mask of despair. This lasted until his eyes rolled and he finally collapsed.

"Looks like the poison finally got the job done," Nagi observed.

Viv didn't say that Nagi could have just slammed him against the carriage and saved them a couple of seconds. The duel had been a masterful display of skill by the washed up alcoholic. Not just that, but he would need mana mastery at a high level to be that sensitive. Even Viv had failed to perceive many of the hints Nagi had seemingly picked on. And he had used concepts from two different colors. That was not just rare. It was extraordinary.

The man had talent.

"What are you fuckers waiting for!" Lim screamed from the underbrush.

Viv realized she and Nagi were standing in the middle of the empty clearing, alone save for the prone assassin mage. In the distance, the rumble of horse hooves thundered.

"Shit."

The pair took off as fast as they could. They were dead last and Viv heard the alarm horns of mounted guards far back. Ok so the law here didn't fuck around when they cared. Good to know.

"Quick, quick!" Lim urged them on.

The two casters had relatively low finesse and that would slow them down. Sonagi also wasn't at his best. Still, the cart wasn't far, and they were rolling away before long.

"Should we toss the coin?" Viv asked, wondering if they should remove evidence.

“Don’t give them more tracks to follow,” Nim replied venomously. “And if we’re caught, that won’t make any difference, I assure you.”

True, Paramese law enforcement didn’t need evidence admissible in courts of law.

The cart wheeled away, sticking to small roads and sometimes even beast trails for a while. There were no immediate sounds of pursuit so they took their time and had one of the ruffians scout ahead.

“Two mounted guards, keeping an eye on the crossroad,” he reported towards the end of the afternoon.

“Think they’re here for us?” Lim asked.

“In full armor? They are.”

“You, the witch. Come with me,” Lim told Viv in Enorian.

Shortly after, the two walked out on the street with shitty baskets and their faces covered with scarves. Two mounted guards soon popped out from behind a tall trunk. They wore chest plates, arm guards that went up to their shoulders while composite short bows rested in sheathes on their saddles. Small bucklers held loosely protected their flanks. They didn’t look like they were joking. Both of them were northerners.

“What are you two girls doing out here all alone?” one of them asked. “You’re from around?”

“From Drosek,” Lim said without stopping.

“Didn’t know anyone from Drosek housed a pale girl. Shouldn’t she be in Helock?”

“She’s my sister in law,” Lim said with a ghastly smile.

Viv and her kept walking. One of the guards spat to the side.

“Freaks.”

Seeing that the two women would not stop, the guards rode forward to block their ways with their mounts. That placed them in optimal range, so Viv didn’t hesitate. Without a word, she used a kinetic spell to pull both shields forward and down, destabilizing the riders. Despite the enormous strength, the two men still managed to grab their saddles and stay upright with superhuman speed.

“Hey, what the —”

Both needles sent by Lim collided with their upper lips. The poison traveled to their brains in a second, then they were both out. Incredibly, they didn’t fall from their horses.

“Good. You pull that one,” Lim ordered Viv in Enorian.

“Hope you didn’t kill them,” Viv replied.

“No. You steal, they let go. Sometimes. You kill, they hunt. You kill one of them? They burn your village down.”

“Oh same as back home then. Kind of.”

The highwaymen left the horses grazing on a small clearing with their riders still on their backs. Viv wondered if they would report the incident at all. If she were them, she wouldn’t. They reached the hideout without further issue.

Viv allowed the distribution of the stolen gold to everyone but herself, which made her somewhat popular. Not that the criminals under Solfis’ control would hesitate a second to shiv her if they thought they could gain something from it and survive the consequences. Still, they partied in secret until early dawn then made their way back to the city in small clumps. The walk back was conveniently boring, and she parted ways with Nagi near the entrance to the middle city.

“So it’s goodbye then. Err, glad it went well. Give Elunath a few good words about me, won’t you?” the man said. He had drunk his share throughout the night and Viv got the feeling he would keep going soon. It was, well, it was a terrible waste.

“Look, I have a question. You said you’re paid in silver at the arena?”

“Yeah. Fights with me are boring. Everyone knows what I’m capable of.”

“I would pay good silver for you to teach me and a friend of mine the fine arts of the duel.”

Nagi winced.

“Not sure it’s a good idea. I’m a pariah, yes? If you associate with me. You’ll make an enemy out of my enemies.”

“I think it’s safe to say I don’t have a future in Helockian high society so we’ll be fine. More importantly, I can feel your distribution. It’s pretty equal across red, blue, gray, and brown. And you have at least two concepts in different colors.”

“Hsssh!” Nagi urged, suddenly serious.

It only lasted for a moment.

“Ah, whatever. Not like people can’t guess. Yeah, so what?”

“I have a very talented friend with a similar profile, and we’re both looking to improve our dueling skills. Your help would be invaluable. As I say, I can pay you well and you wouldn’t need to be punched in the dick.”

“Any contract I take must be shared with my ‘benefactors’.”

“That’s no problem. They can send a goon to pick the coin out of your sad hands after we’re done.”

That got her a chuckle.

“Yeah, you know what? Why not? Let’s give it a try. Can’t be worse than getting pummeled by an indebted baker.”

Now Viv was curious. She’d have to visit the arena at some point.

And now they had a trainer. She wondered if it was Elunath’s plan? Maybe he was grooming young prospects to reach greater heights. Who knew with this man? In any case, that was good news.

Viv followed the fall of house Skaima from afar, mostly through hearsay and her roommate Ereska’s teaside gossip. The town was positively aflutter with the scandalousness of it all.

“We have no doubt the ‘bandits’ were highly trained operatives from one faction or the other. It was all well done. No casualties, which made Skaima’s excesses even more damning!”

If only she knew.

Well, to be fair, Lim was a highly trained operative.

“It’s the brand for the ruling couple. And they will get off lightly. But I digress. To be found using a hidden branch, why, it hasn’t happened since the Thernsent seventeen years ago! Hmmm. And it really shows how stupid that practice is. Who can hide a mage for two decades? Or for that matter, what sort of mage can maintain a cover for that long all while seeing what they’re forfeiting? You’d need to raise one with the perfect personality. Foolishness. No one can truly predict how a child will turn out.”

“That’s not what one of my teachers used to say.”

“Then she spent her career in ignorance,” Ereska sniffed. “And never followed up on her charges. Shameful. In any case, the Skaima are done for. Their rights as patricians have been rescinded by the council. The family will be split into categories for punishment and even their faraway cousins will spend the next fifteen years paying fines.”

“Even the unconnected ones?”

“There is no such a thing as an unconnected one. If you carry a noble name, merchants will look upon you favorably and your opinion will carry more weight, even if you never attend any family gathering. Helock will revert all of this. Such is our way.”

“Fair enough.”

“What do you think, as an outlander? Do you find our laws too harsh?”

Viv shrugged. She’d never really consider Paramese society as fair or unfair because she didn’t see any earth society as fair by nature. To be perfectly honest, she’d care much more if she were submitted to them a little more.

“Several civilizations of earth carried out nine familial exterminations. That means all your relatives going up and down, your cousins, your uncles and aunts, their spouses, your spouse, and your spouse’s parents.”

Ereska gawped, her tea cup frozen midair.

“Ah... Ah. And I thought our ways were merciless.”

“Humans are human everywhere.”

“So it would seem.”

This turned into a discussion into other outlanders who had visited, like the mysterious arcane biologists who had created the Hadals or the adventurer who had explored the Deadlands before her. The next day, classes resumed after a brief speech from the dean. Viv noted that the teachings would focus on warfare and self-defense, which coincided with a general mobilization of all kingdoms to face a renewed threat from the savage lands of Halluria. Apparently, Param was going to war, and the Academy would prepare its students for the inevitable showdown.

During the first magical class, General Jaratalassi informed her she’d be directly involved.

Chapter 126: Montage.

Viv’s mortality notwithstanding, there were a few tasks that required her attention. The first was the raid in the Deadlands to liberate their first major city after Kazar. The second was the impending war with Param’s boogeymen: the Hallurians. She suspected the second part might take much longer as it had been a long time since the last conflict and the various countries had a lot of spare poor people to feed their war machines.

Viv wasn’t sure this was the best use of their people. Or rather, she thought it was a shit idea despite some historical evidence to the contrary. The monsters on this stupid planet had a tendency to stay in their territory until challenged, which explorers tended to do. Then some of the more canny ones realized there were entire places filled with sweet-tasting humans ripe for the taking and ventured out, eager to feast. This led to the destruction of villages

and, sometimes, cities. There was a real incentive to claim savage territory very slowly while also taking land someone else had cleared much faster.

It annoyed Viv but there was little she could do to change an entire civilization.

In any case, her recent progress with magic and more free time gave her the opportunity to develop her arsenal. She had validated all the basic lessons including the ethics one, leaving her with black and colorless mana studies, the military class and dueling. The time had come to make use of the Academy's resources.

The first and most important priority was her mainstay, the purge and flay spells. Those sent tendrils of black mana charged with the meaning of annihilation to sweep the air in front of her. While it was very good at what it did, the range remained fairly limited and it required to stay focused on it. Her ability to cast several spells at once meant that it was not handicapping but she thought she could do better with a 'fire and forget' long-range tool.

The idea came from the latest effort of the black-mana tenured professor, Ashra, to make her class more relevant for the conflict to come. Artillery spells were layered constructs designed to stay cohesive during the arc so they could properly explode at the end. However, shields almost always covered the juiciest targets. There were plenty of historical examples of black-mana minor practitioners lacing the color to the payload to increase penetration. That was the angle Ashra picked, and though the most advanced students made some promising efforts, it was clear they were not at the level to achieve it at the moment.

Viv had another idea.

Since black mana was her payload, she could replace the shield piercing portion by a compression construct, the same she used to create fire through friction. It would undo itself on impact to explosively release destructive mana in a much larger sphere. It took a lot of trial and error but eventually she succeeded with the help of both Ashra and the colorless mana professor. The results were... convincing.

"Astra."

Viv focused on the practice room target. With a slow hum, a sphere of arcane mana gathered around a core of annihilation and compressed it. That was the most delicate part of the process and Viv had practiced hard to keep the spell coherent. Just using two types of mana in conjunction with a dozen glyphs and a concept required a level of concentration and innate understanding she could not have dreamed of a year ago when her best spell was yoink. Both stats and her own understanding played a role in her success.

Alright so it was still her best spell against undead and it was still called yoink but that one was much better. Viv added the finishing touch, a much simplified artillery construct that was barely more than a direction and velocity, then she let it go.

The transparent sphere sung on its way to the target, gaining speed as it hastened to deliver its abyssal core. Most of Viv's spells were silent. That one was not. A loud thump rang

through the air, soon followed by the telltale hiss of black mana at work. There was nothing left of the target dummy except for a half-severed head resting on a small depression in the parquet where the spell had turned the wood floor to atoms. Or at least, she hoped it had turned it to atoms.

“Is... is your spell transporting the target somewhere?” Ashra asked.

“I don’t think so.”

“Oh.”

Ashra still hadn’t managed to learn the annihilation concept. Viv thought that was because the professor didn’t actively intend to harm anyone. That had never been an issue for Viv. There were plenty of people she wanted gone.

The second tool she developed was a harness.

Gravity-repelling runes were insanely complex to create and activate, but fortunately Viv had jumped from a plane and dived before so she was familiar with the illusion of weightlessness. It made her task marginally easier, though she could never have done it without Sidjin.

Viv had been tempted by the enchanting class. Sadly for her, the teacher only accepted those who intended to make enchantment their vocation in the higher levels of the curriculum, something Viv was unwilling to do. Enchanting was merely a means to an end to her. On the contrary, Sidjin’s relentless pursuit of the subject made him an invaluable helper. He was more than happy to assist Viv on her projects now that he had so much free time between establishing teleporters and collecting fat purses. The anti-gravity harness still took a long time to design because it was completely experimental.

Flight was not new to Nyil. Hellock didn’t just have griffin riders. They also had flights of gray mana experts, some of whom could be seen darting between the lowest of the floating rocks hanging over the Academy’s sky. It was just that those who wanted to fly either asked those people for a lift or gave up. No one seemed to want to fly for fun. Or perhaps, no one with the means to actually do it wanted to fly for fun. Mostly, Viv wanted to fly for Arthur.

Mother.

Flap arms faster!

The harness dug into Viv’s waist, armpits, and crotch. She felt dragged up by a crane more than truly weightless until the magic kicked in. Even then it felt like being stranded in a vacuum rather than flying.

“That’s not how it works. Ugh! Propulsion!”

Since Viv had no way of using gray mana, her solution had been to use Sidjin’s grinding spell as base to create her own rudimentary propeller. Instead of blades, she used a higher

amount of large panes that moved as fast as she could manage to create an air flow. It gave her about as much speed as a slow mobility scooter.

Viv sighed. Sidjin had used the harness and achieved high speed with a gray mana. It was just not her thing.

“Maybe I need to create a turbojet. There’s just no way I can cast a spell this complex though, not any time soon.”

Arthur sighed, or huffed. It sounded suspiciously like a forge bellow. A breath of hot hair blew Viv’s hair forward. Suddenly, claws grabbed her shoulders and thighs and she was off over the canopy of the hidden spot they had selected.

“Woohoo!”

It has taken I, She-Who-Feasts-on-Many-and-Gets-Much-Gold, many weeks to fly well.

I must be patient with mother.

Now I show proper flying!

And she did, and the first thing Viv decided when she was back on the ground with shaky legs was that she should get flight goggles so they could go even faster the next time. Flying was absolutely awesome. It was just unfortunate that she had to be held like some sort of fuel tank just under Arthur’s belly.

With the harness done, Viv’s last piece of art and craft was not for herself. It was also one of the most ambitious and complex enchanting works Sidjin had ever faced. The nerdy prince loved every second of it as he spent hours upon hours pondering single lines for maximum efficiency.

The rewards for the necrarch hunt included not just tools to help her transition into a form that would let her live. It had also yielded three cores of excellent size from the nascents they had defeated. Enough to power large-scale constructs for hours. Now, Viv would dedicate those cores to turning the Harrakan into the viable tercios she envisioned them to be.

The issue with Harrakan troops right now was that they were too good yet too few, the perfect target for large-scale artillery spells. They needed protection from bombardment to do what they were meant to do. Viv had a solution. The idea was simple: powerful, mobile shield arrays carried on the back of Yries machines.

The execution would be slightly more complex.

While there would be no friction between the machine’s systems and the shield itself, it was extremely challenging to pack a spell circle in a surface small enough to be portable. In order

to solve that issue, Viv had come up with a solution inspired from the shield she'd spotted in the necrarch cave during her first visit.

The ancient inhabitants of the lone mountain placed pieces of metal into the wall in the shape of glyphs, glyphs themselves being three-dimensional. Apparently. Sometimes, they felt more complex yet drawing them as such always seemed to work so whatever. In any case, Viv's solution was a deployable circle of levitating metal components emerging from a large cylinder. The cylinder would be made of steel by the Yries but the floating symbols needed to be made with a silverite alloy. That exhausted the rest of her reserves and some ore she had to purchase from the university at great cost, but in the end, they had a working prototype of the glyphs and a blueprint.

"Why do you keep calling it a blueprint? It is clearly yellow in color?" Sidjin asked.

"I think it was based on a process in my world to create engineering drawings on a light-sensitive sheet. Why, what do you usually call it?"

"A drawing?"

"Could you make it blue?"

"... fine."

They had a blueprint, which she would deliver to the Yries during her next visit.

Viv walked in the armorer's shop in her best clothes, the doormen letting her in on sight. Sometimes, it paid to be discreet but sometimes one had to let themselves be known. This was such a moment, and the robe waiting on a mannequin in the middle of the clean room would serve the same purpose.

The piece of armor looked almost incongruous among the fancy dresses and panes of polished wood. Black and white with notes of silver, it was a queenly piece of garment, exquisitely made with a strong eastern influence in the upper part and a split skirt that reached the knee. Mail peered out from under the void-color spider silk. Finely embroidered glyphs covered the entire surface. There were pockets and it was designed to accommodate a backpack, as well as a potion harness the armorer couple in charge of the project had also done. There were clasps, small cores, and silverite workings all over the place. It looked like what it was, both a mighty piece of gear and the symbol of someone with means and ambition. It would serve as her field uniform.

Viv put it on before the final adjustments but the tailors had done a prime job. The colorless self-cleaning and repair enchantments meant that the incredible piece of equipment would not just remain fresh throughout a campaign, it would also contribute to making her better. That was a technology she wished she had back in Afghanistan.

She couldn't wait to test it on the field.

As soon as that thought hit her synapses, Viv cursed herself for inviting catastrophe.

Helock had an arena.

Viv was not a fan of blood sports as a matter of principle. The rest of the continent had no such qualms, to the extent it was probably only a matter of time before Harrak requested its own coliseum. Helock's arena was not the largest. That honor belonged to the Hallurian capital's blood ground. It was still a large structure at the edge of the noble district that Viv had never been to before.

Just entering the place was an experience. There was a queue coming from the lower districts for poor people and another for rich residents, which Viv used with Rakan. It led to a circular ground surrounded by rafters split in two tiers, or three if one counted the VIP lodge at the top. A fence separated the lower from the higher section which meant that, although this was entertainment for everyone, they were not meant to mix. Salespeople carrying dizzying amounts of food hawked their wares to the few spectators already present in the mid-afternoon. Viv bought herself and Rakan a few grilled nuts and some toasted bread dipped in spice and oil. They even had some cooled, lemony water made fresh with blue mana, all of it for a reasonable price. They munched on the goods while watching the early shows.

Most of them would be fillers until the number of people reached a paroxysm in the early evening. The first fight was always special, however, and this time was no different.

"Ladies and gentlemen, fine people of Helock..." a man in a mask announced.

Viv tuned him out in favor of cleaning her fingers with a tissue and some cool water. Those snacks were sticky as hell. The gist was simple enough. Some people fell deep into debts and since Helock forbid the sales of relatives as slaves to cover the expanse, desperate people's first option was to volunteer at the arena. The pay was awesome whether someone survived or not, and the arena had high security, preventing knee breakers from entering the facilities. Those thugs that did try never committed that mistake again.

Today's first fight would take place between a ruined smith accused of dishonest practice and a woman who had been touring loan sharks for mysterious reasons, made the money disappear, then entered the arena immediately. Viv found the host entertaining, painting the two losers as a dastardly criminal and a daring and secretive avenger, respectively. The reality even matched the show to an extent. The smith came out dressed in black leather and spiky metal pauldrons, shaved, wielding a warhammer of intimidating size while the woman only wore tight clothes and wielded a spear. Someone had braided her hair in the Hallurian fashion though it remained painfully short. The fight began almost immediately.

While the woman had reach, it was clear the smith had brawled before and he took his time, trying to force his opponent into over-committing. It happened soon enough, and he let her spear bite into his flank while delivering a devastating blow to her forward knee in revenge.

The woman fell with a howl, leg shattered, but when the man approached for a killing blow, she turned on him. She unexpectedly managed to jump on her good leg and landed a powerful, skill-backed attack into his gut. Viv was impressed. She inspected the two.

[City smith, not very dangerous, one who has dedicated his life to the crafting of metal tools used in industry. Very strong.]

[Blood sands marauder: not very dangerous, one who will face death or triumph in the arena despite inadequate training. Suicidal. High pain tolerance, all or nothing, decent close quarter combatant.]

So that was it. The woman had switched class while the man had not, giving her the edge despite her vastly inferior physique. It soon became clear that the smith could not handle the pain of the deep wound in his abdomen. He tried to charge one last time, but his opponent kneeled with a scream of pain, managing to force the spear into his groin. She climbed on top of him while he lay dying and stabbed him with a hidden dagger in a display of utter savagery. She was left panting and covered in blood with a slightly shell-shocked expression.

It was chilling, brutal, and morbidly fascinating, Viv thought. No wonder the arena was so popular.

The next fight involved Sonagi, their would-be dueling teacher. He was pitted against an arcane fencer who used air-infused daggers she threw with impressive speed. She was a southerner and awfully young, a fact clearly visible through the makeup. Nagi looked half-decent in a shady mage robe made artfully scruffy with strategically placed bands and patches. Viv thought the arena did a great job creating a story for everyone.

It soon became clear that Nagi was limited to using colorless mana. The girl did her best to overwhelm his defense but she stood no chance. Gray mana's penetrative properties were the lowest.

Nagi did a good job dancing around the attacks, even pretending to falter when one of the knives mysteriously returned to its sender like a boomerang, clipping his ear and eliciting a cry from the crowd, but Viv knew it was a show. The mage had an almost full tank while the girl quickly exhausted herself in a flurry of dazzling attacks. Nagi finished the fight by gathering all the discarded knives she had not recovered and sending them at her, letting most bounce off her thin chest plate. She gave up soon afterward.

More fights followed, each one made at least a little interesting by the gifted head of ceremony. He always managed to make Viv care a little bit either through sob stories or interesting tidbits. The crowd loved it.

Fights to the death were quite rare, and mostly involved convicts or heavily indebted people. It still happened three times that evening.

"That Nagi man seems capable. You said he was a four color mage?" Rakan asked.

“Yes.”

“So he was fighting with one of his lesser schools? That is... very impressive.”

It was, Viv thought, especially since he was probably a little tipsy. The last major fight of the evening was a demonstration between the champion of the Mornyr area and one of his apprentices.

Apparently, people preferred arcane fencer fights to pure mage fights because it was flashier and Viv had to agree. She had not thought that the northern city dedicated to religion could produce such a powerful fighter, yet the champion cracked the earth and split the air. She didn't think she could beat him, even with preparation. He was certainly a match for Solfis or Solar.

The man and his second, a burly fighter with a mace, exchanged blows at blinding speed. The shock of their weapons impacting sent ripples through the sand while mana danced in many colors, manifested as tongues of fire or walls of ice. Viv knew there was a measure of choreography involved yet she still found herself impressed.

“Bet Sidjin or Nagi could give those showoffs a taste of true magic,” Rakan grumbled, clearly annoyed at the wild support from the mob of spectators now blotting the arena.

“Thank you, thank you! Please show your appreciation for Selyen, the dragonslayer reborn!”

That was a neat title, Viv thought.

Unfortunately, the two were caught in the queue that was leaving, and then in the queue going to the gladiators' quarters along with groupies. Also unfortunately, Nagi was nowhere to be seen.

“Wasn't that to be our first meeting? And first class?” Rakan asked.

“Yep.”

A quick request with a guard and a tiny donation gave her the answer she needed. Nagi was getting piss drunk at the bar. He joined them soon after being reminded of his obligation, sauced beyond redemption. Tonight was a bust.

Viv reconsidered her option and thought it might be better to work around Nagi's messed up life rather than try and fight it head on. They decided to get him between noon and the moment he was supposed to fight in the arena for a change. Still, it was a major disappointment.

Fortunately, the plan worked. The pair managed to pick Nagi up from his place as he woke up. The following class went okay.

It was clear Nagi's abilities impressed Rakan very much. The drunk gladiator was an expert at absorbing spent mana from the environment which allowed him to recover quickly. He

also had a diverse and unpredictable arsenal of offensive and defensive spells that always gave him enough tools to function in various colors. Viv was hard-pressed against his versatility, but Rakan was having the time of his life trying to outwit the veteran duelist. That was fine for Viv. She had already known the slurring teacher would be more useful to him than to her. Her reliance on colorless mana for non-lethal options would always hinder her.

Viv spent a month and a half training and slowly improving herself, then came the announcement that she would be mobilized on the first day of winter. This gave her a couple of weeks to conduct the siege of Shinur's Gate back in the deadlands.

The trip home was extremely fast now that she had a hidden teleporter network. A few repairs proved necessary, but nothing that would truly disable one of her sites. She found that quite a few things had changed in Harrak in her absence, most of it for good.

The many patrols at the edge of the quickly developing new villages adopted a new measure inspired by Koro, the ever-bombastic southern hunter turned temple guard. With her first kid well on their way, she had taken to sharing her experience and some nice southern customs. One of them was face painting. Hunters from her clan would wear the semblance of the strongest foe they'd taken down as an ash mask upon their face to show others they were not to be messed with. The young warriors absolutely loved the idea and now most went to battle with skull patterns on their face, which seemed to drastically improve morale.

The second change was that the Harrakan army was now capable of moving in formation. This would help a lot against the unending hordes of revenants they were meant to face. Viv had shared the blueprints of her portable shield arrays with the Yries who had been quite excited about the innovation, and promised they would deliver them soon. It would not be in time for the next operation but that was fine. Viv didn't expect them to meet many casters anyway.

Although the many patrols into the deadlands had given her troops valuable experience, it had not been without cost. Mana poisoning strained the healers even now, making Viv realize they had a dearth of qualified medics. There had been casualties as well. A heavy had been mauled by an undead monstrous bear while covering the retreat of its squad while a crossbow woman had received a headful of deadly acid, killing her on the spot. Nevertheless, spirits remained high.

The last and strangest development affected the children and came, curiously, from the Hadals. Rather than clearing the surrounding woods of beastlings, Hadal hunters carefully herded tribes into the direct vicinity of Kazar to give the many scavenging bands of children a chance to face monsters. A pre-teen was more than a match for an individual beastling physically, and the two sides had waged a merciless war for the control of berry bushes and nut trees. There had been many wounded, yet the timely intervention of Hadal watchers meant that no one had died yet. Viv wasn't really sure what to do about it, mostly because every last kid remained tight-lipped about that shadow war and the loot they collected to the extent that she doubted she could even convince their parents of the massive conflict happening under their noses. They had even waged full scale battles! In the end, she let it happen after making clear a single casualty would end the war games.

Nyil was just weird.

Also, those kids were cruel beyond measure. Viv shivered at some of the tactics they'd implemented to flush out a small cave. Patient, nasty little buggers.

This led her to today.

The sky was gray as it always was at the edge of the deadlands, but a southern wind chased off the ever-present scent of ash. Rows upon rows of soldiers in armor and mana-isolating cloth waited by the edge of the last fort for her signal to depart. Almost two hundred heavies and the same number of crossbowmen and women awaited the signal to depart. Horse-dragged carts and support wagons stood by in order. Sidjin was here for the occasion, providing much needed magical support. There were also Hadal scouts, Kark regulars, two dozen knights in heavy armor, and a contingent of temple guards led by Lorn to assist in this endeavor. Overall, close to six hundred trained warriors would assault a city that used to host thousands. It was a daunting prospect but they were well-prepared and more disciplined than brainless revenants.

Viv was still worried, and the fact the black-armored, black-caped soldiers looked like the demon lord army waiting to invade the hero's pastoral village had little to do with that. Yep. The white tassels flowing from spears and armor only provided a sharper contrast to the dark iron used for the armor.

Viv watched all those waiting eyes and decided a short speech was in order. She cast a sound spell with a wave of her hand.

"No one has ever taken a city back from the deadlands," she began, and she had their attention.

"The deadlands receded a little after the catastrophe, but since then it has stopped. Until us, that is. No one has ever taken land back except us. Hell, no one even tried. They gave up on this place like they gave up on many of the land ravaged by tides and disasters. Today and with this campaign, we shall achieve the impossible. and provide a safe anchor for our people to flourish. Shinur's Gate has resources, it has tools. More importantly, it will become a fortress from where we can withstand hordes, the cornerstone of our reclamation for the next decade. Such an ambitious project will not be easy.

"So far, we have only fought limited battles. This will be our first real campaign and a prelude to what is to come, because there is no way the rest of Param will leave us alone."

A wave of approbatory grumbles washed through the ranks. Lancer's aggression had turned people paranoid and certain that it was only a matter of time before people tried to 'obtain' what the Harrakans had liberated from the cold grasp of the dead. Viv agreed with them if only because her fate was tied to this country and she had a very peculiar luck.

"We will face a new world of hardship, but with your training and determination, I am certain we will prevail."

“Hear hear!”

“Now remember that the key to victory will be endurance. The enemy may not be as strong as Lancer’s elite, but they are relentless and without numbers. Conserve your strength. Cover each other. There will be no room for bravado and senseless risk-taking on this battlefield if you wish to see its end. Now enough talks, time to reclaim our homeland.”

“About face!” Ban roared by her side.

The heavies commander had mercilessly drilled his troops, and they moved out in a column without problem. The temple guard took to patrolling the edge of the formation, eliminating and purifying the revenants they came across. As the expedition moved deeper into the corrupted land, the sky darkened and the last of the vegetation died out. Rolling gray hills of barren soil expanded in front of them, the hills and valleys almost indistinguishable in the gloom of a sunless sky. Armored boots sent puffs of dust in the air so the army formed a trail that could be seen from afar.

Viv and Sidjin stayed near the center of the formation alongside Solfis. Arthur had joined as well and provided oversight because she had, apparently, a grudge against undead fliers. She thought they were useless as they had no meat or gold and thus provided no value to this world.

They walked for hours at a good pace. The front elements were forced to form up and fight a short standing battle near noon when the amount of revenants streaming towards them had grown too large. Viv and Sidjin helped to clear it, then the bodies were gathered and burnt.

The soldiers had lunch shortly after. How they managed to keep anything down, Viv wasn’t sure.

It took until the late afternoon to get there, but eventually they did. A cliff rose over the horizon, blocking the way further in. A large, dusty road led to a fortress city nestled in its flanks, many of the lodgings dug into the very stone. A palace with an imposing white cupola topped the small city. There had to be thousands of undead there, Viv thought. She could see shapes squirming on the parapet. A single road dug into the cliff turned on itself until it reached a massive gate. Imposing doors hung open, visible even from afar.

As planned, Viv set up two obelisks while the army prepared to make camp. They would assault the fortress at dawn with a third of the army holding the line at all times while the rest slept. Stamina would make or break them. Viv just hoped she wouldn’t be found wanting.

Chapter 127: The Gates of Hell

It was morning. Swirling dust covered the formation, setting pennants aflutter and leaving them a spotty gray. The sound of battle never died down. There were always revenants in the deadlands, Viv remembered. It was the grave of an entire civilization, and then the kingdoms had bled their lost dead to it over the centuries. Over the mountains and through the forest they had walked, tireless and without thought. Now, the Harrakan army faced a wall of rotten bodies. So they fought.

The path leading up was taken step by step. Viv had ordered units to be rotated so only four squads of heavies fought at any time. The crossbowmen had limited ammunition and were tasked with gathering the bodies in great piles where they would be burnt. At least, the corpses were dry, though the smoke of three fires already added to the gloom and loaded the air with its acrid stench.

Viv stood near the head of the formation, watching soldiers drag fallen revenants with grim determination. She'd already killed some burrowing worm and two bears with thorns coming out of their ravaged backs. The constant vigilance was taking its toll, however, and this was just the beginning. Slowly, they progressed along the cliffside road. Puffs of fire from above showed when Arthur made sure the sky was theirs.

Viv looked up. The walls of Sinur's Gate still felt far away. Far behind, Sidjin launched a spell that made the ground shake. Something crashed behind Viv. She turned and saw a revenant flattened on the ground. The crossbow woman it had missed gave Viv a frightened smile.

"Back up, back up from the wall," Viv ordered.

And not a moment too soon. A rain of bodies splattered on the dusty road, missing soldiers by a hair. The superhuman reflexes of people here prevented casualties from occurring, thankfully, and the crossbowmen used their short sword to quickly dispatch those revenants that were still moving. Viv heard a rumble above. A column of gut spillers were moving down the narrow path, pushing revenants on their way. A body almost clipped the front of the formation where soldiers were too busy fighting to pay much attention. She moved up. Had to stop those before they could start spitting acid.

It was noon. The formation slowed down for half an hour to leave people time to eat. The food was cold but the support crew had boiled klod in covered cauldrons, delivering warm, tasty drinks to everyone. It was always cold in the deadlands, even when summer warmed the hills outside. Now, the weather was frigid and bleak. It was also quite dry.

Viv took a sip from her cup and watched the trail below. Where the expedition had gone, piles of burning bodies remained but a blanket of revenants was already slowly climbing the slope, lured by the enticing essence of so many living persons. She always found it strange

that revenants thrived with black mana yet felt the need to attack those that possessed little. Perhaps they had a drive to spread. Looking at those swarming masses below, it was a possibility.

Shortly after, Ban called for the attack to resume.

It was late afternoon when they started the final approach. The road widened near the entrance and there was a small, secondary fort just before the main gate they had to clear before proceeding. Maybe a toll station. The number of fliers had grown so thick that even a furious Arthur could not contain them all, and Viv wondered where they had all come from. She suspected they may have roosted in the cliffs to either side of the city. In any case, the witchpact troops now had targets aplenty to test their marksmanship.

In order to take down revenants, the crossbow wielders had designed cheap, plentiful bolts with wooden heads that looked weirdly close to shaped charges. What the witchpact lacked in range and speed, they made up for in penetration and the ability to enchant their bolts with a variety of effects. Flat-headed bolts splattered lightly armored targets like revenant heads and slow undead birds with ease. Sometimes, they even went through multiple targets. Several squads moved from within the formation to disable small flying foes before they could descend on the expedition's most vulnerable members. Some temple guards waited by the cornudons and medical wagon to make sure they were not disabled.

Viv was now constantly taking out the weird, multi-legged horrors crawling over the nearby walls. She could see the masonry emerging over the sheer stone to her left where the city started. Distant windows peered at the coming humans like so many blind eyes, their insides gouged since the disaster. Thicker waves of revenants crashed against the tiring rock of the heavies. Viv decided she had no choice.

"Alright, let's get ready for tonight."

She set up a mana-absorbing obelisk halfway between the small fort and the gate along with a charging station for Solfis. There were men fighting within a few paces of her while she worked, activating the last of the enchantments. As soon as the ambient mana lowered, she moved to the front.

"We need to clear this space and reach the gate, it will be a good chokepoint."

//Agreed.

"Blight!"

A mass of black clouds expanded in front of the heavies, to their relief. The fighting squads walked back to a safer distance while another fresher one replaced it under the barking orders of a foul-mouthed sergeant. The new squad immediately moved forward, picking off stragglers.

Viv cast a mass yolk to fill her reserves then used another few blights in succession. The revenants' numbers now played against them as they were mercilessly swallowed, leaving behind only pitted stone. Viv grit her teeth. Blight was no longer as taxing as it used to be, but this was only the first day and she was already tired. Thankfully, there were no more gut spillers or other elites. She could almost see the gate. Finally, it came into view.

Two tall statues lined a monumental entrance into Sinur's Gates. The open ground fell abruptly a few steps beyond. Soldiers used this opportunity to toss revenants over the edge before Viv growled that it just meant they'd be fighting them again in a day. A new pyre rose.

Beyond the entrance, there was an enclosed space surrounded by high walls that looked suspiciously like a kill zone for invaders. Viv had also wondered how revenants could leave the city when she'd clearly seen a grate from below. The answer was simple. The large gut spillers had melted it almost entirely. It was gone.

"Do... undead normally do that?" she asked Lorn, the leader of the Temple Guard.

"Do what?" the bearded man replied.

He was cleaning gore off his greatsword and wasn't really in a receptive mood.

//She means, do they create an opening for revenants to use.

//The answer is no.

That got Lorn's attention immediately.

"Do you think they're being controlled?"

//Yes.

//Those gut spillers moved to us in formation.

//Since they, the bears, and the large insects were easily disabled, assault by large monsters has almost entirely stopped.

//This is only one more clue.

//I believe the undead are being controlled by an entity of some intellect.

"Damn. What does it change?"

//We must expect strategy.

//Your Grace?

"I'd send revenants to us throughout the night, then ambush us inside of the city. Attack from all sides."

//This is very likely.

//The probability of a night attack is... above 70%.

//Since a charging station is now available, please deploy me.

"Shouldn't we keep a hidden ace?" Lorn asked.

//I am the hidden ace.

//Because revenants will never draw out my full potential.

“We camp here tonight, clear the city tomorrow,” Viv said. “And you cover me while I rest.”

“Sounds good to me.”

//It shall be done.

It was night. Marruk had volunteered to stand at the gate and stop anything coming from within. Viv had seen her block a siege tarantula's charge and was fairly certain the stout Kark would outlast the walls. A few of her compatriots agreed to stand by her side. Meanwhile, a group of earth casters repaired the fort to protect their rear. It was much easier to defend than the road. The cooks had made warm food from within tents. Viv tried to queue with the rest of the soldiers but they insisted she goes first and then immediately to rest. Someone had made her cot in the command tent. She gulped down the congee, then went to sleep with Arthur's head on her belly. She missed Sidjin but he was just as busy. There would be time to be together later.

A soldier barged in Viv's tent after midnight. Viv knew what it meant as soon as she woke up and she jumped to her feet, followed by a grumpy Arthur. Something screeched an ear-splitting sound. She rushed out, fumbling with her shield. The world outside was pitch black with new piles of corpses and some lanterns providing a dusky illumination. Some of the corpses were puppet masters, tentacled undead that commanded revenants. Others were the ghastly, ghoulish shapes of crawlers with their long claws and thin bodies. There was combat near the gate. She searched the night for the screeching beast. Above. It came from above. Its next scream was cut half-way.

The skeletal form of Solfis emerged from the darkness, claws grasping a giant bat head.

//You should not be in the open without more escort, Your Grace.

“Squeeee!”

//As a general rule.

//Return to sleep, please.

“Not easy when there's weird things violating my ears.”

//The creature was more cautious than I expected.

“Control?”

//If so, it is done by an experienced necromancer.
//Have you felt any presence while using yoink on your targets?

“No, not yet.”

//Inconclusive.
//In any case, return to sleep.

“What about those,” she said, pointing at the defunct controllers.

//They scaled the cliffs.
//But we were ready.
//Your Grace.
//Return. To. Sleep.
//Please.

“Fine!”

The second day found Viv bleary-eyed and tired, but she would not admit it to anyone and pretended to be the kind, morning kind of cheerful person she'd otherwise consider strangling. It didn't appear to fool anyone. Perhaps because she was known as someone who'd never woken up before the militia training was over. Marruk looked much worse for wear, with pockets under her eyes and acid marks over her fortified shield. She also smelled a bit rancid. The Kark walked closer. Actually, she stank to high heavens.

“You look like shit,” Viv admitted.

“I feel like it too, yes. I want to bathe so badly.”

“So... how was it?”

“Revenants attacked often. Then, when those that scaled the cliff attacked us, a large gut spiller tried to melt me down. I had to protect my brethren while they ran. I managed to delay it long enough for the best marksmen we have to use some strange bolts on it. The gut spiller was set on fire and its girth blocked the path, so at least there was that. A bear smashed through it two hours ago though. Lorn is holding the gate right now.”

Viv looked out into the dark desert beyond. More specks were making their way to the city.

“Something's calling them here,” she grumbled.

“I think so. Too coordinated,” Marruk said as well. “So... what now?”

“We keep going. Whatever it is, it's probably inside the city. And I don't see us having a good time getting back down.”

//It would be a safe choice.

//However, I believe it would make future operations riskier.

“What if it’s a necrarch?”

//It cannot be one.

//A necrarch lacks fine control.

//We are facing a necromancer of some form.

//A spellcaster.

“So you’d be able to take it down?”

//Yes.

//However, it may have traps, redundancies, and mighty servants.

//It would be preferable to learn more before sending me.

“We can do that. The city needs to be cleared anyway. Let’s get to it.”

First squad, led by Ban, made their way through the gate and the following barbican. They used a different formation with their shields above their head in case of sudden attack. None came. First there was an open space surrounded by walls and empty ramparts, then another gate, also open. Viv followed closely until she found herself in the city proper.

The interior of Sinur’s gate was a maze of stairs and high towers separated by surprisingly wide streets. A square nearby showed a dust-clogged fountain. Decrepit reliefs and frescos spoke of a time long past when this was a center of trade and culture. Viv’s fascination lasted for only a second before reality reasserted itself. Only a couple of revenants were moving around, effortlessly taken down by a few yoinks. That was not normal. There should have been many more threats around.

//The road to our right leads up and to the palace.

//And the vault.

//Whatever is facing us should be in that direction.

“How likely is that?”

//Close to 97%.

//Control-based undead and necromancers retain a sense of the grandiose.

//They will be either in a throne room, a desecrated place of worship within a palace, or in crypts.

//All can be found with Sinur’s Gate’s main palace.

//We have but to follow the road.

“Your Grace!”

Viv turned. It was one of the witchpact officers, an older woman with long gray hair and a lifetime of poaching in Enoria.

“Yes?”

“Captain Lorn requests a short war council.”

“Hmmm.”

//It might be best to formulate a new strategy.

“Fine. Let’s go. The squad will return to the Barbican.”

A group of elites was waiting by the gate. Viv exchanged a tired nod with Sidjin. Lorn was the first to acknowledge the elephant in the room. There were also various officers present, representing everyone but the Hadals.

“So. Sinur’s Gate is inhabited. Do we continue?” Lorn asked.

“We do unless we believe we will be overwhelmed,” Viv said.

She was not willing to withdraw at the first sign of difficulty. So far, all their preparation had paid off and it would feel wrong to withdraw without at least a good attempt. They were already inside the fortress for fuck sake. That was usually the hardest part.

Solfis didn’t interrupt her, so Viv continued.

“Solfis estimates that our foe will be in the palace. I say we go there, take a squad of elites and engage it. Kill it, and the city is ours. Even if it isn’t, its death will make withdrawing considerably easier.”

//It would also help the troops to stay in a less mana-saturated environment for a little while.

//We should install another obelisk inside.

“We’ll get right to it.”

“There will be a trap,” Lorn said.

“And ambushes, yes. We need to move in a way that prevents them from capitalizing on a moment of weakness.”

“Should we split the army?” the witchpact woman asked. “Leave the support teams outside and only take combatants in?”

“No. Splitting means we must fight on more fronts, which means we’ll tire faster and last less time. We’ll stay together and move slowly,” Viv replied.

“We could clear the buildings,” Lorn said, “move slow and steady.”

//I would advise against it.

//Save that for mop up operations.

“But then they can use that against us. Come from everywhere at once.”

“I agree with Solfis. We can’t spare the time. Then... I have an idea,” Viv said.

The army moved on. Hadal scouts moved around the army to spot threats from afar. The hybrid earth mages used to build fortifications went to every building entrance, sealing them with a basic wall. The saturated mana made their work more tiring, but there were three of them and they were used to raising entire buildings, so the surface of a door was not too much an effort.

Viv activated another obelisk on the second square they came upon. Sinur’s Gate was large enough to house ten thousand souls, living ones at that. There were a lot of nooks and crannies, yet they only found revenants. Something was afoot, and Viv thought she might know what. The necromancer would attack from everywhere at once. Sidjin was ready, and Viv too. The only question was, how much would they throw at the Harrakans.

The expedition moved at a quiet pace, like a well-oiled machine. Soldiers blocked streets then moved on when the rest of the army had gone on. It was slow going given the size of their forces, yet no one complained. In fact, no one talked at all. Warriors with guard experience used their vigilance skill to make sure nothing was amiss. The earth caster walked everywhere, checking for tunnels but finding none. Viv was at the head once again.

Sinur’s Gate was pretty in a ruin sort of way. Despite the grime, the bodies, despite the creeping grip of age, there remained a trace of its early inhabitants’ love for their city. It was far enough from the epicenter than most of its people should have survived the initial blast. She hoped they had survived. They’d be dead by now but maybe their children could return, one day, and see those delicate fountains flow again to provide a pleasant background to the terraces and hanging gardens.

Viv realized she’d been daydreaming and blamed two days of near constant stress. The first thing that was wrong was Arthur’s distant shape diving for something out of sight. Then, bird tweets sounded throughout the silent city from every direction.

There were no birds here, no living ones in any case. Those were the Hadal scouts.

“Halt! Brace!” Viv called.

Other commanders called the same order at the same time. The sounds of alarm got quickly drowned by the stomping of numerous feet, a rumble like no other.

Fire blasted through a nearby alley, then Arthur flew into view, smashing half of a giant bat into a nearby wall. She veered sharply and spat more magic napalm at a target out of sight. The plaza in front of Viv filled with a horde. Hundreds of revenants racing on all fours, charging forward guided by skeletal puppet masters. It was her time to shine.

“True mass yink!”

“FOUND YOU,” a voice said from above.

Danger sense: Intermediate 5

Viv activated aegis, blocking a howling ball of black mana. It was so potent that it lingered, eating at her defenses as it spread. Her foe had used annihilation yet its interpretation was less instant, more pernicious. She dropped the shield and looked up to find her adversary hanging from a balcony far above with two of its four hands.

Tall as two men, it looked like an emaciated skeleton with two pairs of arms under a wide crown, layers of black fabric clinging to its emaciated body.

[Lich: extremely dangerous: a powerful mage who resorted to black magic to extend its lifespan. Very dangerous. Expert caster. Dangerous close quarter combatant. Intelligent. Black mana master.]

“Oh.”

The lich unleashed a torrent of spells, and there was no room in Viv’s mind except for survival.

“Aegis. Astra, astra, astra.”

Viv used her new addition to her arsenal as interception spells. They left abyssal flowers expanding through the dusty air, then those bled to the ground and the last droplets that reached it left hissing gaps in the ancient stone. The only thing Viv could think was that if this touched her men...

She had to hold it back. She couldn’t kill it. It was stronger than her. Faster. More astras flew through the air. There was little time for anything else. Suddenly, the lich gave up its offense to retreat under an impenetrable black orb. Viv swore when Solfis plunged through it. The sphere disappeared, but so did the lich. Solfis was left holding a severed arm and part of a shoulder.

A strident screech sounded from behind a building. Viv watched one of the earth caster stare up in horror, then he raised a wall. The next black mana spell went through it and his torso. Viv was already sprinting. She made an estimate from the direction of the attack and shot an artillery spell through a nearby wall. The lich growled.

Viv turned the angle to see a beleaguered squad fighting off a gut spiller. The witch pact had done their best to pepper it with their most dangerous bolts but there were already gaps in the formation where spells and attackers had killed her men. The lich spotted her, then surrounded itself in another layer of defenses. Viv wasn't having it.

"True mass yoink. Werfer."

Her conduits overflowing with energy, she sustained the flamethrower spell. Black mana roared between her hands. She could feel it dig stubbornly into the creature's defense, her destruction to his. She poured everything she had into the flow, making it tighter, more focused.

"MAYFLY. YOU DARE."

Viv summoned another aegis to wait for the inevitable onslaught but it didn't come.

"Fire!"

Viv looked behind to see who was the absolute moron trying to attack a lich, and found the poacher woman leading two dozens terrified crossbowmen and women firing their best quarrels into the creature's dessicated torso. They were all blocked, but the shiny tips worried the lich enough that it had stopped its attack.

They were all dead. Unless Viv could stop it.

"Blast!"

Her artillery spell crashed against a shield. She had seen that spell eat through an entire building but the lich was unfazed. Balls of void-black cones appeared around the creature. Viv panicked a little.

"Eldritch walls!"

She aimed at a nearby bridge and fired. The entire section grew tentacles, then the displaced material fragilized the already damaged frame and gravity did what it did best. The lich screamed when an entire wall section crashed on the ground, almost clipping it and forcing it to cancel its spell. Then Solfis appeared and took part of its torso, missing the spine by a hair.

//A teleportation device.

//Does not require conscious activation, or I would have killed it.

Viv ignored the fact Solfis was much faster than her, so he was waiting for an opening for a sure kill even if it meant losing a squad. She had to hurry.

"Thank you, ma'am," the poacher told her as she passed by.

"Yeah I can't believe it worked," Viv said.

“...what?”

But Viv was already off and running towards the largest commotion. The battle raged all around her. A healer was already attending to the wounded earth caster though Viv didn't give him much hope. Other wounded soldiers walked or were carried to the central area for triage. Now, the formation was being used to its maximum potential, with squads of witchpact crossbowmen taking down priority targets with their deadliest bolts while the heavies mowed down the revenants. Hadals flitted from building to building, taking down light fliers before they could descend on the wounded. The Kark had formed an impenetrable wall in one of the major axis while the temple guards held the rear. A roar and a flash of light above announced that the sky was contested, though burning feathers soon rained on the beleaguered defenders. It was chaos but, for now, every line was holding. Viv looked around searching for her target. It would take the lich only a few seconds to wipe out a section and the defenders would be overwhelmed. She wondered what it was waiting for.

“For Neriad!”

A flash of golden light met a black lance farther back. Viv sprinted faster. Solfis jumped down from another building and managed to steal a leg from the quickly ascending lich. It was already missing two of its four arms.

The creature teleported again.

Viv reacted before she could even think, turning on herself. The view of the carriage to her left was now blocked by a towering black figure. Maybe her skills alone had saved her, or perhaps it was just experience.

“Excalibur.”

“VOID SHARD.”

Viv's blade of concentrated destruction met the lich's ray of acid mana, the two near-identical meanings clashing with a silent hiss. All Viv could see was a fused beam and, above it, the grinning skull of her foe. The world narrowed down to this view and the contest of will taking place in the crucible of the colliding spells. The lich's annihilation meaning was the image of this city: decaying, attritive, and inexorable. It pushed towards her and for a moment, the lich thought it was winning. But then it felt the threat, for Viv's annihilation was a force of surgical precision and it was always going for the heart. Beneath the surface, her own spell had thinned to a blade aimed at the heart of the lich, just like her expedition aimed for the heart of the city.

Power +1

You have reached a milestone! The power of all of your spells is higher. The range of all of your spells is significantly higher. You may cast farther away from your body. Items that contain mages have a reduced effect on you.

The lich disengaged and flew up despite Viv's attempt to take it down. It blocked her attack, dodged Solfis' assault, though not without losing yet another leg, then burst through a gout of flame. There, at the apex of its flight, it screamed.

It was an expression of leadership, but fortunately, or unfortunately, it was not aimed at the living.

The meaning was clear. It said: 'Come!'.

The lich teleported away, leaving Viv and her allies chest-deep in undead with the promise that more would come soon, and a lot of them too. The witch swore.

"We need to get rid of the lich before the tide washes over us."

//We can get to the palace.

//It should be easily defensible.

//Kill the lich, and the undead will disperse.

"Need a way to open the path," Viv said, watching the tide of revenants still holding between them and their destination in the upper city.

"Ahem," a voice said from the side.

Viv turned and found herself face to breastplate with a knight in heavy armor. It was the head of Harrak's dozen of riders, but he had proved himself against Lancer. And lost his lover as well.

"Sir Rollo," Viv greeted.

"Have you forgotten about us? Give the order, and we will carve through that rabble like a cleaver."

"Then do so."

"Good. Ride behind me and I will get you to the palace."

Viv was suddenly on a saddle behind an armored back, surrounded by barded warhorses. It felt strange to be so high and so heavy, but the mounts moved in good order. They waited a little for the wounded to be loaded into the carts, then it was time to go.

“Perhaps we need a war cry,” Rollo suggested.

Viv had a look behind at her troop and their... monochromatic gear.

There was only one reasonable option.

Viv deployed her leader’s aura, making sure to add intimidation into the lot. It wouldn’t be of any use against the revenants, but sometimes, it was good if your men were more scared of you than they were of the enemy.

“FOR THE BLACK TIDE! CHAAAAAARGE!”

The knights went off like race cars. Wind whistled in her hair because, of course, it was Nyil, and war horses had skills too. The rumble of hooves on stones covered the din of battle but not the roar of... quite a bit of people.

The small detachment of heavy knights plowed through the revenants without stopping, crushing them underneath. Jumping puppets slammed against their shields and were cast aside, their master trampled. Gut spillers were gored, crawlers were pinned. The knights’ spears made no distinction.

It occurred to Viv that she might have to change her approach to tactics and, possibly, get more knights. They seemed nice. But that was for later. Right now, she had more urgent business to attend to before facing the lich again. She turned her attention inward to the notifications she had been ignoring so far.

Lost Heiress: (10)

Path evolutions available. You may pick from the following list.

“Yes!”

There were a ton of choices available but most of them felt grayed out, as if the interface knew she would not even consider them. Those ranged from warrior to civil servant up to and including courtesan. Viv also ignored the rather appealing but bog standard options of court archmage, noble mage, and black archwitch to get straight to the good stuff. This time, there were not one but four special classes to choose from. No empress though, but she didn’t have an empire yet.

Tabula Rasa

The wind of fate spares no one.

You have overturned governments and changed the destiny of kingdoms. War, covert operations, politics, arcane power, there are no tools you will not use to achieve your goal,

and that goal is to liberate people from tyranny. You have slain royalty before. Now, do it again.

- Focus on leadership and arcane skills.
- New class skills related to subversion.
- Capacities are increased when used for the purpose of altering the path of the world.

Ascender

It's lonely at the top because people die getting there.

You have survived many dangers from mana poisoning to assassination attempts. Monsters have failed to eat you, humans have failed to murder you. You have made it past their attempts and killed most of them for it. No one can stop your ascension, and no one will.

- Physical stats will increase more easily.
- Shield mastery becomes a class skill. Magical shields are affected.
- Soul sense becomes a class skill.

Abyssal Conduit

Embrace your nature.

You were born for magic. You love magic, breathe it, theorize it, experiment with it, and magic loves you. Become the hand of the black. What you cannot change, destroy, what you cannot destroy, evade.

- Focus on pure arcane skills.
- Unlock special skill: aspect of the messenger. Your entire body becomes conduit, allowing to cast a single spell at tremendous levels of power.
- Pain tolerance becomes a class skill.

Abyssal Lady

Wield the power. All of it.

The ability to melt someone's face off does not count as governance but it can certainly help! You are a symbol and a power multiplier on the battlefield. Lead on.

- Focus on political and arcane skills.
- Unlock special skill: one-woman tactical array. You can act as an entire team when casting large-scale spells.

- Draconic intimidation and leadership will fuse into a new skill.

Viv's mind accelerated, fueled by some foreign magic, possibly Nous helping her pick without his intervention getting her killed. The meaning was obvious, however. There would be no delaying; it was time to choose her fourth step.

Chapter 128: Fourth Step Caster.

It was fortunate that Nous would give her a hand because there was a lot to unpack, and she wouldn't have had the time to do so at the breakneck speed the knights were going at. Her slow perception helped her think.

She quickly wondered if the interface offered this to everyone who progressed mid-battle but decided that knowing didn't matter at the moment. She had a choice to make.

A brief inspection revealed that all choices were valid, in the sense that none of them felt clearly underwhelming. In the end, picking a path depended on, and would shape, how she saw herself in Nyil and what she intended to do. For that reason, she eliminated Tabula Rasa almost immediately.

It was perhaps the most powerful class all around, able to match the others on every aspect from politics to survival provided it was done for the sake of change, and therein lay the problem. It would require that Viv never stop, and she didn't like that one bit.

'Capacities are increased when used for the purpose of altering the path of the world' was broad enough that she could justify using them here to conquer Sinur's Gate. It was a required step to establish a durable seat of power and she needed power to act, but then it would never stop. Conquering the Deadlands would not change things durably, or at least, she would not be able to convince herself that she was changing the path of the entire world. She would need to go after Enoria, then Baran and the northern cities, then Halluria, then what hid beyond the sea or the far eastern isthmus. Tabula Rasa meant turning the world into what she envisioned by sword, knife, or manipulation. Or guns. There was merit to bringing a modern mindset into a world that envisioned stagnation as the natural state. Mankind would gain ascendancy if she guided them through an industrial revolution that did not send children into coal mines. She could avoid most pitfalls of progress. Become the messiah of a new civilization. However... that wasn't her.

It was not that Viv was fundamentally selfish or self-centered. She cared. It was more that the path required a firebrand, a believer. A zealot. And Viv had been jaded through her teenage years. That path would burn her out before they even conquered Enoria. And that was even before taking the cost into account: the countless bodies this would leave in her wake.

She had studied the 'Terror' in history, that period of time that followed the French revolution. It had been a bloody epoch that led to the expression that a revolution devoured its children. That path was lined with the corpses of her allies and enemies. Rivers of blood would clog its gutters. Even if she succeeded, it would... not be worth it.

Viv hated fanatics. To them, the ends always justified the means. That made them the perfect monsters. She wouldn't be like that. Never. Tabula Rasa demanded a level of forward-moving tension she was unwilling to pay.

Ascender was next.

The gist of it was clear enough. That path would make her more well-rounded, with a strong focus on defense. In particular, the shield skill meant she would not just use her stamped shield better — that was always a secondary thing — she would be using her shield spells better. Aegis was already quite powerful, and that would make it even stronger. Between a bolstered aegis, her danger sense, and the acuity-based reflexes, the only reliable way to take her out would be to overwhelm her. That, or send someone much more powerful and those were no longer that common. She was a fourth step. That was already the human elite.

It would also make her more physically resilient and strong. The most interesting part was not that, however. It was the soul mastery skill.

She had a feeling that knowing and manipulating one's soul was extremely important for a variety of advanced skills, and quite possibly turning into an elemental as well. Ascender's whole point was to allow that ascension to happen. It was a stepping stone towards a more powerful option of the fifth step. That wasn't saying the other wouldn't have a strong option as well. She had a feeling several of the offered options might be offered at the top. It was more a question of prioritization.

There was also an issue with the stepping itself. Even with her traveler's gift, it was clear that it would take a while to reach that level. A long while. Years at the very least.

Still, it was a tempting option.

The third one was Abyssal Conduit and its focus on raw magical power.

Viv had loved magic the moment she'd touched it, back on the outskirts of the fallen capital. She was born for magic. She didn't need the interface to tell her that, although it had. Magic was just great and she was good at it. It fulfilled a fundamental wish of mankind to see their emotions and thoughts influence the world directly, rather than through their weak bodies. That path would focus on that and purely that, and she was okay with it. The lack of focus on social skill could be remedied through practice and returned to at a later step. That was fine. Once again, she would not be losing her progress, merely focusing on the magical aspect of her path. The focus on arcane meant that she would become much more versatile on and off the battlefield. Large-scale black mana purification or a transportation gate network could be achieved, perhaps, or achieved faster. The aspect of the messenger would also mean she could obliterate her targets through a surprise attack. She would become a peerless duelist

and gain the ability to go against far more powerful foes, overwhelming them before they could bring their higher abilities to bear. There was just one problem: the pain tolerance thing.

Viv had a deadline in the form of her body being on the verge of shutting down. Aspect of the messenger would turn it into a conduit, temporarily overloading every cell. That didn't mean just intense pain, it meant actively attuning her body to black mana. The path description failed to mention that, and it also failed to produce a solution or a way to help her transition to part elemental. It was the path of the glass cannon, powerful for a short while, then she would have to see Elunath immediately after. And that was a problem.

It was not just the idea of service that worried her. The issue was that Elunath had promised to do his best, and it was in his interest for her to survive... but there was no guarantee she would make it because, among other things, no one had helped someone else turn part-elemental before. All those who had succeeded had been mighty and knowledgeable archmages. Her luck wouldn't save her. It created opportunities, not certainties. Straining her body further felt unwise to her, despite the lure of raw power. She would have to pass for now.

The last option was Abyssal Lady, the normal continuation of Lost Heiress. Abyssal Lady considered her dual roles as leader and mage then fused them into a path that bolstered her the most when integrated within her army. It was the leader's path, and it provided everything she needed. The one-woman tactical array ability would help her face Harrak's main problem right now: the lack of qualified war mages. It would also be useful in scuffles and ambushes provided she had the time to set up. The main point was, of course, the merged skill.

Merged skills were always more powerful than their parts and then they started at a lower rank, which meant that they improved faster. Viv used intimidation to negotiate what she wanted, or else, while leadership supported her demonstrations. It also helped her inspire and guide people if they saw her as a leader. She felt the new skill would give her an aura of danger and respectability that would carry her through any meeting while pushing her men to new heights. It sounded perfect.

So by elimination, Ascender and Abyssal Lady remained the most preferable choices. Both were perfectly viable. In the end, it was really about what she prioritized, how she saw herself.

Viv wished she could have consulted Solfis, even though the golem probably didn't have enough data to advise her.

Ascender was an investment in herself while Abyssal Lady was an investment in Harrak, possibly. One of them was more conservative and would help her survive while the other would help her develop her 'nation', to use the term broadly. For a moment, she wondered if it would matter after she transformed, but then remembered Elunath still had a class. Viv decided that Abyssal Lady was probably the best option. The other felt too careful.

But then... there was soul sense.

Soul sense was the key, she felt. All the gods had massive souls and were able to use them. Social skills relied on the soul. It had to be involved in the transformation process, not least because she had to remain attached to her mortal coil while it underwent the 'procedure'. And there was something else. Conduits were not physical. Neither was her core. Her ability to cast magic and progress in its mastery were not linked to her body beyond the need for it to withstand its effect. Her soul made her a caster, not her fingertips.

She felt that this was the secret to greater heights and that Nous was giving her one path to grow to greater heights, all while giving her the best chances at making it.

Viv felt an intense burst of frustration at having to give up such skills as Aspect of the Messenger, but her decision was made. She picked Ascender.

It would do.

You have picked: Ascender. Mental statistics are five times more efficient when wielding black mana, twice as efficient for arcane (colorless) mana. You may not manipulate any other color. Associated skill acquisition is massively improved.
Soul mastery has become a class skill at Beginner 4
Shield mastery has become a class skill at Novice 1
Shield mastery will apply to magical shields.

For every step before, she had felt little difference. Progress had been slow, and although casting was made easier, the effect was not so significant. This time, things were different. She immediately felt a quantitative difference in the way mana seemed to concentrate in her hands. Her grip on it clenched more tightly, and the mana answered more readily. She also felt a difference in her soul, a new mark to show her progress. Her body relaxed as mana filled it, ready to change it according to her efforts. She felt as if a dam had broken and she was free to progress again.

Mana coiled around her as time returned to normal. One of the knights looked at her and the black mana roaring around her form, then returned his attention to the revenants they were trampling. Meanwhile, Viv was having a quick epiphany.

There was no real reason to keep the hive structure of her aegis shield as it currently was, not with those new skills. She could use smaller, more numerous pieces and improve the overall integrity of the construct. In fact, she would do just that from now on. There was also no real reason to limit shields to just being a barrier. There were plenty of opportunities for her to make her protection more elaborate, like perhaps reactive spells. She would have to look into it later.

Later, because the charge kept going and didn't stop.

Viv didn't know if the knights were perfectly suited to the situation or if they were doing their best to impress her. As she grabbed onto the front knight's shoulders for stability, they kept plowing through disorganized ranks of revenants on the way to the higher city. They didn't care about the stairs, they didn't even speed up. Their barded warhorses moved and the crowd was trampled.

"Spiller!" someone roared.

Viv spotted it as well, a massive, bloated horned creature standing on a ledge over them. Caustic bile was already flying in the air. Her danger sense had not warned her because it wasn't aimed at her. The back of the formation was going to get it.

"Nope."

A twisted, thin tongue of black mana formed above their heads to match the spray. Could be better, Viv thought. Efficiency was still low. Nevertheless, the attack was entirely absorbed. She barely felt the difference when her yoink turned the spiller to ash.

Between the knights and her, the attack didn't stop. They left the rest of the expedition behind but Viv could hear them fight on. Soon, they reached the bottom of the palace.

Viv jumped down and yoinked a crawler mid-flight. Those pesky ghoul like creatures were getting on her nerves.

Just like the rest of the city, the palace managed to feel crowded without being stifling. Steep stairs led up to a thick double gate, the way too narrow to allow more than four people abreast, yet they had managed to cram a flower bed on either side. It was dead now.

Viv looked back to see the knights had formed a circle. The sight here was amazing, a rare gap in the tall towers giving a commanding view of either side of the cliff. To her left, the plain extended back to Kazar, though the city could not be seen from up here. Viv couldn't even spot a hint of green, only the desolate expanse of dusty ground.

The scene to her right was worse. The colors were a little darker, a little more bland perhaps, but that was not the issue. The issue was the tidal wave of undead flesh moving towards them. First distant dots, the shambling forms merged into mobs, then a veritable sea of the dead. Taller figures emerged from the wave like reefs at low tide, though they moved as well. There were too many of them, far too many. Even if Viv had a week and they stopped moving, she wouldn't be able to kill them all. They were beyond numbers.

She had to kill the lich or the Harakans might not even manage to evacuate.

Viv caught sight of Solfis on a nearby roof and made her decision.

"Head back, I'll face the beast myself."

"Your Grace..."

“Cover the army. And don’t worry. I got this.”

With this, Viv turned and walked to the gate.

“Your Grace, those who pathed up sometimes...”

“I know I’m high on power right now, but I’m not alone and... I was made for this. That undead is mine.”

The man nodded once, though he didn’t seem fully convinced.

“Just remember, we all depend on you.”

With that he turned, and the horsemen turned with him.

Viv moved on. The gate was unlocked but she still checked it for enchantments. They were there, just not active. The lich was extending an invitation.

That was fine with Viv. She still made sure to sabotage them as she went by. They could be recovered later.

The gates led into a large hall. Sparse light came in from high windows to the front and back of the building, all of them still intact. Stained glass dyed them in shades of blue and green. Even the light of the sun was faded here, having crossed through the thick layer of cloud. The faded colors still felt strange here, in that den of undeath.

The ambient mana was increasing.

Viv had not felt this intensity since the necrarch’s den. Black mana swirled and congealed here, giving the air a spicy taste of change and death. There was a surprising lack of dust. The place felt more like a well-maintained mausoleum than an old ruin.

Viv tested for traps and found one in the middle of the room. She deactivated that one as well. A door in front of her led to an inner courtyard while passages to her left and right gave access to the palace’s wings. The Ascender was on a timer, however, so she decided to go straight. No time to explore. Her only question was: what other traps waited for her? A brief look through the windows revealed no strands of mana, buried or otherwise. Just cracked soil and the ever-present dust. She looked up.

Aha!

Viv pushed the gate open and threw three sigil-shaped pieces of metal on the ground. Telekinesis made them rise and form the most basic array for a physical shield, and not a moment too soon. A rain of bones smashed around her, turning into strange, mantis-like constructs that immediately rushed her.

“Yoink!”

Tendrils of black mana elegantly weaved to catch the fast-moving guardians as they tried to dodge. A large hand pierced the ground at the center of the defunct garden, soon followed by a head. Viv killed the large construct before it could extricate itself from its hiding place underground. Too tightly packed, Viv thought. Or the construct was too weak.

A shriek of rage echoed from deeper within.

“There you are,” Viv said.

She recovered her portable glyphs then walked to the far wall at a reasonable pace, checking for more traps. There were none in the garden, but the room beyond that was something else.

The palace extended up but this place was its heart, the center of power of the ancient lords of Sinur’s Gate. Attendants would gather in the massive, circular room under an open cupola decorated with ancient engravings. An elevated platform on the far end hosted a throne, while the sheer rock of the mountain climbed up beyond, reminding people that the city had been carved directly into it. The union of finely chiseled stone and an untouched rock perfectly reflected the essence of the place.

The throne was not the original one, judging from the amount of bones involved in it. Poor taste. It also said a lot about the lich that it would create a court where only the mindless dead would attend. She shifted her focus to the side, where a small stone bookshelf had been raised. It was a crude thing loaded with tomes. There were also a few baubles placed here and there in a poor imitation of interior design. More interesting were the many, many circles hidden on every wall, ready to be triggered. Only a token attempt had been made at hiding them, but the dormant mana was clear to her acute senses. This was a death trap and a sanctum rolled into one. There was no need to go farther. The lich would try to stop her here. It was far too arrogant to tolerate her intrusion.

But first, a little preparation.

Viv cut the window open and stepped in, having noticed that the door was the fantasy equivalent of a claymore mine. She dropped the shield glyphs on the ground and traced a hasty circle in the corner of the room she had found herself in. With her defensive array ready, she finished her preparation.

“Aegis.”

The shield felt thicker and more resilient with more hexagons composing it. Viv felt safer just having it deployed around her.

Now, there was a way to reliably disarm the traps by severing the proper lines, letting the residual mana disperse harmlessly. But Viv didn’t have the time or patience, and also there was little point.

“Astra.”

The first howling projectile hit a cluster of mines and detonated them. Some of them triggered, sending spears of black mana across the room, while others exploded where they were. This quickly degenerated into a chain reaction with shrapnel hitting more traps and destabilizing them. Soon, the throne room was the scene of constant explosions. Viv waited for the dust to settle to look around.

The empty space was now littered with gravel. The explosions had been unexpectedly weak, so she assumed the lich intended to charge the traps before triggering them. Only a single spear had hit her shield and none had reached the platform where the throne waited. There were still no signs of her host.

“Not taking the bait yet?” Viv asked.

She stepped out of the shield and carefully made her way to the platform. The bookshelf was filled with tomes of various ages, she noticed. It reminded her of the one she used to have in her bedroom back on earth. Comics and children stories stood side by side with school books and dictionaries, all of them mixed in ever more confusing arrangement until her mother inevitably forced her to tidy up. The lich had history books and other mundane items alongside ancient tomes of power that gave off puffs of mana, a clear sign glyphs were written on their surface. She approached the throne. It was heavily warded, with a fancy noose designed to bind whoever sat on it unless they knew the spell.

“I’m going to smash that ridiculous chair of yours now,” she said to no one in particular.

The corners of the room hissed, half-whispered words muttered from the shadows.

“No? Your choice. Excalibur!”

A sword of pure black mana as long as the largest two-hander emerged from Viv’s dagger focus, extending it in a cool way that totally didn’t remind her of a lightsabers.

Viv didn’t really feel displaced air or hear the swoosh of fabric, there wasn’t enough time for it. Acuity reflex and danger sense let her act as soon as she felt the lich teleport. A dense ray of annihilation smashed into the floor where she used to be. The lich turned to see her, but she was already back into the aegis.

She could teleport in the middle of combat now. She was fast enough.

It changed everything.

“Astra.”

The lich blocked several projectiles on its own shield as it rose towards the ceiling. Suddenly, the ambient black mana concentration spiked until even a heavy would have died in a few seconds. She could practically see mana crystallize in the air in fleeting fractals before the lack of guidance broke them again.

“CHOKE!”

Viv quickly engraved an absorbing circle in the wall by her side and used it to drain her immediate surroundings. Then, she gathered all that power and sent it at the lich.

“Greater blight.”

The lich screeched when the all-devouring spell stuck to its defenses, consuming them with every second. It teleported again near its throne and activated another array.

“EFESTAR’S REBUKE.”

Suddenly, divine magic filled the creature’s empty orbs, turning them from empty to a deep green. A tide of skeletons rushed in from two lateral entrances.

“True mass yoink. Blast.”

It was just more fuel to Viv. Tendrils snaked on either side of her, maintained by her ability to cast several spells at once. It was easier when it was the same spell cast several times in a row, something to explore later. Each new seeking spear was an extension of the previous one. Each one grabbed the undead’s power effortlessly, pushing aside the lich’s weaker grip and claiming the power for Viv. Her conduits sang with the pilfered mana. There was simply so much of it, she didn’t know what to do except feeding them in more constructs. Her spells grew more sloppy and less precise but it didn’t matter. There were just too many of them to fire and forget. She was a walking avatar of magic, taking and giving back with every fiber of her being.

It felt good to be at the top.

Her own emerald glare matched the lich’s borrowed power and slammed it back into its face. A large defensive array had surged to life around the throne and it was already being overwhelmed, Viv’s annihilation too aggressive for its insidious pace. The lich roared again, but it was frustration, not anger.

“LIVING INSECT. ARROGANT TODDLER.”

Viv felt the lich reverse course. Power left its dying creatures, its many traps and constructs to gather in the lanky skeleton. The damage Solfis had done repaired itself in front of her very eyes. Its arms regrew, the legs soon to follow. The show was horrifying, yet another example of the dangers of the deadlands. All its dwellers had to be slain definitively, or the pervading black mana would always fix them back to their original shape. The lich was no different. It gathered all its power above its head then simply slashed towards Viv.

It was the first time Viv had seen a mage turn to wild magic.

So far, the lich’s power had remained structured and logical. All of those traps were magery, codified to the last line. The call to Efestar was divine magic and thus borrowed, but this was different. The lich was swinging mana through hatred alone, a departure from its earlier methods. It was extremely powerful. It was also excessively hard to wield.

The lich missed, striking the ceiling above her head, The entire top of the room was simply gone, windows gutted halfway up. Black mana escaped into the courtyard through the massive hole, while pieces of masonry rained down all around. The palace had withstood three hundred years of abuse, but not the lich's spell.

The lich swung again.

This time, the torrent of darkness clipped Viv's shield and the power was enough to rattle her teeth. Nevertheless, she shifted the pressure around, reforming the damaged parts and placing the intact one near the impact.

Adjustment made: Shield mastery is now at Beginner 1

"ENOUGH!"

The lich split the remaining power in two, holding part of it above its head while the rest formed firm ropes around the room, all of them converging on Viv's shield. The thick, destructive links covered the shield and fought it for control. She realized the construct was too tight for her to shadow dance through it.

"NO ESCAPE THIS TIME."

The lich walked slowly, then turned most of its remaining strength in a single, vertical ray of void energy. Viv was still caught in its net.

"NOW DIE!"

"Shatterstar."

Viv's shield exploded outward, sending accelerated panes of deleterious shrapnel everywhere around her. They shredded the chains, flayed the frescos, raked the earth, and pierced the foe.

She could see light through the many holes in its form. The jaw hung loose, perhaps in surprise. Viv didn't wait. She shadow danced to the creature side.

"Excalibur."

She didn't swing. The blade materialized where the lich's head was, then she sliced down and through most of its body. Only when it turned to ash did she relent and let the spell go.

You are suffering from mild mana poisoning.

“I’d better get out of here.”

//Yes, Your Grace.

Solfis emerged from a side passage, uncoiling from the ceiling like a demented spider.

//A capital performance.

“I have grown a lot since we found each other.”

//Yes.

//Your contribution was the most important one, of course.

//Yet allow this one a moment of pride.

//What a wonderful little harbinger of destruction you have grown up to be.

“Let’s leave before you make me blush.”

//I would shed tears if I could.

“You can always make someone shed tears on your behalf.”

//That would be unhygienic.

//Now, let us solve our undead horde problem.

Viv walked out of the palace to find wounded people waiting on the steps, many of them too hurt to fight again. The din of battle still sounded deeper in, and the temple support folks were bringing in more victims. Viv could see more undead gathering through the gap in the towers. Without pause, she turned a nearby statue into a mana-absorbing obelisk. The wounded were particularly sensitive to black mana.

Lorn was seated by the stairs with many of his temple guards. The captain was cleaning gore off his massive zweihander. It wasn’t going very well, but Viv thought it might just be the gesture that helped him relax. Especially because he could set his weapon on fire.

“Lorn, how are you?”

The man looked up and blinked, then he stared to the side towards the lines of battle.

“You killed the lich. I can no longer feel its call.”

“Can you give me a report? Otherwise I’ll find someone else.”

“No, sorry.”

The tall man shook his head, then smoothed his beard which was quite dirty.

“Ugh. Yes, the situation. We moved everyone up so we only have to defend in one direction. That let a lot of people rest, but there is a problem. The dead keep coming. Even with the

lich dead, they have our scent. We might need to break out before we are too tired to fight and the dead overwhelm us. I already exhausted my mana taking down crawlers and some of the Hadals got wounded.”

“Don’t worry, I have one more card to play.”

Viv walked to the wagon and rummaged around to find the item she’d make sure to pack.

Life energy beacons were designed to peel off a necromancer’s army of undead by attracting them to a different point. That usually meant that the team that set it up died surrounded unless they forced their way out quickly enough. It could also be used to drive a horde away from a location before letting it disperse, as long as there was no one to direct it. It was time for Viv to use it. The only issue was to activate it away from her troops.

“Arthur? Arthur!”

Viv put on her harness, the white dragon landing next to her an instant later.

“Squee?”

“We need to drive the undead away from our folks. Can you help carry me away? And, uh, hopefully back.”

One gold talent.

No.

Two gold talents!

Round trip!

“You’re charging me to save everyone’s lives?” Viv said, pretending shock “Who’s going to feed you meat behind my back if the soldiers fall here?”

Oh.

The dragonette looked dejected.

“Just kidding, I accept your terms. I’m taking it off your share of the lich’s treasure anyway?”

Treasure?

TREASURE?

“You can only see it if there are no undead crawling all over the place.”

WE FLY TO RUIN AND THEIR FIERY DEATHS

“SKRAAAAA!”

“Yes, yes. Onward, noble steed. Hey, Farren! Help me get that thing primed!”

The Voice of Neriad rushed from reattaching a finger to helping her. Viv was left holding a small sphere brimming with energy then completely contained. As she touched the metal, something touched her perception, the mark of Neriad. She could recognize his soul from their many contacts. He would help activate the item.

Viv activated her harness and felt gravity lose its hold she floated up, watched on by a few sentries hunting for fliers, then she was over an arch and towards the heart of the deadlands. Sinur’s Gate receded in the distance as Arthure picked up speed. A few yonks were enough to kill the nearby undead birds.

There were a lot of the buggers.

The next ten minutes were spent keeping the slower dragonette safe while she carried her. Viv’s feet dangled over dead desert and the coming masses of monsters. High up in the air, they merged into each other to form a squirming, maggoty tide. If she dropped now, she’d die.

Her danger sense screamed at her.

Viv formed a massive shield around herself and Arthur just as the dragonette swerved to the side, avoiding a black bolt sizzling by her side. Arthur roared and climbed sharply. Viv felt the gray mana coming off the dragon’s core in great torrents, pushing her wings up. Once again, she felt in danger but this time, they were traveling up, where the threat was. She quickly made an adjustment to her shield so it moved with her and cast, not a moment too soon. Another blast of power hit it.

The sheer might was close to what the lich had managed.

Air blew in Viv’s face from the suddenly increased speed. The clouds above approached, and she finally spotted their foe: a massive bird as wide as a jet. Dark fathers clung to desiccated limbs and tattered flesh. Only some mana fuckery could let that thing fly.

They couldn’t land with that creature bombarding them from afar.

“Let’s take it down!”

Oh really?

The dragon had learned sarcasm. The world was doomed.

Arthur climbed like an arrow and Viv got her first taste of draconic aerial combat. The furious juvenile did not just use gray to push herself up, the same gray formed a small vortex that destabilized their fleeing adversary, disturbing the flow of air around it. The undead bird was flapping its ratty wings with increased desperation. Another blast of energy was so wide, Viv

didn't attempt to stop it. She just clung to Arthur and tried to make herself as small as possible.

They moved into the cloud cover.

Arthur was relentless, moving and dodging with calm control. She didn't lose focus even when the bird disappeared behind thick mist. Blue mana turned the water around them into a gathering storm of ice. Suddenly, Arthur dove under an attack, then she surged up. The gathered water smashed into the undead bird, eliciting a horrid squawk. And Viv was flying.

"Heh?"

Arthur had dropped Viv. Inertia and her harness kept her going up through the cover. She saw Arthur turn around and roast the bird in one single, devastating attack. Then the sun rose.

Above the clouds, pink and red dyes colored a cottony sea. The radiant orb of the sun kissed Viv's skin and brought with it the promise of hope. Towering columns of cumulonimbus rose high in the distance like mountains above the ocean. It was breathtaking. She had only seen such sights through the sanitized hole of a plane, but here it was raw and untamed with its freezing wind and nothing under her feet.

Arthur picked her up softly, and they dove back down.

See, mother.

That is why you must learn to fly!

"I'll find a way. Hey, we make a good team."

What team?

You are my luggage.

"Fine, fine."

It took quite some time to return to the gloomy world under the ever-present sky. One day, she would see it cleared over Sinur's Gate.

They landed heavily on a small hill overlooking the cliff's approach. A few revenants shambled their way, but they were at the edge of the masses, and Arthur made short work of them.

Viv activated the primed metal sphere. A massive pulse of life blasted out. Viv perceived a mighty shield, a pair of golden eyes.

They winked.

The nearest wave of undead turned like a single person. Viv watched even distant, towering behemoths rotate to get to her. She activated her harness and they lifted off once again. Viv sent a silent thanks to her luck for not deciding to damage the harness to make things more 'interesting'.

The trip back was uneventful. They landed near the frontline and immediately joined the fight. Viv's legs felt uncertain under her after spending some time in the air, but her finesse kept her upright. Not all undead had taken the bait. Those that were already in the city kept coming.

So the Harrakans kept killing.

Minutes turned to hours and Viv cast again and again until her conduits screamed but she didn't stop, not even when Sidjin offered to replace her. He could not stop elites like she did, instantly and effortlessly. Night fell and the battle turned into a grind as the most dangerous undead had fallen. Only then did she allow herself to sleep.

She rejoined the fight at dawn.

Endurance +1

Again and again, Viv cast. There were still birds flying to them, then a few more elites came, probably those who had returned after the life orb stopped broadcasting its siren call. Viv kept fighting until night and noticed that the line was now held by witch pact with their short swords. They were enough to manage most revenants.

"The heavies are exhausted, they just can't fight anymore," the poacher lady explained, her long gray hair matted with sweat and worse.

Sidjin took over again. She vaguely heard someone say that they might have to leave.

On the dawn of the fourth day, Viv heard something she had forgotten was possible: blessed silence. A gore-covered Solfis waited by her tent.

//The assaults have stopped.

//I spent most of my energy taking out stragglers and ambush monsters.

//We are safe for now.

//The city is ours.

"We have won."

//Yes.

//Now, to enjoy the spoils.

Chapter 129: The find out moment.

Sadly for Viv, instant looting didn't happen since the army pretty much fell where they were, asleep in minutes. She was feeling comparatively fresh since they had gone to great lengths to protect her, so she led Solfis on a hunt for stragglers.

All the undead who could have reached them had done so, but there were a few idiots left in the maze of rooms and suspended bridges of Sinur's Gate's many towers. Solfis just grabbed her and carried her up if necessary. Honestly, the golem could have done this himself. Viv just wanted to get a look at the place.

There was a deceptive amount of room in the narrow city, most of it vertical. It would be interesting to see which dwelling people picked. They found some sealed safes and promising chests but left them to scavenging teams. The most notable discovery was the presence of extensive sewers, all the entry grates blocked by dust. Viv's first order on the way back was: do not unseal the fucking sewers. Nobody objected. In fact, Sidjin had already led the earth shapers to organize the future water purification system using an empty fountain.

"The grate will prevent solids from entering — those can be used as fertilizer. It takes very little mana to keep the flow going for the eight hours required to complete a circle. It will offset the issue of water supply. Namely, you have no water here."

Viv looked at the construct. It was ready and already working, slowly turning an ungodly sludge into clear water.

"Very impressive. Did you have it ready?"

"Some bastions of the Glastian walls do not have access to freshwater. The college came up with this method. It's used in most fortresses with casters now."

"Very impressive," Viv allowed, admiring the makeshift water purification plant.

Sidjin chuckled. He looked a bit rough around the edges with scruffy hair and deep pockets under his eyes, but his gaze was teasing.

"If I had known of your interest in arcane waste disposal when I was trying to woo you, I could have dazzled you with my conversational skills."

"Lies. I was the one to woo you."

//As fascinating as organic mating rituals are, I believe we have a palace to clear.

"Yes yes, let us not forget the treasure!"

Not even the greediest of looters would have volunteered to clear a place trapped to the gills by a notoriously bad-tempered lich, and so it fell to Viv, Sidjin, and Solfis to clear the area. They started with the wings of the palace.

As with most Harrakan structures, few of the furnishings and artifacts had survived the test of time. The pair found cold ovens and deserted halls, all signs that people used to live here. A side door allowed the palace to be resupplied from either side of the fortress, though they were blocked by a significant amount of passive defense.

“Triple helix with a self-feeding reinforcement. It will take some time to pierce through those...Hmm, perhaps by draining that section there?” Sidjin mumbled.

“Yes. Or!” Viv replied.

She had the group backtrack to the lich’s corpse and checked whatever was left from the punishment. She found what she sought stuck to what was left of its toes.

“The key!”

Viv loved how offended Sidjin looked at the pedestrian solution.

“I’ll let you pick at it later if you want, hey? It’s my palace now.”

“Get going...”

The trio found a few custom-made undead, all dormant thankfully. It was only a matter of moments to eliminate them. The lich was unsurprisingly unimaginative with its traps. Most were offensive arrays pointed at the head of those breaching a room. Sometimes, it had added variety by aiming at the crotch. Or maybe it feared children. Who knew? It didn’t take long for them to clear the first floor and determine nothing waited in the extensive cellar. Next came the throne room and the way up. And the books.

//Please do not read the necromancy books, Your Grace.

Viv glared at Solfis by her side.

“Trying to censor me, machine?”

//I know you are tempted to learn, but I fear you may be tempted to experiment.

//Irlefen mentioned that necromancy was accepted and even ritualized in the Shadow Lands.

//Here, it is an immediate death sentence.

“Fine. Oh, I know! We’ll give them to the temple. I bet they love burning those.”

“Yes, they do. You know them well,” Sidjin said.

“Meh, it’s a universal thing, I think. Ah, there are non-necromancy books... and research notes!”

Viv opened an old leather tome decorated with tight yet perfectly legible characters in old Harrakan. A very summary analysis showed that they belonged to the mage who then became a lich — a mage from the south apparently, the wild part of Param.

“He was thorough, hmm.”

Many of the mage’s musings concerned the transfer of his soul and consciousness to an undead vessel, a process he called transference. There were several references to other books, some of which were also in the tiny library. There were primers on souls by people with weird names, translated from a language she’d never seen. It all felt very useful.

“Looks like I could start my research on souls here.”

//If you had ten years, I would have advised you to do so to become part-elemental.

“But I don’t.”

//No.

//You can keep these anyway.

“Yeaaa, thanks.”

After splitting the books into a ‘keep’ pile, a ‘burn in a religious autodafe’ pile, and a ‘history of music and cooking’ pile they were not quite sure what to do with, the trio crossed the trapped and locked door at the back and found stairs leading up.

The stairs were trapped, naturally, but this time there were pits with nasty spikes at the bottom.

//I believe this installation was an original one.

“Who builds stairs with a trap like that? I would sweat every time thinking I’m only a mechanical failure away from sitting on a stake,” Viv said.

“There are always many redundancies to that sort of traps. We can check the mechanism but mostly, they have to be armed and readied first. A failure would mean a failure to activate,” Sidjin explained.

“... you had those at home?”

“Of course. And acid showers. Oh, the containers are kept dry and empty at all times unless we are under siege.”

Viv didn't know what to say before so much mustache-twirling evil. Though, to be fair, medieval castles had some pretty nasty defenses. She just didn't like it under her feet at three AM if she went hunting for a cup of warm klod.

The upper floor extended up, but Solfis checked and the palace was deserted past the third floor. There were nothing but empty suites, their shattered windows opened to the deleterious air of the deadlands. Only the third floor was occupied.

"Well, this is it. Check for traps first," Viv said on the threshold.

The alley behind them was dark, a single window providing very little illumination. They had resorted to magical lights.

The alley had been trapped, of course. There were even spells under the relatively-new carpets.

The entrance to the first suite was stone, the paint faded over delicately engraved birds. It looked both sturdy and beautiful even with the wings corroded and the beaks cracked. The original protections had not survived, but a new, gruesome construct had replaced it. Viv decided here and there it would have to go. Also, it was trapped.

"Allow me," Sidjin insisted.

With the key, Sidjin patiently dismantled the hostile black construct strand by strand, undoing what must have taken days to set up with the patience and care of a bonsai gardener. Viv wondered why he was so delicate until he started rebuilding the original work. Brown mana breathed life back into the abused carving under the archmage's patient care. He repaired some of the damage, until the dove-like bird that occupied the most space felt almost alive in her mana sight.

"Touch it, go on," Sidjin invited with a smile.

Viv caressed the stone back. In a soundless ballet, the birds flew aside to reveal a keyhole.

"Wow. Very nice."

"Northern work, from before the exile. It's mostly lost now. The governor must have been a rich and dedicated man."

"Do we need the key?"

"No, it's unlocked."

The pair activated their shields just to be sure, but the gate opened without a sound on what must have been the governor's personal quarters. Viv couldn't resist.

"Open sesame."

From the receiving room to the bath, from wall to wall and from floor to ceiling, the entire surface was crowded with teetering towers of treasures, piles of metal, weapons, enchanted weapons, vases and jewels. The light reflected on dull gold, but also the colorful shimmer of precious stones. Silver was present too, of course. Towards the center, an improvised canopy bed stood surrounded by rows of gold ingots. Arthur was going to blow a fuse.

“This is... so much,” Viv expressed.

//More than the vault should have held.

//I am counting over two thousand five hundred gold talents at first glance, and this is without the rest.

//The lich must have accumulated goods for quite some time.

//I did not expect Sinur’s Gate to have so much wealth left.

“No, it’s not just the city. Look at those weapons. They should have faded.”

Viv pointed at a small pile of mildly enchanted items. There were a few knives with sharp enchantments, but also maces with a brown impact and even an exotic spear with a fire function.

“Those were taken from revenants.”

Sidjin nodded.

“I would have said from caravans, but there are no caravans here or around.”

“And to think I believed us efficient in the way we kill the undead for loot. The lich must have found a way to control revenants into giving it valuables. I wonder how.”

//Perhaps by using carrion specimens.

//Or perhaps he did it himself.

They checked for traps and found none in the vertiginous display of wealth. After making a last check for traps, they brought Lorn and Ban to help plan the transfer.

“The temple will want a small donation,” the tall guard captain said after a small delay.

“Everyone will get a bonus from this operation, and the wealth will be reinvested in the city anyway. That’s not my question.”

“We don’t have the carriage capacity to transport this. We’ll need Farren to come here and inventory the gains before things ‘go missing’.”

“We’ll let Baroness Azar handle it,” Ban said, “with you busy I mean, Your Grace. The old b— that smart woman will know what to do.”

“I’m trusting her with too much stuff...” Viv grumbled.

**//Don't worry.
//I can always find her.**

Viv's solution to the treasure and city problem was to close the door and leave no one behind. Leaving a small team in an empty dead city with a treasure vault was 'huis clos murder mystery trope three' so Viv just gave up. Let the dead protect the way.

Baroness Azar was waiting for Viv in her tower. She was more than pleased with the news and immediately organized a series of convoys with her heading the first one.

"None of your louts know how to tell glass from ruby. Or a genuine Skand vase from a gilded pisspot! I have stories. And evidence. But I digress, this cash injection comes at a perfect time. Enorian interests are baring themselves to every bank under the sun to fund their reconstruction."

"I'm not comfortable with investing public funds in foreign land, especially — "

"Kindly do not take me for a complete idiot, young lady. We will, of course, dangle competitive interest rates to all those young, talented entrepreneurs willing to launch themselves now that the country is safer. Harrak, the past and the future. Reclaim your legacy and so on, all that nice hogwash you tell yourself. You can count on me."

"Good, because I will be... very engaged in the coming months."

Azar gave Viv a sharp glance from over the documents she was already compiling. Viv felt that she was the one being examined and debriefed, despite her high mental stats. In a way, it was comforting to know Azar was on their side. Her luck really worked overtime attracting overqualified weirdos.

"The war and your transformation?"

"Yes."

"Your kingdom is too young to be orphaned, darling. Return to us."

"I promise I will do my best."

"Oh, by the way, a merchant caravan returned while you were away. They have three inquisitors with them who want to talk to you."

"Hmm, I wonder what this is about."

Farren headed the small meeting inside of the temple compound at their own request. He seemed embarrassed, and so did Denerim. The old inquisitor brushed his beard sullenly,

while his protege Orkan fumed in his seat. The only newcomer was a dour man in an ill-fitting armor that little fitted the image Viv had of inquisitors. He was clean-shaven and rigorously well groomed. He also wore perfume. Viv got the idea this was a trap, somehow. The stranger's gaze followed her when she entered. It was distinctively calculating.

"Thanks for having us, Viv. I mean, thanks for coming. You know, well you know them, of course, and me. This is High Inquisitor Jaks. He's sent by Mornyr."

"Nice to meet you," Viv replied as neutrally as she could.

"And you too."

Jaks' voice was mellifluous and Viv got the impression of a snake through grass.

"I have come here because the Order Master is considering a formal proposal to have Neriad as your Patron God."

"Ah? This is... unexpected."

"On the contrary, you have repeatedly shown that you believed in our values without prompt. There would be conditions, of course, such as the requirement not to start a war on a clearly selfish agenda... but I do not believe this will be an issue for you."

"Indeed not."

"As for the benefits, they would be many. Mostly, we would significantly increase the temple guard presence around here, and give you access to our services which will include a large hospital, diplomatic benefits, and many others. Do you know that Captain Lorn has declined a change of post? Him and a few other key members of his squad. Let me tell you that this is a rousing endorsement."

"Then why is everyone looking like they swallowed a pinecone."

"Ah, well, there is just a small matter to solve first. You see, a bishop of ours disappeared a few months ago. I would just like to ask you a few questions to... make sure nothing is amiss."

Ah.

She knew this would come back to bite her in the ass soon enough.

"Let the trial begin," Farren said with annoyance. "High Inquisitor Jaks?"

"I will ask the questions. I would like to inform you in advance that I have a skill that detects falsehoods. You may make mistakes, or you may be remembering wrong and that is fine, but if you lie, whether outright or by saying something that could 'technically be true in a certain light', I will know and you will be treated accordingly."

Jaks waited for a reaction. Viv shrugged.

"That's fair."

"Did you murder the Bishop?"

"No, I did not murder him. I was with the temple guard at all times."

"Did you have him murdered?"

"I gave no orders to that effect."

That was the truth. She had made a suggestion to Solfis, and let the golem decide. She had not ordered anyone to do anything. In fact, she had not even told Solfis to kill him. Solfis could have decided to scare him instead, though that was unlikely. Obviously, Jaks latched on to the peculiar turn of phrase like a pitbull on a marrow bone.

"But did you start a chain of events that eventually led to the bishop's death?"

"Yes, technically," Viv admitted, then she continued before the others could throw accusations.

"I did my best to get the temple guard to leave with me, which left him vulnerable. With them, he would have surely reached the yries' city. There is simply nothing in the upper level of the mines that can contend with the temple guard. So in a way, I am responsible for his death because I took his defenses away."

The expression of vindictive triumph on Jaks' face dawned and died in a heartbeat. He stopped, thoughtful for a moment.

"And you insist that beasts killed him?"

"I am certain of it. We found the bodies of two members of his escort. They were eaten on site by rock moles. The wounds were consistent with large teeth and claws. We found the same traces on remnants of the bishop's robes. He was killed by monsters. For sure."

"Hmmm, you seem to believe that firmly."

"I was not present but all evidence points to that."

"Hmmm."

“Look, I will not lie when I say his death simplified my life, but I was already on my way out of the city when it happened. I left to Helock literally a few days after.”

Jaks did not give up. He asked a few more questions, trying to catch Viv in a plain lie. One of the methods he employed was to get her to admit she wanted him gone, then work from there to ask her what she had done to ‘get rid’ of him. Viv took her time to answer every question, never losing her temper, never hurrying to defend herself or speaking too much. She kept her replies short and to the point. If she could have, she would have chosen a lawyer to represent her, but that wasn’t the way on Nyil.

Seeing that this wasn’t working, Jaks used another strategy. He used body language to try and make her relax, see things from her perspective. He only wanted to help her and for her to help him. The assassination was in the past and this was a good opportunity to move forward. She just had to tell him everything she knew.

Viv was aware the good inquisitor was finishing at that point. Once again, she did her best to keep calm and measured every word. It was paramount not to share too much. Eventually, her patience and the calm that came with leadership and high mental stats allowed her to stall long enough for the other two judges to grow annoyed. Even Jaks appeared to give up. At least for now.

“I will be honest, I can tell from the shadow in your soul that you are not telling me everything, but I will try to inspect the scene of the death to see if I can learn more.”

Viv did not react. Inquisitors such as Jaks could learn much from a body or a crime scene. There were even rumors they could see the memories of the dead. Of course, the bishop was long dead and digested by now, and the crime scene had been contaminated beyond salvation, so there was little he could do.

Jaks could also resort to a more violent form of interrogation by using that golden light Viv had seen Denerim wield against Lancer’s agents, before they’d taken Kazar back. She knew he wouldn’t dare use it on her though, not without good reason. It would be a declaration of war.

Jaks was at an impasse. Viv was most likely cleared.

“So for now I will pass the judgment of guiltless, though I reserve the right to reopen the inquiry.”

“Witnessed by me,” Farren said.

“So witnessed,” Denerim added.

There was silence for a few seconds as the atmosphere relaxed. Viv smiled pleasantly.

“Are we officially done then?”

“Yes! Yes, thank you for your time,” Jaks said.

He placed both hands on the table and made to leave.

“If you will allow me a moment, Solfis come here please,” Viv said.

The golem’s familiar, skeletal frame slid silently into the room, its baleful glare settling on the inquisitors. They did not take a step back but hands hovered ever so slightly towards the handles of sheathed blades.

“I had the bishop murdered. We killed him,” Viv stated with a polite smile.

Jaks’ face formed a hilarious ‘o’ of surprise and he froze where he was.

“Sit,” Viv invited, still with the same pleasant smile

They did, all four of them.

“No sophistry. I will not share the details but I did it. I’m guilty. So now listen well, because this is important. The bishop’s intentions were to break the contract between the temple and the yries clan to obtain the entirety of Min Goles’ iron reserves. He made no secret of it.”

She leaned forward over the table, still smiling, fingers intertwined.

“The yries came here with little resources and many died on the way. They have a secluded valley where they can grow crops, but we have run some predictions and they will never have enough to sustain their population. The ground around their city is also ill-suited for mushroom farming. Too dry, you see. They need food from around Kazar and they trade for it with iron. No iron, no food. Lak-Tak already told me in no uncertain terms that they would fight rather than be chased off again and risk losing most of their young. The temple is free to break its contracts if it wishes. I have no say in how you act. I do, however, have a say in how the yries are treated.”

You could hear a pin drop. Both inquisitors and Farren were listening with rapt attention, possibly because Viv felt her leadership skill working. It was the right moment, the right mood. She had them and now she would deliver her message.

“The yries have joined their banner to mine. We are allied. They are part of New Harrak and the vision I have of what this place can become. The same is true of the Hadals, of the Enorian refugees, of your wounded veterans. Everyone here who swore obedience to our rules. They are my people. Your bishop was going to use the power of the temple to evict my people from their home.”

She leaned further.

“They are mine and I protect those who are mine. I will protect everyone here even if I have to kill every last invading motherfucker on this continent. I will honor my word and I will use any means necessary to do so, and if it means I have to pour molten gold down another royal throat, with the gods as my witness, I will. If I have to send Solfis after a high priest, I

will. If I have to cross the forest in a tide of blood and ash, I will. Anyone who comes and treats my people like second-class citizens will get my first-class attention. No exceptions. Now, you know what I did and why. You can decide to withdraw your support. I don't mind. I will never sacrifice one of my factions for a bigger, better one. But I want to make it absolutely clear that I feel no guilt for what I have done, and if I had to do it again, I would, and without a second of hesitation. So a word of warning. If you do decide to come after me for that death... you'd better not miss, because Solfis is always looking for more heads and I have no fucks to give. I hope I've made myself perfectly clear, gentlemen. And a good day to you."

The air smelled of scales and hot breath as she finished. Viv stood and left like a queen, feeling really good about herself. There might be dramatic consequences but for now she was perfectly at peace with herself and that was extremely important.

Draconic Intimidation: Expert 3

"I knew you'd understand, Nous."

Viv got her answer a few hours later. There would be a large fine to pay from her personal pocket, but they were willing to let it go.

Viv didn't know what to think about that.

As a last touch, the head merchant that came with the inquisitors came to see Viv.

"Your Grace, I have found what you were looking for."

"You'll have to be more specific."

"The flowers. It was hard to find but a collector from Mornyr had them. He was pleased with your initiative to revive the species, and sent more than three times the required number of seeds. Here."

Viv picked a large pouch and removed a single, light blue seedling from a larger mass.

"Get me one of the earth shapers."

"Immediately."

It took five minutes for one of them to fashion a small pot of soil, then to make the plant bloom very quickly. Soon enough, Viv was left with a rose with a dark stem and shockingly blue rose of a hue like pale ice. It was gorgeous.

“Thank you,” Viv told the merchant.

She pocketed the seeds and gave him the four gold talents he’d requested — a fortune for flower seeds — but it was a symbol as well. She found Solfis near her tower. He stared fixedly at the flower in her hands.

//You Grace.

“I found them. Harrakan roses.”

//I see.

With more care than Viv had ever seen from the mechanical being, Solfis picked the pot and caressed the petals, revealing a pale white carpel in its center. He remained silent for a moment, but Viv knew it was an eternity at his speed.

//I thought they were extinct.

“Some herbalists and nobles have kept it alive.”

//And a good thing they have.

//Look at this color.

//No other plant can produce it.

He looked up after a while.

//Those were my master’s favorites.

“I remember. Got a whole bag here. We can seed them again, make sure they thrive.”

//Yes, we will.

//Thank you.

He lifted the pot.

//Welcome home, little one.”

Chapter 130: Conscripted

“I fucking hate escort missions,” the young sergeant said.

It was tight inside of the command tent. Tight and a little rank, and hot despite the cold air blowing from the south. It was dark as well. The company didn't have oil to waste on lanterns while the sun still shone outside.

His name was Tarn and he was an idiot. Not a bad sort really, and not a bad commander either, provided someone told him what to do. He could do his job well enough beyond the fact that everything that came out of his mouth was moronic, poorly timed, or uncalled for. No wonder he ended up with this apparently unworthy assignment.

The older, cannier officer cast a quick glance at Captain Cernit before replying with a nod. That was old Jarod Three-Eyes and he had seen much. Cernit had never worked together with the others, and Old Jarod knew better than to antagonize an officer right off the wagon. Besides, they knew Cernit was a noble and some nobles had a tendency to be asshats.

It was just the way things were in the Baranese army.

Cernit smiled.

"She's different."

"You know her?" Old Jarod asked.

"Besides the fact she comes recommended by General Jaratalassi? Yes. She took down undead crawlers and gut spillers by the dozen back in the deadlands where I met her."

"Huh," Tarn said, suitably impressed.

"Of course, she was only first step then."

That got their attention. Cernit allowed himself a smile, feeling that for once in his life, he knew someone important. By Sardanal it felt good to be connected.

He would have said she stopped an entire undead horde led by two necromancers but that was the golem. Overselling a caster's ability was also dangerous business.

"Jaratalassi said she's the only witch he's accepted in his second year. He also said she was among his ten best students."

"Grim Jaratalassi? The bear trap?"

"In person. In any case, you will see. She should be here any time now."

In truth, Cernit's high finesse had let him hear the quieting camp around them. It could only mean one thing. Old Jarod stood at attention before him.

The person who came in the tent was almost unrecognizable. Gone were the gaunt traits, the hollow eyes. The one he had grown to call Bob was hale and confident, dressed in black

and silver armor that must have cost more than he'd made since he'd last seen her, bounties included. A round shield rested on her shoulders, a dagger waited on her chest, to the side. The pommel was a black core the size of a large egg. More importantly, mana danced around her, visible in tiny fumaroles at the edge of her soul. It played strangely with the light that came from the entrance. Only the blood-tinged hair and emerald eyes hadn't changed, though there was less despair and more control now. Cernit also felt that sense of weight one had when facing forces of nature. He inspected her.

[Ascendant, fourth step, one who has followed the path of direct war magic and leadership. Lethal. Undead nightmare. Man bane. Monster hunter. Leader. Smart. Lucky. On the rise.]

Fourth step!

The woman's face lit up when she noticed Cernit.

"Captain Cernit. Congratulations on your promotion!"

"Thank you. You look much better than last time!"

"I feel that way too. Glad to see you again. I love to see a familiar face. Let's catch up later. For now, I believe an introduction is in order?"

"Yes. Those are Sergeant Tarn who will command the line, and Sergeant Jerod but everyone calls him Old Jerod Three-Eyes on account of his vigilance skill. With him, we'll never get caught off guard."

The two men saluted.

"Right. I am attached to your company as a member of the Academy. Do you know what that means?"

"Means you can't give us orders?" Tarn replied before his two brain cells could catch up with his lips.

Cernit smacked the back of his head. The blow tilted the man forward.

"That means she's considered an expert, not a member of our glorious army. But if she says jump by Neriad's balls you'll jump. Understood?"

"Yes sir!"

"I am only here to complete my objective, but I will be providing support and arcane-related advice to the commander, so Cernit. If I do give a quick recommendation though, you'd better obey. If you want to live, that is."

"Makes sense," Tarn grumbled.

"Could we know what that objective is? We're to take a fort?" Jerod asked.

“Occupy. We don’t know if there is anything there,” Cernit said.

“Of course it’s fucking occupied,” Tarn grumbled in his beard.

“This will be our primary objective as far as you’re concerned. The rest is classified,” Viv said.

The two sergeants waited for her to elaborate, which of course, she declined to do.

“Wow, we're doing something important.”

“Tarn,” Cernit said, “talk less.”

“Yes sir.”

“You just have to get me to that fort in one piece. That is all.”

“Understood,” Cernit said.

He knew what she was supposed to do.

“Are you ready to depart?”

“Anytime.”

Viv was not having a good time.

The trip to the regiment’s meeting grounds had been quite pleasant in a way wealth and connection could make trips enjoyable. Nice inns, nice manors, General Jaratalassi’s letter of introduction had been the best key money couldn’t afford. She had ridden her expensive horse down the best tables of the northern kingdom and to the border of Baran. It had removed the sting of Arthur’s ever longer trips. Now though, things were different.

Her mission was to reach the northern flank of the current front and open a portal to a predetermined region. She wasn’t sure how Jaratalassi knew she could open portals and suspected he’d just asked her in a hunch knowing her skill and relationship with Sidjin. In any case, she was officially a portal maker for the alliance. The destination portal being in the wilderness, she was granted an escort of good size: a hundred experienced infantrymen to protect her during the trip and help ‘secure’ the fort. Viv highly suspected Jaratalassi knew the fort was occupied but she didn’t know by what. That part was fine. The part that wasn’t fine was that they had to walk through the boonies of the boonies of Baran, a heavily forested area creeping along the barren wastes of western Haluria. The marches of Baran were a patchwork of deserted moors and survival villages huddled in remote valleys, eking a living between two invasions. None of the parochial villages kept any roads because roads

led raiders to places, places where people lived. As such, everyone walked over rocky hills and through arid ditches. Everyone including Viv.

Now, Harrakan heavies were superior in combat for a variety of reasons, one of them because their paths favored explosive power. They were unmatched on the battlefield. The problem was getting them here. Harrakans were masters of logistics for a reason. You couldn't win a war unless your overly muscular soldiers wearing seventy kilograms of enchanted steel could get in spear range of your enemies. The rest of Param favored a more balanced approach. That meant that the supersoldiers making this regiment had trained to move fast and far. It meant that Viv was contending with a hundred fucking winter soldiers on an 'active stroll' and that meant that her life was utter shit.

Endurance: 28

She'd not hated her life that much since special forces training. Worse, she was more resilient than even an Olympic Marathonian champion and it was still not enough. Even with people carrying her tent and some of her gear, even with scouts leading her silently through the easiest path without comments, even with all of that, she would collapse in her bed every night with a groan.

It was a different groan every time.

"How the fuck did they drag a water barrel through that thing?"

"If Mouq could see me she'd laugh her ass off. I'm in a world of magic and back to being a grunt."

"My feet are now 80% blisters."

"Fuck."

Day after day, the regiment went farther into the forest. Viv got the beginning of a fever, the first time she'd been sick from actual disease since she came to Nylil. Fortunately, a small dosage of potions managed the symptoms until she got better. No soldiers said anything, not even Cernit, but they could see they were waiting, expecting.

Expecting her to break.

Viv was unwilling to give up. The path she had picked gave her a fast improvement of her physical stats as well as the mental. This was a good opportunity to push herself to her limit in a relatively safe environment. This was also a point of pride. Viv knew any other mage in her class would have demanded a better accommodation, possibly riding in a handcart. It would be reasonable too. Viv was not feeling reasonable.

“We can help more if you want. We expected to slow down,” Cernit told her one evening, not unkindly.

“It’s fine. Don’t worry, I will not be too stubborn to forget our goal. I will be in shape to cast that spell.”

“Good. There is a betting pool going to see how long you’ll last.”

Viv huffed, a bit annoyed. So everyone was pretending not to notice her struggles then.

“I feel encouraged. Wait, what did you bet?”

“An officer does not join in such base pursuits.”

“Come on.”

Cernit smiled in the dim light of the tent.

“I bet two silver talents that you’d make it to the end.”

“Wow. Thank you for your trust.”

“Do not mention it.”

Viv’s pride lasted until she realized that Cernit was purposely slowing down the pace to let her adapt.

Bastard was cheating.

Like this, they walked for almost three days, then snow started to fall in heavy tufts for the first time this year. As Viv licked a thick flake off her lips, she allowed herself to smile. The men were whining about the much harder work but Viv had come prepared. She had potions, she had clothes, and she had... snowshoes. Custom-made snowshoes to attach on her boots made to her specifications by a refugee from the southern wildlands. An old man from the same region as Koro had weaved them himself for a meager price. The result was immediate. First, they laughed. Then, they scolded. Finally, they asked to see them.

“Snowshoes spread the weight over a larger area. That way, you can stay on top of the snow unless you’re really, really loaded,” Viv explained. “Even then the packed snow should only dip a little.”

“You sure came prepared,” Tarn said with some admiration. “Not a city flower then? From peasant stock, maybe?”

Cernit massaged his temples.

Viv wondered if Tarn had ever said anything that didn’t offend someone. She didn’t mind herself but even the mildest mage here didn’t enjoy being reminded of their humble

beginnings. Paramese society was fundamentally layered. It was only a matter of time before Tarn put both feet in that damn mouth of his in front of the wrong person and got sent to steal a dragon's favorite tooth. It said a lot about their assignments.

Viv didn't interact much with the rank and files, they wouldn't understand it anyway, but she heard that old Jerod was an exceptional scout. It was just that he couldn't hit the broad side of a barn with his bow. Cernit had led a doomed defense that saw only six survivors return to Baran.

It sort of stank, Viv thought. She delicately shared her concern with Cernit.

"All part of Jaratalassi's plan. Tarn is a great executor. Old Jarod is still a solid spearman. If the Halurians have any spies, they will see a bunch of misfits sent to a peripheral mission and think little of it."

"The Halurians use spies? I took them for a straightforward bunch."

"Their women are the wiliest snakes to ever live. They lead their nation's dishonorable ways of waging war. Even more dishonorable, I mean. They... they convince men to betray the cause. They have... compelling arguments."

"You mean sex."

"Yes," Cernit said, blushing a little. He looked terribly embarrassed.

"So General Jaratalassi hid this operation. It must be important. I still don't know what we are opening the portal for."

"Me neither. The general takes secrecy very seriously. He's not just called the bear trap because of his defensive fighting."

"Hmmm."

Day in, day out, the column moved on. During the day, they crossed the pristine snow between leafless trees and hidden stones. At night, Viv raised walls and lights to help with safety. The stars above shone brightly on a good day, so far from all the light of mankind. Most of the time they were muted, however, and the encampment became an oasis of existence in an ocean of darkness. Nature was silent now, with most creatures burrowing for the winter. Only the creaks of laden branches broke the silence. Sometimes, Viv would look out of her tent at night when the only motion were the puffs of breath from the hidden sentries, an ethereal reminder that life still persisted in this barren land.

After a week, rolling hills and crags replaced the denser forests. Even the few villages Cernit somehow found grew more rare while above, the gray cover of low clouds masked the entire sky. The world was reduced to a dreary expanse of white, gray, and the occasional brown touch of sleeping wood. Stones gave the snow strange forms and hid pitfalls that the scouts

had to find for them. Water was thankfully abundant, as was wood, so they always had fire and warm water going.

It was also the first time they were attacked.

It happened as they were crossing through a canyon, its surface devoid of much snow thanks to chance and wind. A mighty roar stopped the men where they stood. Viv felt a pressure against her that her intimidation dispersed immediately. She was no prey.

“Form up! Form up and grab your spears!” Cernit roared.

The clarion call of his voice dispersed the aura of fear that had gripped the men. Tarn and Jarod ordered their men to form up by squad because there was no time to do anything better. Almost immediately, a white form like a bear in armor topped a nearby ridge and charged.

Viv had removed her silverite runes the moment she'd realized the danger. They hovered around her, waiting for a command. She opened with astra spells as soon as the creature was in view, launching a swarm of them. The beast didn't stop. Instead, walls of ice and frozen earth rose to protect its flanks. The spells hit them and blew holes in the protection.

The armored bear's bullheadedness played against it when its forward charge placed it in the path of most projectiles. Many were stopped too early, but a few hit around or over hastily raised obstacles. Viv saw a puff of red and heard a roar, but the beast was already hitting a squad. Viv saw a white trail and a man went flying.

She couldn't hit it without hitting her own soldiers.

Thankfully, the creature stumbled and swiped. The squad it had attacked spread out before its anger. Viv finally noticed the wound on its flank when it stood on its rear legs, howling terribly. Blood dripped freely from its flank.

She must have hit something important.

“Blast.”

The artillery spell hit the creature as it was falling back, braining it instantly. It fell where it was.

Silence spread over the plain. The engagement had lasted less than five seconds.

“What are you ogling? Form squads! Medics, check on Leras! NOW!” Cernit bellowed.

The men moved with needed pride. A soldier with a bag of remedies approached the fallen warrior. He shook his head. He was dead. Now Viv could see that his head was turned at an unnatural angle, the helmet deformed by a violent impact.

“Wow,” Viv said.

“Fantastic shot there. Good job.”

Viv didn't tell him she was aiming for the chest.

“Sorry about your man. I wish I had been faster.”

“You did great. We couldn't have killed it without you. Its skin is too thick for the short bows we have with us. This is a female rock bear. Gravid. If they haven't fattened up enough for the winter, they'll even attack humans. First they roar, then they use the confusion to charge a group and drag away prey. They'll eat it then do it again if they're still hungry. It's rare to lose just one person.”

Viv's brows rose in amazement.

“You seem very knowledgeable about those beasts.”

Cernit leaned conspiratorially. Despite the loss of his soldier, he seemed to be in a good mood.

“It is a secret, but there is another reason why I was the one who was picked. My lands are very close to the border, next to the fort in fact. I told you I was a minor noble?”

“Yes. Oh, so you are going home.”

“Not by the best road, but yes!”

He turned to his men.

“You lot! Skin the beast and get the core out. Get the best cuts of meat with you. We'll have a stew tonight. And don't touch the liver!”

He turned to Viv while a mass of drooling, knife-wielding maniacs fell on the carcass.

“Shame about the pelt, but we really don't have the time to get it. Come with me. Tonight we will feast.”

The first signs of their destination came with the forests' return. A chain of low mountains rose in the distance, the location of the fort. Those were not young mountains, tall and sharp like new teeth, but old and comfortable ones. They sagged under the weight of eons and the current snow, forming white mounds with soft tops where pines had taken refuge. A river still flowed along their flanks. Its deep blue waters provided some color to the winter landscape. It would have been quite nice if it were not for the corpse.

It belonged to an old woman. She had been carrying wood home on her back and the twigs surrounded her like a marker. She was lying on her chest. Something had bitten off her

calves and thighs, then attacked the flanks but it had been interrupted. Entrails extended away from the regiment then over the ridge amid a mess of snow tracks. The corpse was still steaming. There were roars and the neigh of horses in the distance.

Viv was standing next to Cernit when they came across the dead one. He blanched like she'd never seen him do before, even on the wall of Fort Sky when all was lost.

"Weapons out. Move it! MOVE!"

Viv sprinted alongside him, cursing the slightly duck-like step the snowshoes forced on her. She was still fast enough to keep up and they topped the slope just in time for the battle.

Below them, a creature like a massive wolf with strange tusks and a vaguely serpentine face charged a man on a horse who raced away as far as his mount could carry him. Another two young men turned around their quarry, wielding javelins. They wore forester garb, not armor, and the horses had no barding. One of them hurled his weapons and found the beast flank but it seems it only angered it. As Viv watches, another landed a javelin in the back, between the ribs. The shot was fantastic and just as immediately useless as the previous one. The beast gained on the young man.

"Those are my SONS!" Cernit bellowed before charging.

Ah.

Viv sprinted as well but the horseman was heading towards them and she wasn't confident in hitting the creature. Too close. Fuck, if only it went sideways.

The rider skilfully turned as the beast pounced, but the horse was caught, somehow. Back of the leg. It stumbled, yet the young man somehow still managed to stay on top.

This gave Viv the opportunity she needed. Her silverite symbols hovered and she cast a series of Astra forward, angling them to the side.

Rather than attacking the rider, the beast jumped nimbly to the side, which meant that it was still hit by three of the fast spells. Viv had faced enough fast opponents to know to spread her attacks.

The attacks were powerful enough to dig devastating gaps in the beast's back. It fell to the ground, clawing and whining until a blast put it out of its misery. Viv did not stop, however. On the field below, more creatures had appeared. A dozen.

Those were pack animals.

Viv followed the sprinting Cernit in silence. Scouts remained behind, peppering the lead beasts with arrows. They didn't seem to do much more than annoy them.

“Father!” the young man nearest to them said. Without prompt, he led his horse to Cernit who jumped on his back as if he were not wearing armor. The old knight gave Viv a hand. She took it without hesitation.

The horse departed at a gallop towards the marauding monsters without a hint of fear. Viv thought the horse ought to be wounded but it seemed the claws had miraculously avoided the leg’s flesh.

“Yah!”

They charged forward, Viv’s silverite symbols hovering around her and letting her cast on the fly. The sudden speed made her heart lurch after a week of walking. It felt like flying, with the powdery snow peppering her cheeks. Stress and excitement sent her heart racing. Cernit’s sons. She had to save them. She would save them. Those beasts were as good as dead.

The two remaining young men threw a javelin then galloped across the clearing towards the quickly approaching soldier squads. For a beautiful moment, it seemed that they were faster and would escape but the lead beast hissed, a sibilant sound that made Viv wince, and one of the horses panicked.

The youngest son fell off his horse. Cernit swore and yelled but his mount was already going as fast as it could.

“Blast!”

Viv’s attack curved to kill another creature, though the largest specimen was still hidden at the heart of the quickly moving pack. She could see more of them now, red gums, slavering tongue, deep-set black eyes. She silenced the part of her that said she couldn’t kill them all before they reached her. Her heart thundered in her chest as she lined another artillery shot and killed another creature. They didn’t stop. They should have stopped. It didn’t make sense.

The older son changed his trajectory and picked the younger by the scruff, then placed it in front of him. The younger son grabbed the horse’s neck with all his strength. It slowed down.

Viv distinctly saw resignation on the older boy’s face, calm when he dropped from the saddle and turned to face his death with a straight back and a javelin in his hand. Cernit cried. She decided that the man would live.

Power coursed through Viv’s core and roared, answering her call.

“Eldritch walls!”

A barrier of grasping tentacles and scales rose like a tide to grasp at the beasts. It was fragile and weak but they didn’t know it. Some jumped over but more stopped or tried to go around. The strict formation scattered in an instant. It wouldn’t be enough to save him but it gave Viv the time she needed. With her hand in front of her, she found her target.

“Kinesis.”

It was the older son’s turn to be lifted by the scruff, rising over the plain with a yelp. Viv unceremoniously dragged him towards her at good speed like a squealing, flailing package. At the same time, the first beasts were almost upon them. A volley of arrows stopped them just in time. One of the beasts screeched, eye pierced.

“Purge net.”

Viv turned the space in front of her into a hell of flaying tendrils that scored deep gouges into the beasts’ hides. Those were not the leaders. They yelped. The lifted son landed on his feet and sprinted without pause past them. Cernit turned their horse around and trotted back. Meanwhile, Viv sent another blast at a flanking beast and killed it, all while maintaining her flay spell. Her mind worked in overdrive to juggle all the symbols and her intent but it didn’t feel like pressure. It felt like a dance of minds, her against the pack, and she was winning. The beasts were whipped, killed, obstructed. She projected her will and the most powerful kinetic spell she could at another flanker and saw it reel as if punched.

The lead beast smashed through the wall and roared. The creatures attacked with suicidal frenzy, and Viv dropped the purge net. A moment later, the roaring mass of Baranese soldiers smashed into the disorganized pack spears first. The creatures fought, but the soldiers held on.

Viv cast another blast but the beast dodged with a natural ability that made it move so fast it left an after image. Viv could not hit it.

“Charge it!” Viv asked, and Cernit did it without a second of doubt.

The opponents charged each other, the slaving monsters and the humans and their fearless horse. Viv waited until the last moment. She saw the thing jump, heard the woosh of snow, heard the cavernous sound of its breath. A flash of gray pelt.

“Aegis.”

The creature smashed against her shield at full speed and bounced back with a resounding smack. Viv winced from the strain but she grit her teeth and unsheathed her dagger,

“Excalibur.”

The blade was massive, easily as long as the horse. Viv screamed. She swung. Something so large shouldn’t be so light, she thought. There was no resistance when the blade bisected the reeling, airborne beast cleanly before it could touch the ground and jump again. A sprinkling of blood covered her face and most of her clothes. It was warm and smelled like iron.

That was too much for the rest of the pack. The maimed survivors limped away, the archers picking off a few of the more wounded ones.

Shield mastery: Beginner 2

For a moment, the plain was silent except for the heavy breaths of the recovering soldiers. Viv couldn't believe everything had gone so well.

"For Baran!" Cernit roared.

"For the king!" his men echoed.

Viv turned and saw that the older man had tears in his eyes and a smile on his lips.

"I've never seen anything like that. You are a champion," he whispered. "A champion. And you saved my son. I owe you twice over, Viv the traveler. But now please give this father a moment."

Cernit stepped down while Tarn and Jerod busied themselves ordering the men. A few of the braver fighters planted spears through the ribs of the dead beast to check if they weren't faking it. Viv watched Cernit with some amusement from the top of her saddle. The main reason why she didn't come down was that she was tired and the horse let her sit with a dry butt.

Cernit practically jumped on his older son and hugged him with an energy only fear could bring. They smacked each other's backs with their fists and cried. Then, Cernit placed two hands on his shoulders and stayed there for a good ten seconds before punching him square in the jaw.

"An entire pack of Halurian beasts with javelins? You utter morons. Where are your armor sets? Where are the bloody bear spears? Huh?"

"We didn't have the time, dad," another boy said in defense.

"What did I say about delaying hunts?"

"This wasn't a hunt," the middle one said. "This was a rescue."

He pointed up the slope where the rest of the infantrymen were appearing, dragging their luggage. There were villagers with them. Young ones too.

"The beast got old Shev but we bought time for the rest. You said that we had to protect them."

"I said that, aye. I did."

Cernit mussed their hair, all three in turn. He made no effort to hold his tears.

"And you did a bloody fine job. I just hate to see you in danger like that. By Neriad..."

The four hugged again while everyone else pretended not to watch. The oldest son was the first to break, fuming with mock outrage.

“So I’m the only one that gets punched then? It’s not fair!”

So Cernit gently punched the other two.

Chapter 131: Mind like a bear trap.

“The fort’s occupied alright. By those thrice-cursed Halurians!”

“Language.”

Cernit’s eldest son faltered under his father’s gaze, his bluster gone in an instant. The mood in the tent grew awkward. Viv shifted and leaned over the map to offer a distraction but the old captain would not have it.

“We are here to receive your report, my son. Not to see you grandstand with all your youthful bravado. Provide your report in a concise and gentlemanly manner, so your officers may draw the right conclusions.”

“Yes, father. Of course.”

Viv thought the golden rule was to scold in private and praise in public, yet Cernit had decided not to do that despite a known leadership skill. Viv wondered if it was a question of etiquette. Perhaps he could not show favoritism. Perhaps he had done so for the sake of his other children. An interesting aspect of his culture.

“Halurians have taken over the deserted fortress. I have personally seen them while standing on Semia’s teat.”

“That’s a small hill facing the fort,” Cernit whispered to Viv.

She nodded. There was a mountain in the United States called the ‘Grand Teton’, the great nipple in French, so mankind shared the same naming skills everywhere, it seems. That or explorers were horny.

“I used a spying glass. They had sentries and the flag of the Varak clan. I did not come closer because the presence of birds of prey indicated tamers...”

The young man looked up to his father for approval with clear worry. Cernit only gave a curt nod. Viv thought the scout had been wise to stay away because if the Halurians had more of those dog things, he would have ended up as a crunchy snack without word of the enemy presence reaching the Baranese.

It was also clear the boys were not meant to be stealthy foresters. Their classes read as [Hedge Knights] and they were a sort of hybrid between hunters and actual knights.

“Will you be attacking them, father?”

“You have not finished your report. How many men do you think they might have?”

“Oh, yes. At least sixty from the number of flags, perhaps less. They have tamers. The presence of a faceless is... unlikely.”

“Very much so. They only intervene when we move into Halurian territory,” Cernit said for Viv’s benefit.

She had learned that in her history class but thanked the knight anyway.

“Do we attack?”

“Our orders are clear. We are to take over that place and we will. They cannot be allowed to report to their main forces.”

“Yes, father. It will be done.”

“Get your armor ready, you three, and fetch me my horse. They might have warborns with them to protect the tamers. We will be needed.”

“Do we raise the levies?”

“We know they have more beasts and they likely have warborns... what does it mean?” Cernit tested.

“That levies are only victims.”

“Correct. Make sure you pick up spare spears.”

“Of course.”

“You may leave.”

“Father, what should we tell mother?” the youngest asked.

Cernit smoldered until it looked like smoke might escape from his ears. Junior Cernit wilted under the terrible gaze.

“Tell her I will do all I can to bring her idiot sons back home in one piece. Now go.”

“Yessir.”

The trio left the tent, leaving Viv and Cernit alone. Tarn and old Jerod peeked through the curtain flaps. Cernit invited his lieutenant in with a gesture, then inspected the map in front of him.

“We need to follow the road. Beasts are always more dangerous on uneven ground. Even worse in a forest. They’ll see us coming up from very far if they do have birds anyway,” he said after a little while. His attention landed on Viv.

“What do you think?”

“How do we get over the walls? You do not have siege equipment.”

“We can make ladders in mere hours, but...”

“If they have warborns on the parapet, it will be a slaughter.”

“Yes. Only cavalry or elite infantry in formation can hope to stand before those maniacs. Soldiers climbing one by one just be so much meat. The gates, however...”

“Could they have repaired them?”

“Close to impossible. The Varak clans live in the nearby plains which also happen to be the only place in those gods-forsaken lands that can grow cereals. They have very few forests and no carpenters worth their salt.”

Viv knew from her class that the clans almost never cooperated, each warlord only trading favors in dire times.

“It’s not easy to repair a fortress gate. If they have done anything it will be a makeshift arrangement. Most likely not enchanted either.”

“What if they put up a barricade?” Tarn asked.

“Then they’d have a real hard time getting in and out seeing as there are no other entrances,” Cernit said with some bite.

“Beg your pardon,” Old Jerod said.

He blushed mightily when everyone actually paid attention to him.

“That is, sorry, ah, they probably have slingers. Gotta be hard to get the boys to work if the slingers just take potshots at them. Those stones can brain a man, even if they wear a helmet!”

“I could always shoot them from afar,” Viv offered.

“We’re supposed to take the fort, not demolish it. And the general said we were on a schedule,” Cernit said.

“How about that then? You pick some strong lads to carry a ram. I protect our approach with a shield and cover them while they work. Worst case scenario, I can destroy a blockade if there is any so long as it’s not made of stone. Black mana works worse against inert materials, though it still works.”

“And the scouts provide covering fire. That would work well, but... It puts you at risk. A great risk.”

“Have shield bearers protect me and it should be fine. I’ll make walls for your archers.”

Cernit and Viv exchanged a long glance. Viv could almost see the gears turning in the experienced man’s head. He could probably take the fort without her. The archers would provide cover while the infantry attacked through the door and while climbing the walls, using their superior numbers. It would most likely work but the casualties would be massive. Success would not be certain either. Involving Viv gave him the best chance to succeed, yet it also placed her in danger. No Viv, no portal.

“Jaratalssi didn’t just send me because of what I could do. He also sent me because of what I... could do.” Viv commented.

Cernit knew what she meant. He’d seen her fight.

“We will do as you suggested with one more thing. Jerod will pick his best archers to scale the walls on the northern side after we’ve begun our attack.”

“They’ll see them coming.”

“Not if they’re too busy with us. I know the perfect spot to scale the walls. A place where they’re damaged. They might get lucky.”

“As you said, sir. I’ll... lead them personally.”

Cernit eyed Jerod with suspicion. It was universally known he couldn’t shoot for shit and his offer felt suspicious.

“I can tell them if there’s a warborn waiting for them on top.”

“Very well. The fort is some way away. We’ll have an early lunch then leave as soon as my sons have returned.”

Cernit’s sons did return with a graying dark horse in tow. They wore mismatched armor pieces that did not always fit. Viv thought they looked like university boys who bought their disguise from the discount bins, though every bit was polished to a shine. The youngest just had a gambeson, no chestplate. Their spears looked good enough, however. Those were boar spears with a guard near the tip that prevented the victim from approaching.

The riders also came with civilians carrying a cauldron of warm food between them, and a letter from Cernit's wife. The old knight read it, turning bashful and scared in turn. Everyone pretended not to notice.

"Let's go!" Cernit said.

The column departed shortly after and Viv didn't miss the worried glance he cast at his sons. She hoped her luck wouldn't screw him over.

The approach to the fort went without a hitch. Distant birds of prey observed them from far above, their shapes sometimes visible as they emerged from the low clouds. Those looked like a cross between vultures and hawks, and it didn't take an ornithologist to notice they were neither locals nor acting normally. The path led through dense woods, the pines still green and healthy. Their scent overpowered that of old sweat, to Viv's relief. Nothing moved. Nothing attacked. The scouts' vigilance proved superfluous.

The company reached the fort in the early afternoon after a brisk march though. Viv had ridden at the back of Cernit's horse and felt refreshed as she took on their target.

Across a large expanse of empty ground, the fort stood like an old, cracked nut. Crenelations were missing on a battlement and reminded Viv of a smile with missing teeth. Large impacts had scored holes in the gray stones here and there, revealing lighter shades beneath. The gates had been hastily repaired with nailed on planks and they were closed at the moment. The keep was a single round tower no higher than her own house back in Kazar, and the walls were barely thirty meters long at the front, yet the fortress felt no less formidable for it. Savage flags depicting a lean wolf lined the walls, floating under a light breeze. Shapes moved behind and growls could be heard on the other side. The fortress had seen much and it still stood, and now it belonged to her enemies. A horn rang in the distance.

"Alright, spread out," Cernit said. "Stay well behind your shields because you're not safe, you hear? A second of an exposed neck and you'll get a stone through the jaw. No second chances."

Viv made sure to keep her shield in front of her. A squad detached from the main formation to cut a thick trunk at record speed. They had a makeshift ram ready in record time. Once again, the average soldier's strength meant they could work and carry stuff their Earth counterparts could not hope to move. Soon enough, they were ready.

Tarn formed a protective square around Viv. Jerod faded in the trees with his handpicked group. The rest of the infantry formed in a column behind her with the scouts protected by shields, the ram went in front of her, and the mounted knights under Cernit loitered at the edge of the forest, trotting in this and that direction to prevent the slingers from getting an easy shot. They were ready.

"Forwaaaaaard!" Cernit roared.

He blew a horn for good measure. Viv called in an aegis with colorless mana and the formation moved forward.

Almost immediately, a few stones pinged on the transparent beehive shield. A test. This version of the Aegis was designed with runes that stopped physical impact so the drain on her reserves was negligible. Guttural voices rang across the battlements, calling the warriors to battle. Viv didn't have Arthur with her this time so she asked Tarn to keep an eye up for birds. Nothing could break concentration like surprise talons to the eyes.

Slowly, they moved forward. Stones would skirt the very edge of her shield to try and take infantrymen off guard, but those were experienced lads and most stones only found raised shields. A man got a broken foot after twenty meters and the column made themselves even tighter. Cries of frustration echoed over the wall.

"Steady!" Tarn said.

The formation kept together remarkably well until they reached the walls. Viv kept the shield up and got to work.

"Eldritch walls!" she cried while the ram smashed heavily against the door.

Twisted geometry erupted from the earth, forming a thick barrier. The scouts spread out along and exchanged fire with the slingers above the walls. A scout got brained immediately but Viv heard cries of pain above and saw a man take an arrow through the eye. The slingers wore leather caps over their long, braided hair. It didn't seem to help much. Not at this range.

It didn't take much focus for Viv to maintain the shield so she sent a couple of astra spells at targets of opportunity. She needed to get a reaction and now was the best time. It worked.

"Warborn! WARBORN!" Tarn screamed.

She didn't like the fear in his voice.

They came quickly. Viv barely caught a glance of a man falling from the battlement dressed in leather and what appeared to be chitin, his thick hair following like a mane. A scout fell with a dagger in the throat while Viv was still registering it, then another pinged against her shield. He practically teleported through thin air to dodge her first net and then he was in the middle of the spread out scouts, killing. He dodged behind a wall. She caught a glimpse of red lines shining on his face.

Viv dispersed the wall which he did not expect. A well-placed purge spell whipping at him chased him off, wounded. He had still managed to avoid being cut in two. And then she saw him look down in surprise at the arrow going through his chest. Another joined in the moment he hesitated, then a third. Viv didn't even cast. She didn't watch him collapse with a look of furious disbelief. There was another. That one fell right on the ram wielder. He had killed three before she could even look.

A large axe smashed against her shield to no effect, so the man ran alongside its length all while dodging spear thrusts coming from the inside. A couple of soldiers blocked his path with their shield but he kicked them and they were sent flying. Viv hit him with a telekinesis spell. He was sent flying into a lying spear. It skewered him from back to front. She smirked. He rushed at her anyway. A well-placed purge spell finished him off.

It was her danger sense that saved Viv once again. She coated herself in mana and charged it with the annihilation meaning and not a moment too soon. A third warborn fell from up high where he had jumped and between Viv's guards. A thrown knife pinged against her physical shield, then the man was in front of her.

The entire sword, then half of his hand disappeared before his triumph turned to horror. He turned into a shadow and teleported back exactly where Viv expected, catching an astra through the chest which killed him instantly.

"Nice try."

"Close ranks," Tarn screamed from the side where he was fighting off another pair of warborn. "Close ranks or I'll fucking skin you alive!"

The guards who had spread out a little immediately surrounded Viv but it was for nothing. The battle was already winding down.

Cernit and his sons had engaged more warborn at the edge of the formation while she was taking care of the nearest ones. Cernit and his eldest son formed the wings of the group of four while the youngest stayed at the center, the opposite of what Baranese doctrine dictated. They rode one warborn down at a time, turning sharply when they used their insane mobility to evade. Four spears and the horse's speed were enough to make sure at least one of the weapons landed. The usefulness of boar spears now became apparent when the skewered warborn tried to free themselves. Their tendency to charge suicidally was hampered by the merciless implement pinning them in place.

The swifter warborns tried to use the wall to their advantage, jumping on it to force the knights to give up the charge or crash into it. The first to try received two javelins to the back and fell to his death.

The four knights had done better than the rest of the infantry combined, Viv realized. More importantly, the warborn had absolutely no team spirit. They were independent fighters with no squad tactics, trading the ability to work in formation for incredible single combat prowess. It proved of little utility against patient and disciplined groups of soldiers and yet the outnumbered warriors had still killed four people in the blink of an eye. It was... a little concerning.

Viv also realized the last slingers had stopped firing.

Inside the fort, something was happening. The ram smashed through the damaged door to reveal a scene of carnage. Two giant hounds like the one they had killed before were fighting

slingers, killing them easily. A third lay dead with a smashed skull. The inner courtyard was a scene of pure chaos. Blood was spilled everywhere amid corpse parts and dying men. Viv immediately spotted the cause. There was a group of robed figures left intact near the tower. Well, mostly intact. Feathered shafts emerged from their backs.

It appeared that Jerod's little foray had been successful.

With the fall of the tamers and most warborns, the rest of the battle was a simple mop up. The remaining slingers never surrendered though several managed to run away. Viv was left watching a peculiar scene.

In the corner of the courtyard were huddled women wearing thick robes that hid most of their features. All of them clutched a small, ornamented knife in their blood-covered right hands and all of them were dead. The sprays of arterial blood and clean left hands indicated the girls had cut their own throats before forming a small pile, perhaps to face death together.

Cernit walked to Viv after he was done giving orders. They looked at the spectacle.

"Camp followers. They always kill themselves. Even if you capture one alive, they'll do their best to end their own lives."

"Out of fear of something?"

"Not fear, I'd wager. Pah, who knows with those savages?"

Viv shrugged. They looked like civilians to her and she didn't like that. That was all.

"Is it pity you feel?" Cernit asked, his face closed.

Viv knew this was a test and also that she didn't care for it.

"A little, yes. Those were not warriors."

"Then come with me."

They walked to the keep. The first floor was a makeshift prison, the door guarded by a soldier. He looked a little green. Viv knew what to expect from the smell.

The Halurians had captured villagers at some point of their brief occupation. Probably to sell as slaves for a bonus. Their bodies were spread haphazardly across the room, drying blood coloring stained piles of hay in a disgusting mess. There were many with defensive wounds, a mother curled around the remains of the child she had failed to protect. They were all too thin and too lightly clothed. A skeletal body waited curled in a corner, long dead before the rest had been executed. The stench of voided bowel and filth was nauseating.

"That's what they do. That's Halurians," Cernit growled, and there was a deep hatred in the knight's voice Viv had never heard before.

“They are beasts who kill and get killed without a shred of regret. They don’t understand humanity. One day we’ll cross the border, all civilized nations together to cleanse them off the face of this world for good.”

Viv could see why Rakan and his sister would leave. Haluria sounded like a shit place.

“Do you understand what we fight for?” the knight asked with a burning passion.

“I understand that I have my orders and now that the fort is clear, I’ll carry them out.”

Cernit blinked.

“Oh. Of course. My apologies, this is a difficult tale for me.”

“You live on the border. I understand,” Viv replied.

She turned and moved to form a large, durable witch teleporter.

The work this time took a long time, not least because she didn’t have Sidjin with her to flatten and prepare the ground. This teleporter was temporary but the distance was also much longer and it was close to nightfall when she added the finishing touch, pouring most of her mana into the working before her. All the while, soldiers and knights protected her though she could see them look with some curiosity.

With an effort of will, the circle ignited.

It always felt strange to twist reality at such a fundamental level that even modern technology could not dream of matching it in a hundred years. The sheer amount of power required to do so would be on the scale of the Dyson sphere, Viv thought, but here it happened because the planet allowed it. Or perhaps, it strengthened the body and souls of those who dwelled on it so they could make it happen.

The aperture of the portal opened slowly, more a peeling than a wound. It would close just as smoothly later. Viv could soon see the distant walls of the town of Lartizen on the northern border of Baran. There were also knights. They crossed immediately.

Now, Cernit was a country knight. He owned land but probably had few servants if any. His armor was army-issued while his son used functional yet mismatched castoffs from lost sets. Those stood at the opposite end of the spectrum. If Viv had to imagine a valiant prince in shining armor, that was it. That was the real fucking deal. They rode massive chargers clad in engraved armor of exquisite make shining with delicate patterns, lines, and illustrations. Art and enchantment here formed a harmonious whole far from the functional sobriety of Harrakan armors. Banners and motley capes completed the dazzling display. Those armor bore the history of the families that undoubtedly paid a fortune to have them made and they did so in more ways than one. Discolorations and minuscule dents proved that those were not display pieces to be exhibited in dusty halls but tools of war, powerful defenses that had saved their owners as he charged into danger. The knights’ weapons were stowed for now but Viv saw from the sheaths and handles that they would be no less impressive. She felt

tiny in front of them. On horseback, they were so tall and massive. A fugacious memory of the charge in Sinur's Gate came to her mind unbidden. If a dozen knights could plow through ranks of undead, then those men...

[Inner Circle Knight of the White Orchard. Count of Irelus. Very Dangerous. Expert melee combatant...]

Yes, they could probably hold their own. And there were a lot of them. The first riders trotted out of the courtyard until one blew a horn, then a group even more hallowed and decorated slowly moved out, shining under the pale sun like apparitions.

The most obvious signs that they were bigwigs happened when every man in the courtyard took the knee, Cernit first. Viv did not bow to foreigners so she merely curtseyed.

The group consisted of a giant in scarlet armor, a lithe man in a multicolor garb that looked strangely like a buffoon outfit, though she didn't feel like laughing, and a few others in sublime garments. They rode under a banner showing a field of trees bearing white flowers that reminded her of roses. The man at their head was seventy if he was a day. Or rather, he looked seventy but that didn't mean anything here. She didn't dare inspect him while his dark eyes peered at her over a wide, bushy white beard. He was the only one whose helmet was open. He nodded at Viv, then to his credit, he dismounted. Meanwhile, knights kept crossing the portal.

"And you must be Viviane the Outlander. Excellent work on taking the fort, as expected of a war caster of your reputation. Now, we can be sure the tamers cannot report our presence. You have delivered on your promise, just like General Jaratalassi said you would. Congratulations."

"Just doing my job, sir." Viv replied automatically before realizing he wasn't a colonel and this was no longer the army.

He had a rather strong presence, but it wasn't just that. Just like Inquisitor Denerim, he felt transparent in a way that Viv could never achieve. She could tell with certainty that he was valorous and devoid of malice. She could also tell he would lose his path if he acted otherwise. That didn't mean he couldn't plan and manipulate, she reminded herself, but at least he wouldn't try to abuse her.

He nodded.

"My name is Order Master Ered. I lead the Order of the White Orchard."

Viv nodded, though she minded two things. First, the Order of the White Orchard was the most elite knight order on the entire continent and quite possibly the world. Second, the knights had kept pouring through the aperture and there was no sign they would stop any time soon. Jaratalassi had already understood the importance of Viv's portals. They were meant to solve the military world's most constraining factor: logistics. Viv was moving an entire army.

“This is the second time you have proved your valor to the kingdom, Lady Viv. You have also saved the life of young Cernit whom we have been following with interest. Captain Cernit, you will report to the citadel for evaluation after we return to the capital. The eyes of the White Orchard are upon you. Do not disappoint us.”

“Y... Yes sir!” Cernit exulted.

“As a sign of Baran’s appreciation and with regard to your vital contribution to our plan, we would like to offer you the position of herald in the coming battle,” the man said seriously.

Then he waited with a careful expression. It was a test of sorts, first of etiquette. She knew she couldn’t fuck it up.

In the space between moments, Viv’s mind went into overdrive. Ethics class content had mentioned that, albeit briefly. The herald’s place was third in importance in a Baranese cavalry formation. Their role was to yell a war cry. They rode at the grandmaster’s left and before the standard bearer while to his right, he had the squire and the musician. All their roles were pretty self-explanatory, but there was one subtlety. Herald roles were sometimes left to outsiders because it only required high attunement and a leadership skill while standard bearer and musicians required a specific path. As for the squire, that was usually the formation’s deadliest fighter. It was a rare and meaningful gesture. She could not refuse.

“I am greatly honored and I accept.”

“Very well. We have prepared a horse for you. Cernit will explain your role, won’t you, my boy?”

“Of course, my lord.”

While they talked, Viv’s mind went on tangents, calculating. Was this a political gesture? Did the grandmaster count on her to occupy the Enorians now that the kingdom could finally turn its gaze outward and towards the nearby Baran, currently under pressure because of the invasion? Was this a first opening towards future cooperation? Perhaps lady Azar, Viv’s senechal in Harrak, had something to do with it. After all, the wily old viper was Baranese. There were so many considerations.

“This way, milady,” a flustered Cernit told her. “This way.”

“Don’t milady me Cernit.”

“Apologies. But you have to understand, I have never been so proud. The order of the White Orchard, perhaps recruiting me? It would... it would change everything!”

“Let’s make sure we give a good impression.”

“Most astute, yes! We have to do that. Absolutely. So, herald.”

“I know what I need to do. Scream a war cry at the beginning of the charge, right?”

“Yes. You do not have to do much. The order master’s magic will guide you. It is acceptable when hosting a guest to yell war cries belonging to other nations, though it is considered a poor show to name the foreign power itself. Oh, and the most important detail: leaders such as yourself tend to resist the order master’s skill by instinct. You will perhaps feel it like an intrusion? I am not sure. My own skills cannot compare to yours, of course. I only recommend that you let go and accept to be pushed forward.”

“I won’t ruin the charge.”

“Merely being aware of the pull should be enough. Only surprise could push you to resist I suppose, hence why I informed you. But I babble, I babble. Oh, the Order of the White Orchard! Viv, I cannot express how much this means to me.”

“You’re an honorable man, Cernit. And you have good instincts. I’m happy that your efforts are recognized.”

“And yours as well. A herald. Ah, to be at the front of such a charge. You will see. This is an experience like no others.”

“Looking forward to it.”

It didn’t matter if one was predictable when the foe cannot use the knowledge, Viv mused. Jaratalassi was a defensive expert, so he was defending. And as before, it was working.

Below them, a gap in the mountainous area gave Viv her first full view of Haluria. It didn’t look any different to the Baranese frontier, only flatter and dotted with copses of trees. The open path led to a well-defended Baranese stronghold and quite possibly the juiciest prize in the entire region if the acres of tilled ground were any indication.

Viv could have told the way the battle had unfolded from the corpses. Unarmored Halurians had fallen to arrows on their way to the first line of fortifications. The white-clad forms of Baranese infantrymen atop the small elevations spoke of a brief yet heated defense, then they had retreated to the second line. Rinse and repeat and now they fought below the third.

It appeared warborns were not that plentiful, which was definitely a good thing. Many of the Halurian soldiers were spearmen using a chitinous round shield. They had not performed too badly. Archers with shortbow and lightly armored riders completed the Varak clan’s forces. Viv wasn’t sure but she thought she could see riders on the strange wolf monsters they had fought before, but they were only a handful. There were barely any mages on the Baranese side and none on the Halurian side.

On the other side, Jaratalassi had used border soldiers efficiently. A small core of knights had engaged with fury to cover their retreat every time they changed position. They had paid a heavy price but never hesitated. Now, the Halurians were below the wall and the Baranese had their backs against it. The anvil had played its role. Viv was bringing the hammer. Ranks

upon ranks of Baranese elite cavalry emerged from the forest, their approach covered by elite scouts. They had no obstacles in front of them. It was open ground all the way down.

The formation finally emerged from the forest and the sun caught the tip of their spears just right. Once again, Viv felt that peculiar feeling of vastness that came with Nyil battles, those tens of thousands of soldiers in tight formations marching on each other. At this distance, they turned into organic masses that worked in relative harmony with and against each other. The Halurian infantrymen regiments were resolute beetles while the warborns writhed and twisted like centipedes, full of spikes and angles. On the other side, wasp archers and other beetles worked together with a mantis, fast and precise. It was easy to forget that they were made of individual humans tied together by leaders and beliefs. There were just so many of them.

The Order Master made a gesture and she stopped caring. Viv felt his skill and aura take over.

Even if Cernit had not warned, she would still have gone with it. The White Orchard leader gathered so many nobles into a blade with a singular purpose and it felt great. For now, none of the politics, the fact that Viv was dying, none of it mattered. They would go down here and ride the Halurians down. There was no need to think of the after until they reached the after. It was happening.

Then the skill rose like an orchestra, carrying with it a strange passion. Glory and valor would be hers today by the simple action of pushing her horse on to face evil. She and thousands of others merged into a magnificent and terrible whole as undeniable as the tide, and just as unstoppable. A horn blew somewhere to her right and the banners unfurled, starting with the White Orchard one. Floral touches caressed her nose. She felt a light breeze on her face, the pungent yet not unpleasant smell of horses. They moved, first slowly, then faster, faster. The earth rumbled. Viv's borrowed charger carried her with the rest and she went with the flow. The Halurians spotted them. It didn't matter. They were flanked and exposed, ripe for the scythe bearing down on them. An unseen wind pushed into Viv's back. The army was galloping now, their lances lowering. A rolling wave of steel rushed to her right, to her left. She was part of that wave. She was part of something greater but she could do more. It was her role now to give it a purpose. The skill sent her looking for one.

Instead of resisting, Viv realized she could go the other way, and so she did.

Viv had stood before two dragons, killed a third, and raised a fourth. She had already left her mark on Nyil and this charge was the most powerful tool she had ever wielded. They were foreigners but this didn't matter right now. Right now, they were hers. Cold rage filled her veins and a fire burnt in her chest, one without end. Black mana sang as it answered her call. The Halurians were close now. She had seen what they could do. She was not impressed. They had to go, because they stood in her way. In that fateful moment, all of Viv's power poured into the tip of the formation and every drop of black mana in her allies' cores answered the call. The tips of their spears turned black.

"Crush them. Ride them down. For the black tide."

Viv didn't have to raise her voice. The world understood her.

Annihilation-charged spears met the Hallurian ranks without stopping. No shield stood against the onslaught, no formation resisted the unstoppable charge. The Order of the White Orchard carried the outlander from one side of the field to the other, and none stood against them.

Chapter 132: Tide

It was all wrong.

Tuk's old man had told him: "Son, the war is like a tide". He had said so while mending their nets on the coast of lake Kital, by the shore, where beasts made truce with man for the duration of a drink. His weathered hands worked deftly, calmly, with confidence. Tuk's old man had survived two wars and brought Tuk's mother as captive the second time so he wasn't spewing fish gut. He'd said that the tribes crashed against the rock of Baran and fought. If there were enough tribes or if the Baranese hadn't received help in time, Haluria would win hard. The waves spread to bite at the belly of the westerners. The warlords would bring treasure and slaves aplenty. Food. Clothes, arms and armor. Then, inevitably, the tide would follow the crevices of the earth to find the farther fruits. It dissolved. The westerners regrouped and received reinforcements while the warlords bickered over the best prizes. The wave retreated.

Sometimes, the Baranese got the better hand but the Halurian numbers were so high that the line would crack somewhere, inevitably. Fewer prizes would be obtained. The warlords united more, however, and the war devolved into bloody battles with more than enough corpses.

Those who overstayed their welcome were always caught and slaughtered. The sweet spot was in the middle when the two masses split after the initial shocks. That was when the getting was good and even slingers could get something, even being at the bottom of a very tall shit heap. Tuk's old man had said slingers died less and also that a sling could kill a Harren, or chase off some of the jungle's predators so Tuk was a slinger. A decent one. It was not Tuk who had messed up. It was the war. The tide had not happened. He was beached like a trout and just as fucked.

Beyond the gates of the captured watchtower, the battle was already lost. Didn't take a clan leader's genius to see that. The Baranese knights had swept everyone else. Poor fuckers didn't even get a chance. Even the warborns had been smushed; but that wasn't how Tuk knew. Tuk knew because half of the Baranese army was celebrating while the rest smashed whatever was left of his side's regulars. Towards the front, Warlord Varak was locked in a duel with some westerner asshole in red armor so showy it screamed 'fuck me in particular' to any desert blade, but, pity there weren't any. And that was the fucking problem now. And it

was Tuk's problem. Because Tuk was going to die. It was only a matter of time before someone came knocking. He stepped back from the battlement and rushed downward.

The tower was tall and it sat on a small elevation. Murderholes let enough sun in not to miss a step of the long, winding stairs clinging to the walls. He rushed into the cold sun of winter and saw other slingers manning the low crenelations around the inner courtyard. Short wall. Never meant to stop an attack. Place was deserted when they arrived. Now, they should leave as well. Lick and quick. He moved towards Chief Emki.

"Chief, bad news, I—"

"The fuck you where? Baranese are coming!"

"On the tower, chief, you—"

"Shut up and go. Pelt the softlanders. NOW!"

A part of Tuk screamed to tell the chief it was for nothing. Stupid. They had to leave or they would die here. No need to fight to the death. Not trapped just yet. There was a small door at the back, but Tuk was a slinger, the chief was the chief, and his feet were moving before the first of those thoughts could coalesce. It didn't occur to him to stop the chief until he was halfway up the wall and by then, it was too late. He arrived just in time to see a small, dark star arc down on Lug and with a loud 'whomp', his friend's head was gone.

Tuk froze where he was when more of those damn spells turned the top of the small battlement into a mess of missing chests, severed legs and other body parts. It smelled horrible. There was a hand next to him, cut at the wrist. It was just so... clean. So precise. Like done with the sharpest blade. Here was a Efestar-cursed hand, and there... nothing.

"Tuk, snap out of it!"

A stone came in sharp focus, then the hand, then blood, so much blood. Running slingers. Someone grabbed his shoulder and pushed and down he went, back where he came from.

"Get the gate!"

And off Tuk was, still running before the sentence was finished despite knowing for absolutely sure it was fucking useless. They had a mage. This was a gate.

"Did someone manage to off the caster?" He asked hopefully.

"No. He got a shield. Can't get through."

Tuk watched chief Emki go from pillory to pillory, killing the villagers they'd kept here for pleasure and relief. He walked to the screaming women and struck down. Should be here at the front with the others.

Tuk placed his hands against the door, ready to offset the blow of the ram. It slowed them down. Didn't know the point. He ought to fucking run back to the jungle and the lake and the

fishes. There were screams on the other side. Softlanders with their weird sing song voices. Womanly, the chief had called them. Sure didn't look like soft skin and ribbons right now.

"Steady!" a senior said. "Steady!"

But there were no rams. A gash into a starless night opened in front of Tek and it also opened the senior. He fell with a gurgled scream. The gash carved down with a hiss. Strange. Shit like that should be deafening.

An aura hit him like a fist to the jaw. It was cold and reptilian, uncaring. There was no bluster or grand declaration here, no claim to glory like the warlord's aura had. Just death in some deadly breath. There for a moment, gone the next. Immediately forgotten. He was just meat.

That was it. Weeks of walking, of shitting his bowels out because some of the water had gotten rancid, of not enough food and digging latrines and shooting harriens with his stones just not to fucking starve, just to die here to defend a doomed tower no one gave a shit about? No. No. He'd rather slather his balls with honey and dive them in a pike's mouth.

Tuk turned and ran.

He ignored the screams of outrage, then of fear, of pain. The doors smashed open. Light dimmed, somehow. He turned and looked. Baranese infantrymen in nice armor with bloodstained spears. A monster.

It was a she. That was just so weird Tuk did a double take. A she, softlander caster, like a faceless but with tits. Just unthinkable. Was Tuk still alive or hallucinating, stung by a puff fish on his pier? He could see her face and the soft, strangely colored hair and she was the only one in the courtyard without emotions on that smooth skin, pretty like a statue. So out of place. There was terror, rage, agony, but only one person was calm. Around that face things were less nice. She wore armored robes coated in something dark and thick, something that coiled and seethed at the edge. Tendrils rose above her head to form horns, and he could spot scales forming and splitting on her bracers, her pauldrons. The tendrils moved and merged and split as he watched. It felt alive. Alive and hateful, so very hateful. A couple of stones pinged on a transparent shield formed like the inside of a hive. A shadowy whip killed another slinger. Then, the she-mage found chief Emki. Her face twisted briefly with anger. She lifted a monstrous hand just as the chief lifted his dripping cleaver. He was dragged through the air.

The she-mage smashed him once against the ground then another time, then again on some spear rack. Finally, she sent him against the wall and what fell on the ground was more mush than man. A few soldiers had formed a line at the entrance of the tower. Tuk ran towards them. There was a woosh, a wave of black fire like the breath of some mythical beast, then they were gone.

Tuk kept running expecting to die. He turned again. There was an old man with a bow aiming towards him among the softlanders. Tuk was dead. He was so very dead. Not even enough time to pray. The codger loosed but that puncture between the shoulders never came. The arrow clattered against the wall, then Tuk was through. He didn't know how.

There were shoes with cleanly cut calves standing in orderly rows where the shield wall used to be. Feet positioned properly. Just missing the rest of the person. He found Dala with the other women in the middle where they'd been cooking. The fire was doused. Why douse the fucking fire? Who were they saving the food for? It was so stupid, just something Dala would have done. The old, fat lady who led the kitchen glared at him, her decorated knife over her wrist. Dala also had hers out, hovering over her wrist. She was bleeding a little. The other two girls were on the ground sobbing and watching the expanding pool of their blood.

"Tuk, you good-for-nothing! I should have —"

It was too late for Tuk. He had disobeyed. It was over. He was free and damned and he was scared but he felt so... so liberated when his hook connected to the old bitch's face. The fat hag smashed against the cauldron, splashing a dying girl with hot soup. She sobbed softly.

"Come with me!" he told Dala. Her knife clattered on the ground. He dragged her by the wrist but the entrance was shut. Soldiers there, approaching slowly. They saw him. He veered right and climbed with Dala, her small calloused hand in his own. He wasn't sure why he'd picked her. She was small and ugly and she didn't know how to say no and she would just cry when anyone raised their voice and he should have gone to the back exit instead of going in to save her, that stupid head. He turned and looked in those big brown eyes, surprised and a little dumb. Liquid from unshed tears. Fuck.

Tuk slammed through the door. The city waited before him. The battle was fully over. Whatever resistance there used to be, it was gone now.

There were no ropes here, no way down. He turned and grabbed Dala's hands.

"Sorry. I don't know why I did that. Sorry. I wish we could have run."

"I didn't want to die with her. Or inside. I didn't want to die smelling leek with her small eyes on me. So. Thank you."

They stayed there and watched. It smelled cleaner here. The crisp air clawed at Tuk's lungs, drying his sweat. He shivered, suddenly cold. Dala pushed herself against him. It was nice.

The soldiers arrived a moment later. They were in no hurry. They formed a small shield wall by the gate, with the old man who had missed Tuk and another officer with a short beard. They didn't seem sure on what to do.

Tuk felt the she-mage arrive long before he saw her from the gradual aura of cold patience that froze his brain. Something promised violence in a way a knife under the nose didn't. How many things did one have to kill to get that sort of skill, he wondered? What horror must one commit?

She stepped out and watched them with a raised eyebrow. Her armor still shone from that viscous coating, though he could see now that it was almost like mist in places. She walked to the battlement and peered out. Tuk was frozen. He wasn't sure what to do. Was she toying with him?

The bearded man swore something in the Baranese voice. The woman turned and the old man slapped the back of his head. Tuk still didn't dare move.

"Why not die?" she finally asked in broken Halurian.

Her voice lacked the harsh intonations of the noble, and her accent was that of the desert. He'd heard it in the camp. She sounded like a mushroom peasant. That was so weird, so unexpected, Tuk didn't know what to do. He felt like laughing.

"Why you not die?" the she-mage insisted, a finger pointing at his dagger.

Why not attack her? Why not depart this world with honor? What was honor to a slinger and what difference would it make, Tuk wondered? To use your own blade or let the spears do the rest. They said softlanders did bad things to captives but they said a lot of shit and now he was stuck in a tower with a girl he might love, waiting for the end.

The she-mage wanted an answer.

Tuk grabbed Dala tighter. Had to impress the she-mage.

"Huh. I didn't wanna."

Well done Tuk you fucking bard. You great talker.

"You do not want death," the woman stated.

"Yes."

"No fight?"

"No."

"Come with."

Tuk blinked for a few seconds at the departing, armored back of the she-mage. The soldiers grabbed him and Dala. He didn't resist. Every breath felt like a strange blessing, so full of smells. He hoped it would last.

Viv reclined in her seat, relaxing for the first time in two weeks. She was just missing a bath. And a mojito. Sidjin massaging her soles.

A knight in bling armor walked past the waiting room. He greeted her with a nod, which Viv returned while noting it was not exactly Baranese etiquette. The members of the White Orchard were still not sure what her status was and, to be honest, neither was Viv.

The room was deserted again. To be honest, it wasn't much of a room. Spartan only began to describe it. The chairs were wood, unadorned. No pillows. The walls were also void of any decoration. Nobody had even put a vase with some faded flowers in a token effort to make it

look nice. The border fortress was purely functional and designed for quick evacuation, which made sense but would it kill them to add a painting?

Viv shifted in her seat. She had already been waiting for close to an hour and practiced fine spell tuning behind her back for most of the duration. She didn't mind Jaratalassi's lack of punctuality. A lot more important people wanted a piece of the man of the hour. A convoy of richly dressed men and women had trailed in and out until the room was finally empty.

His majordomo came in.

"Milady, the general will see you now."

Viv walked through unadorned (of course) corridors.

"Is this place always so gloomy?" Viv asked the majordomo, a tall black man she suspected might double as a bodyguard.

"The general has taken the initiative to bring proper tea on every trip, because he has been disappointed so many times. He would bring carpets but as a general, he has to set an example."

"What about booze?"

"I will not confirm or deny any information about the general's cellar."

They found Jaratalassi in a small office with the same bare furniture as everywhere else. The man's uniform was a pristine white but he had deep pockets under his eyes and a few more gray hairs in his beard. He watched Viv get in, then blinked owlily.

"Viviane? What are you doing here?"

Viv felt paranoia claw at her chest with cold fingers. She readied a shield and looked around.

"You called me here?"

"Oh, yes I did."

False alarm, though the majordomo looked at her curiously.

"Sorry," the general said. "It has been a very long week."

"And you have yet to celebrate," Viv reminded him.

Jaratalassi glared. Then he removed two small glasses from a drawer as well as an old bottle with a tattered label, handwritten. Viv had spent enough time drinking homemade hooch in Provence to know this was the good stuff.

"Want some? As an apology for the wait."

"With pleasure."

“Kit, do we have any of that jerky left?”

“I’m afraid not sir.”

“Damn shame.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

The majordomo left the both of them alone. Viv taught him how to clink glass, then they sipped from the bottle. It was floral and powerful with a sweet, persistent aftertaste after the alcohol had scraped every taste bud clean. Viv thought it was nice. She also detected a hint of life mana, which only enhanced the drink.

“I see you’ve proven the worth of your ‘combined arms’ approach to sieges and maneuvering. You have identified its weaknesses well according to what my reports say. I should demote someone for letting a warborn reach you.”

Viv shrugged.

“I wouldn’t have done it if I were not confident in my close quarter potential.”

“Yes. Though I would advise you to get a bodyguard.”

“Oh I have some pretty good ones.”

“Yes, well, in any case I am not confident this is the best use of war mages, however I cannot deny that you saved the lives of many men and so I grant you full grade for your thesis. You proposed a strategy, then went to the battlefield and proved its viability, as is fitting. Well done. Write a paper and you will have graduated.”

“You don’t want to see me work as part of a team?”

Jaratalassi waved her concerns aside.

“You’ve done it during training. And I cannot grade you for logistics since your attunement is ill-suited to it. Actually, I can, because of the portal spell. Full marks.”

The majordomo returned at this moment with grilled skewers. He waved his hand over them, possibly a skill, then gave it to them.

“Poison free,” Jaratalassi explained to a flabbergasted Viv.

“Oh.”

“Always a concern. But I digress. You pass, that is all.”

He sighed.

“Is something wrong? I have never seen a sadder victor,” Viv said.

“Yes the White Orchard knights said the same thing, but they miss the point.”

“Alright, what is the point then?”

Jaratalassi stared and Viv got the feeling he was calculating if the rant was worth the energy expenditure.

“Where are the rest of them?” He finally said, pointing at a wall where a map of the border was pinned.

“You mean the rest of the Halurian invasion?”

“Yes! Yes, dammit. We are celebrating as if the danger was gone but we have only faced the forces of a single warlord, a fraction of what we would usually fight off. Where are the rest of them? All border fortresses report no contact. No scouts have detected anything more than piddling raider bands. Where’s the meat, the faceless mages, the desert bone bowmen? The capital warborns? Where have they gone?”

“Any contact north or south?”

“Nothing north, but those are crags and mountains, and you would lose half your army to monsters trying to cross that hellhole. As for the south, it’s tundras and the deep forests of the wild folk but we would know if something was off. There are still merchants and coastal cities there. They have to be somewhere.”

“I never asked in class because I didn’t expect a straight answer, but don’t you have a spy network?”

“Spies!” the general bellowed, arms raised. He refilled his cup before speaking again.

“Spies in Haluria. Hah, you do not get it. You think there are peddlers and travelers and normal trade there. There is not. Think families, only larger. There are no strangers admitted unless they are vouched and here for a purpose. Everyone knows everyone and if no one knows you, you are dead. That is the reality in Haluria. We cannot place spies because we cannot even establish contact to turn someone. The only snippets we get are from rare prisoners and when their leaders betray each other. Even then, it only goes in one direction.”

“But there is a diaspora, a recent one. Surely, they know someone you could convince.”

“You might be onto something,” Jaratalassi admitted, “yet even then Halurian society would be difficult to penetrate, not to mention each warlord would require their own spy network. Do not count on me to organize such a thing. My time is better spent juggling the various knight’s giant egos and I assure you, it takes more dedication than it should. If only I could work with the Entikku girls...”

“That order of female soldiers?”

“Yes. Disciplined. Celibate, sadly.”

He took another sip.

“They’re on the Glastian wall. A pity that. Anyway, I believe I am due some shut eye. You should rest as well. Sardanal knows when the next catastrophe will occur.”

He yawned.

“Off you go, strange witch. See you again on the battlefield, hopefully on the same side.”

It took a day for Viv to get supplies and a way home with a caravan of wounded soldiers. She said goodbye to a proud Cernit and his men, and paid a visit to the camp of the Order of the White Orchard. The knights were having some sort of political games based around having the biggest tent and inviting people in for wine and sweetmeats. It felt like a more elaborate version of a high school clique dynamics. Fortunately, the victuals made up for it.

Nobody tried to bed or even flirt with Viv, something that would have happened in another place with lots of hot-blooded young warriors and a dearth of ladies. A lazy analysis revealed that a couple of senior knights from different factions prevented their juniors from trying it. That was fine since some of them didn’t look a day over eighteen, but she still wondered if it was a mark of protective respect or if she was ‘radioactive’. It was possible the Enorians didn’t like her much, even the rebels. It wouldn’t surprise her if the Baranese preferred to wait until she survived a bit longer before making ties, if not their leaders then at least his subordinates.

Or maybe they just didn’t like her.

Viv realized she should try to talk to Sangor, establish a good relationship with her neighbor. She’d postponed that for too long because important matters had required her attention, yet she had to resign herself to the obvious. Harrak needed diplomacy. One that Solfis would have as little to do with as possible.

Finally, she was ready. As they departed, she considered her progress.

Arcane Constructs: Intermediate 4

That was a nice bonus considering she had not been truly enchanting, but rather using forged signs in new and creative ways. The largest bonus was shield mastery, however.

Beginner 2 to 6

That was a massive improvement not born just from her use of shields in combat but also from their power and adaptability. With aegis as a base, she could change the nature of the shield to better answer the threats she was facing. This didn’t just extend to her magical shield but to the way she held her physical one as well, though it felt a little redundant. Viv wondered if she could anchor a shield on, well, her real shield, and strengthen them

somehow. She would have the experiment later. In any case, her defenses were now extremely powerful, well in line with her very important project of not dying.

Finesse: 24

That was a pleasant surprise, though not necessarily that helpful. Viv depended on her mental statistics for reacting to danger by casting defensive. A higher finesse would open options to dodge more effectively since shadow transportation had conditions and took some time to activate. It would also help with her perception to some extent. Not exactly the most useful advantage but it was always good to have.

All in all it had been a good haul. There was only one important matter to attend to before she could get back to the Academy and attend to her unfinished business there.

They had first met in an empty cave with still water and a dead world beyond. Now, their last meeting for a while would happen in a meadow by the sea. The sky was just as gray but it was snow, not death. The air smelled crisp like a winter morning with a hint of iodine, far away from the bustle and refuse of humanity. Sleepy trees waited in silence for the return of spring. It was secluded and peaceful.

Arthur barely had to stand to wrap her arms around Viv, her heavy serpentine head resting on the witch's hair. Arthur smelled of mana and she was very, very hot. Her scales were smooth. Viv hugged her back.

After a while, they parted.

Arthur was taller and much stronger than Viv now, she who had once fit in her arms. Was this how it felt to have a teenage kid? To have who once depended on her be her own person, with her own plans and projects, with her own ability to affect the world? It tore at Viv's heart but at the same time, she felt proud. It was just a shame it had taken so little time...

Mother, I must go.

I must fly and see.

I want to meet others like me.

"I know. Judgement said you would outgrow me. I just didn't think it would be so soon."

Not outgrow.

Become my own.

I waited so long in that cave.

Now I am free.

You saved me, mother.

“I think we saved each other.”

Of course, after.

I am mighty dragon.

“When you meet the others, don’t fight them, please?”

Of course I fight them.

Arthur stood again and spread her wings.

Fight to learn.

“Remember the green one we met in the Deadshield Woods. Large and dangerous? His name was Wind over Spring Meadow or something?”

He is stupid.

Lives in forest like a tree.

Cannot eat fish or get back brushed by wise humans who know what to do.

No pillows.

Complete idiot.

“He’s much bigger.”

Mother fought much bigger foes.

Ate them.

They were delicious.

Also, older dragons do not kill young dragons. I know this.

Sparring is important.

“Okay. I believe you. Just be careful, please?”

Just like mother.

“Consider me officially terrified.”

Carefully do not-careful things.

“I was not the best role model, alright?”

But you were!

Make den.

Acquire servants.

Acquire pillows.

Acquire food.

Acquire gold.

Pour gold down enemy throat!

Very scary.

Mother best model.

“I just want you not to get hurt.”

Life hurts.

“Don’t go philosophical on me now, you know what I mean.”

Arthur rolled her head dramatically.

Yes yes yes.

I am not gone for good.

I return often.

For important scratches.

“Please do. And send me letters if you can.”

Yes.

Paid upon reception.

“You know you can spend some of your own money?”

Can.

Will not.

I go now, find more gold!

“Go then,” Viv said, feeling misty-eyed.

I will return.

When I return can I be treasury minister?

“Who taught you that?”

Solfis said it was called that.

Can spend money.

If not my own!

“You’re ready to be a politician then. Off you go you small rascal, and come back safe.”

You be safe too, become part better.

Then we live forever.

“Good plan.”

Mother.

Try to grow wings.

Is very important.

“Okay.”

More so than scales.

I go now.

Despite Arthur’s words, she still hugged Viv for another minute, then she stepped back. Viv expected the dragon girl to spread her wings, but instead mana shifted and a large portal opened to a rocky landscape blasted by the winds.

This is how I win.

With magic!

Bye bye!

The portal closed as she took off.

“Wait, I never taught her that!”

After the separation, only one thing could salvage the day. Viv teleported back to Sidjin’s mansion on the edge of Helock. She moaned her dismay to find no one was around the lab. Surprised, she made her way up the stairs to Sidjin’s study where he would sometimes retire to read between two research sessions. She noted that he purchased some fencing equipment, eager to regain his former shape now that he was feeling much better. To her

surprise, she heard voices coming from the closed room. Male voices. They quieted down when she approached. Her presence was known.

Viv knocked on the door rather than turning tail.

“Come in.”

Sidjin’s voice was cold and regal, not a voice she had heard before. The cramped study hosted two men on top of its owner and the mass of books he had managed to accumulate in a short period of time. One of them bore a strange resemblance to her loved one down to the wavy hair and short beard. The other was a northerner with the aura of a mage and heavy armor. He felt out of place in this cozy retreat, though Viv wore her armored robe as well. But Viv was home and he was a stranger. Sidjin was tense though a stranger could not tell with how in control he appeared.

“You allow your whores free reign over your house, brother?” the man said.

And then he recoiled almost instantly, smacked by Sidjin’s rising aura of intimidation.

His skill tasted differently than hers. It spoke of a great harvest, of bones exposed to the sun. It was less who he was and more what he could do, what he had done, and would do again. It felt less personal than Viv’s skill but Sidjin was also more distant when he fought. The mage reacted by standing between the two brothers with his hand clearly on a focus.

“Cast a spell in my house and I will consider this an attack,” Sidjin warned.

“Would it be too much to expect you two to behave?” the northerner mage asked in a calm voice.

Not just a bodyguard then.

“If you insult my paramour in my house again, I will kill you where you stand.”

Viv had let Sidjin defend her because it was him who was really targeted, and also because he was the host. Appearance and honor were important. That didn’t mean she couldn’t add her contribution now that he had made his position clear. Especially because the enemy mage’s jaws were clenched.

Viv deployed her own intimidation, immediately clashing with two auras. Sidjin’s brother tasted like hot sand and a sharp blade while the mage was final heat. Hers was younger but no less powerful for it. Her soul spoke to them of wings, scales, the woosh of a breath that could scour the very rock. Cold carnage.

“We’ll send you back to Glastia in picnic baskets,” she helpfully added.

Now the small study was very, very cramped. Viv wasn’t sure what effect she was having on the other two. They sure didn’t react. After a while, the other prince spoke slowly, articulating every syllable.

“I need an answer, brother.”

“I will speak if and when I decide. In the meanwhile, get lost. Now.”

The other prince waited for three seconds just to be a twat, then he made his way out. Viv stepped aside to let him pass. The mage stopped and glared, his eyes reddening.

It was a cheap trick, just channeling mana in the iris. Only fine tuning was required. Viv turned her own iris fully black and shook her head in her best ‘now fucking what’ expression. He left.

Sidjin sat down heavily for a quarter of a second, then he jumped back up and she was in his arms a moment later. His hand patted her back. He smelled of soap and of Sidjin.

“I am sorry you had to see that.”

“Relatives? Will you be fine?”

“I do not want to concern you with my problems.”

Viv broke the hug and stepped back, eyebrows raised and arms crossed.

“It will affect you anyway, will it not?” he asked with a sad smile.

“I mean I just threatened to turn a Glastian prince into a small, easily transportable format so...”

“Right. I was dead until recently, at least officially, so now there is the matter of the heir to the throne and my position in the list. My brother dear would like me to officially renounce my title.”

“Oh, succession wars. How exciting!”

“Duels, actually.”

“Ah, well I have just the guy.”

Chapter 133: The Damn Tournament Arc

Viv walked through the hallowed corridors of house Trez, of Helock. It was her first time visiting a manor of the Helockian nobility after a disastrous social season where no one had invited her. Ereska, her roommate, had briefed her, but she was still a bit leery. It would be her first time rubbing elbows with the Paramese nobility in a way that wouldn’t involve dismemberment. Hopefully. It was also the first time she would join high society without her dad guiding her every step and she kind of missed his sardonic voice. Finally, the manor stood in a place where the square meter could be priced in the same order of magnitude as Manhattan, Shibuya, or Neuilly and she’d just come across an aquarium that was larger than her dorm room. Those Trez people were not playing.

Some of the fishes in there looked downright ferocious. There could be human bones under the kelp.

Vic shook her head. This wasn't a James Bond movie. The impeccable maid guided her to a large door and knocked, popping her head in to whisper.

"Lady Viviane, the traveler, here to see you, madam."

"Let her in," a commanding female voice replied.

Viv was summarily escorted in a soberly decorated boudoir with assorted lacquered furniture and vases that all looked made by the same artist, giving an overall zen mood to the secluded room. She didn't dare inspect anything but she highly suspected there was more money in designer stuff here than could be found in all of Harrak's knight armory. Such was the way of the world right now.

Her host sat straight-backed on a throne-like couch with elbow rests. A steaming pot waited between the two women alongside an assortment of sweets and biscuits as flawless as if they had been carved from stone. The maid came in and poured an infusion in the cups. She left without a glance.

Vic expected the old woman to start speaking as soon as the door was shut, but she remained silent. Lady Trez kept her white hair straight, except for thin braids. Her face was mature and beautiful, without blemishes beside crow feet by her eyes. They revealed a lifetime of self care. Few people lived long enough to have white hair here, and those that did carried them with grace. Lady Trez carried them with arrogance. They contrasted with a black dress, impossibly matching the room, that cinched her perfectly maintained body. The witch felt a caress on her soul that reminded her of an inspection skill, only incredibly more subtle. If she didn't have an awareness of her own soul, she would have missed the faint hint. It was rude but not unexpected. Ereska didn't have to remind her that etiquette did not always apply to the powerful, and that they could use blunt manners as a tool to test their newest acquaintances. It still stung a little.

Viv resisted the urge to inspect in return. That would be really vulgar. As a caster, she was at a disadvantage in social encounters against someone with a social path and nothing would change that.

After almost a minute of awkward silence during which Viv waited patiently, her host finally deigned to address her.

"Thank you for coming. I am the matriarch Trez and I would like to welcome you to my home. And you are Viviane the outlander, I know. We should wait a little more for the tea to cool. It's a special blend from the shadowlands. Not poisoned. I had it tested on the staff."

The lady smiled, a sign that Viv could speak in turn. Normally, she would present herself but that was no longer an option.

"Thank you for having me, and for the tea. You wanted to see me?"

“How blunt. Very well, I shall return the favor and dispense with the small talk. I gather you have an idea as to why I have called you here. I have an offer for you. I am sure you have or will receive similar offers in the future, but you will find that our reputation is well-deserved. I have three candidates here, all vetted by myself, healthy, and of good breeding. They have all achieved the third step of their path, all hybrid casters. The contract would cover your... services for two years. The list of benefits can be found in this document. Here. You will find that the terms are more than generous. We also have a history of accommodating promising candidates such as yourself. You only have but to ask.”

The woman placed a contract with enough gold to buy a large house and the paintings of three strapping men on the table. Gears were turning in Vic’s mind and she realized there was only one explanation and she didn’t like it one bit.

“Errrr.”

“If you have any questions about the terms, I can reply here. Later questions can be directed at our lawyer. Or one you may select.”

“No, not that. Urggg it’s probably cultural. Just to be clear, you want me to build you a child?”

“I thought that was obvious. Unaffiliated and powerful individuals will sometimes pair up for this very purpose, or did you not know? I expected you to be at least aware of this opportunity.”

“Errr.”

“If you expected a marriage, I was informed you were a ruler in your own right and would probably prefer remaining untied for future alliances. But I am open to discussions.”

“No just... no. There has been some sort of mistake.”

Viv swallowed the anger she felt at being treated like a broodmare. The woman didn’t mean it as an insult. So Viv should not take it as such. It was normal here in Nyil where the nobility engaged in light eugenics to bring powerful mage bloodlines in their families. This was a testament to her skills.

Still pissed her off though.

“No? You will not entertain the thought at all?”

“Sorry and again this must be cultural but I will not do so for a multitude of reasons.”

“Well this has been a massive waste of my time.”

And of Viv’s time but she imagined Lady Trez didn’t care.

“Out of curiosity, why did you expect I called you here?”

“The Glastian contest? For supremacy among the heirs? You are backing Aldus.”

“Oh that. Yes, I was about to dedicate myself to this project. Why?”

“Sidjin is, well, I am his paramour.”

For the first time, Lady Trez seemed to lose her composure. She pinched her lips, then grabbed the contract and paintings in a strong grip. The paper crinkled under her fingers.

“There has been an oversight. I apologize on behalf of my house for this tactless offer. If you will excuse me for a moment.”

The matriarch stood and left. Bob heard a few hissed words beyond the door but her finesse was not yet high enough to pick them up, even though her northerner had massively improved. She could guess the contents though. Someone had not done their due diligence, and that someone had made Lady Trez act like a fool. That person was in for an ear bashing of epic proportions. It was a wonder these sorts of mistakes still happened in a society with oaths and skills but well. Everyone could get negligent.

Lady Trez returned with a thin smile frozen on her face.

“Yes, the Glastian contest. I gather that Prince Sidjin is open to negotiations then?”

“I understand that it is common among contestants since the winner can decide quite a few things including who gets to be the heir. I assumed you approached me to test the waters. Sidjin has been less than happy with the existence of the contest, even less because it takes place here.”

“I understand that the arena was destroyed when Glastia temporarily lost their outer walls. His fault, by the way.”

“There are more casters taking part as well. Only this place and Mornyr have suitable grounds for fights of that magnitude. But I digress,” Viv said, borrowing one of Ereska’s favorite phrases. “Sidjin does not seem to have an interest in becoming heir. I believe he wants to be left alone.”

The two women sipped tea in the following silence.

“I am myself surprised that he was not stripped of his title.”

“He would have been but the first prince considered his merits against his faults and found that he should be given a chance. I am no expert but I would assume the possibility of a portal network exclusive to Glastia might have been a factor.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“So you are his paramour. Will you fight?”

“If he lets me. He is convinced I should not risk my life on his behalf when it comes to his family. Thinks I should remain uninvolved.”

“Men can be so foolishly stubborn,” Trez said, rolling her eyes. “In any case, Aldus has a reasonable claim to victory. A better one if Sidjin forfeits in his favor and offers his fighters. Does he have any?”

“He has himself.”

“I suppose he is still the Red Mist. The rules of the contest are so complicated. Politics and blood games should never intermix to this extent. We are not Halurians for Sardanal’s sake.”

“I thought it was strange as well, but Glastia needs someone who can gather fighters to their banner, I suppose.”

“In any case, if Sidjin’s desire is official immunity via a pardon, I am convinced Aldus would oblige. It depends on whether or not we are in the same bracket. We would still require you to eliminate a contestant, perhaps. Nothing too dangerous for someone of his measure.”

Viv nodded. The truth was that the so-called contest was painfully complex and obviously designed to favor backstabbing and alliances. There were eight contestants, all people of royal blood. Technically, those were six children of the first prince and two cousins. They would meet across three series of duels. Whoever won moved on until a winner was decided across a grand final. Each contestant started with four fighters and no more could be recruited, but they could be swapped and exchanged including with losers if casualties were to occur, and casualties always occurred in the last events. As such, losers could still get something by backing the final winner and supporting them. It was a game of diplomacy and strategy as much as might, though a modicum of strength was required to play at all. She and Trez talked a bit more but it was obvious the canny woman didn’t feel like sharing, and probably wasn’t too familiar with the contestants yet anyway. Most were still to arrive. With a promise to keep in touch, she left. The biscuits had been as delicious as she expected.

“I will not take them,” Elunath calmly said, “and unless you bring me a divine artifact, I will not take anything anymore.”

“What? You were ready to accept valuable stuff and those are prime Halurian casting tools, an insight into the practices of the faceless.”

“And they are valuable indeed.”

“What changed?”

“Nothing changed,” Elunath said, reclining in his seat. “You just failed to account for the value of time.”

Viv looked askance. She didn’t see what he meant.

“Simply put, the value of our time now is higher than our time in a hundred years. Much can happen in that duration. Perhaps we have grown apart. Perhaps one of us died.”

From his flare, it was obvious who he thought might perish.

“Perhaps we no longer need a contract to work together or perhaps animosity has made cooperation impossible, even with a binding oath. There are ways to sabotage a project that would not break an indenture agreement. The uncertainty means that I care little about what you will be doing in 95 years. I do, however, care about what we can achieve in the three years we have left in this contract. As a reminder, you will be incapacitated for at least three months, which will already reduce the useful time at my disposal. I will therefore not go lower. I believe I have already been generous in allowing you to push so far. You have brought me many interesting items in a very short time frame. Take this as a token of my respect for your work, but now I simply no longer wish to shorten our cooperation any further.”

“Right...” Viv said, “the contract-“

“Gives you the right to negotiate. I am not unwilling to do so, I am merely saying that the value of the last three years is much higher than all the rest combined.”

He smiled.

“I am not cheating you and I assure you that you will have all the time in the world after we are done. You have proven yourself to be valuable and I would not waste your potential, I assure you. Now leave. We are done for now. Unless you would like to start the transition immediately?”

Viv checked her attunement. It sat at a comfortable 37%. She still had a few months, though Solfis had warned her it would climb much faster towards the end. On the other hand she felt... very strong. It would mean very little if she didn't live though. In any case, the change would stand more chances of success above 45%. Not that she was eager to do it.

“No, thank you. I'll have to wait a little more.”

“I thought as much. There are signs that do not lie, but when they come, and they will, do not dally. You can survive long without teeth. Or eyes. Not so long without a pancreas. Goodbye.”

That was Viv's first solution to her impending demise. Three years of really shitty internship. With a boss who's demonstrated he was an asshole and didn't care about it. Could be better, could be worse, but Viv got the strong intuition he would ask her to do stuff she was morally opposed to. He would use her and her skills without remorse and probably leave her pissed off, but not enough to attempt to kill him at all costs. That's the impression she got. The issue was that the books she'd found near the lich only confirmed what she suspected.

Transitioning to part elemental alone was excessively difficult. She'd spent an entire week of effort with Solfis' help and pushed her polymath skill to its maximum to turn the ramblings of a lone man into proper research notes. The lich had been a mage interested in bone magic of all things. He was also too weak to survive the dead lands on his own. Mentions of his

path painted him as a hybrid caster. It was clear he never meant to share what he had found, therefore his notes contained many references to works Viv had not found, some of which even the Academy librarian could not help her with. Nevertheless, there were still a few valuable tidbits buried under the mountain of tangents. To change one's body on a fundamental level required, invariably, to die.

To be clear, the casters had to be clinically dead and then keep casting.

This would require a willpower and drive Viv simply lacked. Only someone with monstrous stats or an overwhelming, almost divine need to live could manage it. And Viv didn't have that. As a soldier, she was used to the possibility of dying. Oh, perhaps she would change her mind with a mangled chest and while feeling the cold grasp of death upon her, but that wasn't enough to pull through. She wasn't maniacal about staying alive, not in a way that would make a difference. In short, and even with the help of potions and allies, she would still fail even if she managed to piece together the proper method.

That left her with either Elunath or Solfis' mysterious person. The golem still didn't want to share and even indicated she should not try to learn more.

//Any knowledge you acquire now would serve no purpose.

//Additionally, they would harm you in case of interrogation.

//Therefore I sternly recommend your ignorance.

//For once.

"Then why tell me at all?"

//So you would be aware there exists another option.

The yellow glare of the golem had landed on Viv. His cruel eyes with the background of towers and the floating stones over Helock provided the most alien landscape to her.

//My role is not to decide for you.

//My role is to provide you with all the relevant knowledge to reduce uncertainty to a minimum.

//Whenever that knowledge is available.

There was a hint of regret in the golem's cold voice, one that only Viv could detect. Very few people knew Solfis could feel emotions to an extent. The truth was that elemental change scrolls and books certainly existed in the imperial library back in Harrak. Perhaps some of them had even survived the cataclysm hidden deep under shielded vaults, but Solfis had absolutely no records of them. The data stored in golems were almost exclusively rated to

war and the conduct of it. Only Irlefen's desire to make Solfis grow had allowed the ancient war machine to keep entire historical and engineering records. That and engineers storing erotica in the hard drives. In any case, Viv was missing an entire facet of Harraksn society, not just magic but also art, culture, fashion, music... everything that had made the old empire something more than just an oppressive nation. It was gone, only remnants still conserved in dusty collections.

//Do you know what I mourn the most?

"Tell me."

//Gardening.

//Irlefen loved gardening.

"You told me he would talk to you while he cared for his flowers."

//Yes.

//Those were the only moments he could truly relax.

//I do not want you to be robbed of the choice to live and die on your own terms.

//Like he was.

"Thank you."

//Though I prefer it if you could live.

//For obvious reasons.

"Thanks Solfis."

//I mean to say that your heiress still lacks a certain maturity.

//And she craves gold too much.

"Ah. Well she is gone on a journey of self discovery."

//One day, second princess Toreka traveled on a journey of self discovery against the wish of her imperial parents.

"How did it go?"

//She was pregnant upon her return.

"Ok shut up it won't happen."

Viv watched Sonagi exchange a quick array of spells with Rakan. The expert arena fighter looked sharper and fuller than he used to be when Viv had left. As for the young Halurian mage, he had grown in confidence. Viv had learned that her roommate, Ereska, had taken him for a makeover. The gangly teen now sported clean-cut robes and an asymmetric hairstyle with long hair on top and shaved sides. It looked okay but she hoped he would not get a... a man bun. That would be weird.

As she thought, the earth under Rakan failed and the young man was sent rolling across the training grounds. He stood up immediately and gestured. Every piece of sand and debris fell from his robe at once. It wasn't the first time, it seemed.

"Again with the calculations," Sonagi warned.

"I know, I know."

"Look, you're distracted. Five minutes break."

The pair went to sit by Viv who didn't interrupt her shaping exercises. It was good training.

"So, the tourney? How does it work?" Rakan asked.

Viv frowned, not liking his 'light' tone.

"By far the messiest succession race on Nyil. Except maybe in the Shadow Lands. The Glastians have designed it to, ah, crystallize the hierarchy of alliances before a change of princes. Every form of manipulation short of outright murder is allowed."

"Can you explain more?"

"Short version: you should not participate. We, in fact, should not participate. I know what you want," the disgraced mage said with a pointed look.

"Long version please?"

"No, seriously. There are plenty of friendly contests for us to join if you want to sharpen your teeth on some two-bit duelist. Glastian tournaments are clusterfucks. They were always a bloody people, you know? Even before the tide."

Viv just looked.

"You're doing it for your man. Does he even need to join?"

"If you don't join, you lose. That's what he said. Sidjin stands on thin ice, especially with how dangerous and influential he is."

"Assassins?"

“None so far but... there is no way a Glastian first prince will allow the humiliation of a traitor building gates for rival powers. I think the only reason he’s been left alone for so long was that the first prince forbade an attempt on his life.”

“You see him as a traitor?” Rakan interrupted, surprised.

“No. He protected his brothers in arms against his superiors is how I see it. But it doesn’t matter what I believe. What matters is the belief held by the people with the means to send killers.”

“But it’s not true!”

Sometimes, it was painful to see how young Rakan really was.

“Truth does not send armies across borders. Beliefs do. The world is not fair, Rakan. We have to live with it.”

“Right. Who cares what those idiots think?”

“Let’s get back to the matter at hand before the young killer gets his blood boiling,” Sonagi said teasingly.

“I’m not like that!” Rakan protested.

“Right. I understand that your lover boy must enter then, so listen carefully. Every heir will go through three stages, each one comprising several rounds. The heirs each have four contestants who meet across duels. Those who win the most duels move on to the next phase. The last one standing gets to dictate what everyone else does, except, of course if there are previous agreements. That’s the simple part. The difficult part starts now. First, it’s possible to draw.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, either when the contestants agree or if they somehow neutralize each other. Both cases have happened in the past. Now listen, if a victory between two heirs isn’t decided in the first four rounds, for example with two wins two losses, the winners meet in a second series of battles. Draws fight again. That’s just at the arena level. At the tactical level, if you lose as an heir, it’s not over. You can offer your support to another heir and lend your surviving fighters because only those who are registered at the start can compete. Stealing other combatants is acceptable. Ganging on someone is acceptable. Negotiations are free of rules. Hell, this is still just the second level. I heard things in the arena. Disappearing supplies, murdered fighters, intimidation.... There is no limit to what one can do for one of the largest of the free cities. You are shoving your hand in a viper’s nest.”

“I’m not letting them kill my boyfriend.”

“Does the boyfriend know you will fight by his side?”

“We have talked.”

“That means he said no.”

“I’ll fight as well!” Rakan said.

The two others watched him with naked disbelief.

“Look,” Viv softly said, “I don’t question your skills but you’re very young and not fully trained.”

“I got more training than most people sent to the front.”

“Not war mages.”

“And,” Rakan insisted, “I have seen some shit. When I escaped.”

“When your sister rescued you,” Viv corrected.

She knew she’d made a mistake the moment her words left her mouth. No young man appreciated being called powerless. Rakan’s jaw surged forward in a stubborn lock. His eyes grew defiant and his tan skin reddened. Viv’s leadership skill was an instinct whispering hints in her mind, drawn from her experience. He could be directed. He could be distracted, coyed. He would also probably know, and besides, it was a little late. She had spoken before thinking.

It was a terrible shame there were no skills to keep one’s mouth shut.

“I’m no longer a child. I don’t need to be coddled all the time. Professor Dirge said I’m better than most third years he’s ever trained.”

“On a dueling track in controlled conditions against other children,” Sonagi said. “Another round now, young killer.”

“Don’t call me that!”

The two duelists stood facing each other. Sonagi gave a subtle nod, and the duel began.

He looked different when he was fighting, Viv thought. Like a diamond cleaned of mud to reveal sharp edges, he acquired a deep gleam that made him seem more than human. Every movement was sharp, every step measured. He was a dancer wielding energies at the tip of his finger like a conductor and like a hunter. The pinnacle of the mage. Every primary shade of mana flowed for him with exacting precision as he summoned them. In front of him, Rakan fought with his feet apart, as solid as a rock. Their style had grown closer, yet it only served to underscore their difference. While Sonagi was an artist, Rakan was a scholar, his forms perfect but still too slow, too predictable. It did not take long for Sonagi to gain the ascendant, until Rakan pushed everything he had in a great gout of flame. A blue shield blocked the attack and Rakan’s robes shone with a flash, signifying that their shield enchantment had been exhausted. This marked the end of the duel.

Rakan was furious.

“A feint. FUCK! Of course.”

“You know your flaws, my dear boy. Still too emotive. Still looking for the perfect counter.”

“I KNOW! Damn you.”

“Two more years,” Viv said, “and you’ll—”

“The world won’t wait for me! All of you are fighting, growing and doing stuff. I’m stuck here playing mageling with entitled nobles. They only care about clan politics, which childhood friend they’ll marry. I know what’s out there. I won’t grow unless I’m with you. Stop training me if you’re just going to toss me with the kids as soon as the spells start flying.”

“Less than two years, Rakan. You’re good but I’ve seen people like you die from stupid shit because their skills didn’t make them invincible.”

“It’s Nyil, Viviane, not your magicless dustball. Here, you need to fight if you want to grow.”

Rakan left the Academy training room in a huff, slamming the door behind in the most dramatic of fashions. Neither Viv nor Sonagi made any effort to hold him back. It would have been pointless. She had experienced the same with her brother, back on earth. Damien had been near unmanageable despite being a great brother overall.

“You shouldn’t get him on board. It’s not just the lack of training. He doesn’t have the mind of a killer,” Sonagi whispered.

“Maybe that’s not a bad thing.”

“On a battlefield as part of a mage cabal, maybe, but not in a duel. He’s always trying to outdo his opponent when he should be trying to win. The goal isn’t to disable via superior magecraft. The goal is to disable, period. He gets too absorbed in the flow of spell exchanges, never tries to deliver a disabling blow unless I push him. Get him out of here.”

Viv watched the disgraced duelist with some curiosity. It was weird that he seemed to care so much. Especially with how difficult things had been at first.

“Wow, you have changed.”

“Look, Rakan walked me through steps to shrug off my... use. It wasn’t easy but stats helped. I feel like I have a purpose again thanks to the boy. It matters. A lot. So yeah, I care a little, and yeah, I want in with your prince. If he can get my mother and I out, I’ll fight for him. I don’t want to get back to this hell. I can’t. I’ll do almost anything for a proper way out.”

“Alright. Sidjin has means even as an exile. His teleportation network means he’s making bank. If it’s fine, you can come to my desolate little spot of land. We could use a dueling expert.”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

“I’m not willing to piss off a major family now, but after the duel, I’ll likely be over the edge. Elunath can deal with the aftermath when I’m in his employ.”

“Burning bridges?”

“I’m kind of famous for rash actions.”

In the cramped city of Helock where even the wealthy saved on space, the town hall stood as a statement of pride and uncaring majesty. The entrance could be found in the center of a vast square alongside Param’s most prestigious churches, trade guilds, and banking establishments. Monumental steps led up to vaulted entrances that swallowed and spat the notorious and the meek with equal gusto. The light snow falling on the roofs had been tramped to disgusting mush, but it did little to detract from the imposing structure. Viv eyed a few statues. Those were mostly robed men holding scrolls with stern gazes. Maybe they had invented a new sort of tax and been immortalized.

Her attention centered back on the two men standing in front of her. With Sonagi at her side, she still had the low ground.

“I told you not to come,” Sidjin said with equal parts love and rancor.

Viv would have been moved were it not for the predictable presence of Rakan by his side. She could refuse the young Halurian exile all she wanted. The final decision to accept or refuse a contestant belonged to Sidjin and Sidjin alone. His presence annoyed her. Sidjin was smoother than her when he cared. He could have refused the young combatant.

“You know I couldn’t. And…”

Her eyes landed on Rakan who stared down, defiant with that stubborn streak that would send him fight a dragon on a dare.

“It is customary to accept young and promising agents during the challenge,” Sidjin calmly explained.

He was obviously aware of Viv’s reservations from his reaction. This pissed her off. He could have told her. They could have discussed it beforehand.

“How young do you take your agents?”

“I was barely his age when the tide arrived. I was placed on the wall and fought them off. He is an adult by our reckoning.”

“We will be facing grizzled mercenaries.”

“We all know the risks.”

“Will you sacrifice his life to preserve his pride?” Viv growled. “Do you not see the risks?”

“Yes, dammit,” Sidjin replied, raising his voice at Viv for the first time.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, bringing his anger under control. Viv did the same. They were all on the same side. She had to... accept the disagreement. Not leave. Not feel betrayed. She was not on Earth and those were not first world citizens. Nyil was a merciless place. It was just the norm for them.

Thinking that didn't help. They had a choice here. The one to keep Rakan safe.

"Look, Viviane. My love. You are trying to protect him out of care and the desire to protect the young. It is a noble drive, but it is, in the end, not your choice. It is his. He is an adult by our standards."

"With eight months of magical training and no field experience!"

"And whose fault is that?" Rakan yelled.

"Enough! Please. It is done, Viv. Your tradition is to protect the young and to take arms. Mine is to accept young warriors under my banner, but not my paramour. I am supposed to be protecting you and I can't, so I will accept your presence at my side with gratitude for it is your way, so please extend us the same courtesy. Rakan is a young warrior. Young warriors fight to prove themselves, sometimes earn a name as I did. Be here with us, not against us, because I will not discard my path for yours. I'm sorry."

Viv sighed.

They were going to get the child maimed.

Or maybe she was getting dramatic.

"Ok. I'll let it go since I can't do anything about it. As you said, we're a team now whether I want it or not. Let's get registered."

The tournament opening ceremony took place in a vast room filled with circular tables below an elevated dais. Rich tapestries hung from the walls depicting Helock's many military successes. They favored red and gold under the light of many mana constructs, yet the abundance of decorations made the space cluttered and still a little dim. It gave the venue a feeling of both intimacy and grandeur.

Each table could host up to twelve people, and this was already being used as a statement of power. Four of the heirs, the two cousins and a pair of young male twins, had come with just their combatants and a few retainers. They wore sensible travel clothes of good make but still lacking the class of the main contestants.

Among those bigwigs, the first was Medjin, the man who had insulted Viv in her lover's study. He stood like a king over a court of powerful mages, servants, and administrators dressed in fineries. They looked like they'd just stepped out of a palace for a stroll. One of them poured fine tea into a cup which, Viv noted, had not been provided by their Helockian hosts. None of them had been offered drinks.

The second contestant was Aldus, the one Lady Trez supported. While Medjin had the smooth snake style down to an art, Aldus had cultivated a more restrained appearance with carefully cut brown hair and a close-cropped beard. His warriors were also mages, but they sat with their backs straight, attentive. The clothes they'd picked were more restrained. He was selling himself as the 'reasonable' alternative to Medjin's domineering appearance.

The third serious contestant was Shaya, the only princess in the race. While Glastians did not separate roles by gender as much as other cultures on Param, there had never been a first princess. She came at the head of an eclectic bunch of warriors and agents, including a dark-skinned woman in golden armor who didn't look pleased to be here. It would be incredibly rude to use inspection here so Viv didn't try but for her, there was no need. She was a paladin of the golden order, the continent's only fully female knight order.

Viv had heard good things.

There was also a Viziman woman dressed entirely in bones.

Shaya herself wore light armor under a cloak. She was a square-faced woman with a certain rugged charm and scars on every piece of exposed skin. She was the candidate of alliances, having rallied contestants from various factions. By comparison, Aldus had the support of most of the nobility while the guilds and militia backed Medjin. No one backed Sidjin.

The two remaining candidates were a young man in blue armor who had come with a team of arcane swordsmen. The last one wore full plate. He was masked and alone. He was also the size of the average bank door.

Except for the lunatic, Sidjin's team was the smallest since he had brought no support staff. Quite a few gazes stayed on them anyway. Part of it ought to be curiosity, yet anyone with an advanced inspection skill would guess that they were all magical heavy hitters. Beyond that, they were the most diverse group short of the bone woman's one. Sidjin wore the yellow of Glastia like most of the heirs here. Viv had selected her black armored robes, while Rakan kept the dark blue of Academy graduates. As for Sonagi, he used a crimson dueling garb bearing the symbol of Helock: two staves crossed over a white tower.

"Welcome, welcome," a voice said from the dais.

Everyone turned at once to glare at the newcomer. He was the most obese man Viv had met since her arrival. Rolls of smooth fabric expanded to cover a massive gut upon which rested fleshy, ringed hands. The newcomer was bald except for finely curled hair on the sides. He licked his crimson lips, tongue darting like a slug. By contrast to his grotesque appearance, the man's voice was sweet and deep.

"I am Deos and I will be the master of ceremony for the duels, which will take place over three days a month from now. It is my utmost pleasure to welcome you here in the capital of magic. I shall guide you to the bloody sands of the arena where the fate of a nation shall be decided. You all know the rules so I will now share the brackets."

Viv listened carefully. Sidjin's team would face one of the twins in the first round, then most likely move to Medjin's team and either Shaya or Aldus in the finals. They would face two

princes which was less than ideal, but perhaps there was a way to forfeit at some point. After all, Sidjin only wanted to guarantee his tranquility, not inherit the throne. He'd been clear about that. They didn't have to win against everyone.

Deos finished and bid them goodbye, but not before one last warning.

"Oh, I know you glastians have hot blood so we understand if there are scuffles, but do keep it between yourselves, yes? Helock would not want anything to... spill over."

With the message clear, he left. Sidjin immediately stood and departed before anyone could react. Viv suspected it would have been a good time to make contact with others. Her lover had a different idea. They walked down the steps and didn't stop until they were back at the fallen prince's home on the outskirts.

Sidjin collapsed in a receiving room's chair. Viv realized she could use a drink, but Sonagii had a different idea. He took a list of documents from his bag, distributing it around.

"What's this?" Viv asked.

"Your intensive training program."

Chapter 134: The Cracks.

Viv cast three small nets, rupturing the attacking spells. Three booms rang across the small arena, pushing dust aside. A cast of eldritch wall to the side followed as she ran left—just as insurance if she needed to move. An astra spell was quickly blocked by a small wall of water barely strong enough to trigger it. The resulting explosion spread with a hiss, slowly. Too slowly. Sonagi used a water intent on his defensive constructs.

"Is that all?" the man mockingly teased from a wall of mist.

Viv rushed forward, feeling the sand under her boots. Never let your foe finish a long casting, he'd said. She vented mana into the ground, detonating a mine. Another cloud of black mana tore forward in front of her and through the mist. It revealed wet sand and the edge of a circle carved into the ground. She sent a blast at it and retreated, her floating silverite symbols forming a shield. The expected explosion did not come. She'd really hit an array, not a decoy.

"Dammit!" Sonagi exclaimed.

By a supreme effort of will, he still managed to finish the half-baked spell to throw at her. A roaring, spitting flame of inferno shrieked across the circle towards Viv. It was the size of her torso.

Contestants wore heavily enchanted defensive robes but Viv couldn't help but notice that if that thing landed, it would cook her on the spot, robe or not.

If.

"Durandal."

Viv's latest creation and the result of her black mana studies launched at the projectile. It was a black spike-tipped bomb designed specifically to take down incoming artillery spells. It made short work out of the unfinished ball.

Sonagi's attack exploded in a wave of heat that seemed to penetrate even Viv's coating. She was used to it, however, and reacted anyway,

"Lure. Shadow step."

The heat parted the mist, revealing a knee-high wall of stone now pitted in places. Beyond it stood the robed shape of Sonagi. The light of the exploding spell made shadows and near his feet, one such pool bubbled.

"Force cage!" the man screamed, and a transparent box surrounded it. This wasn't where Viv was going however. She let her lure fade and teleported behind the shadow of her eldritch tree instead. The safety one she had placed at the beginning.

A caster duel was half chess, half unbridled violence.

"Net."

Whips of razor thin black mana surged towards the duelist who reacted without looking, Another wall rose from the ground to cover his form. Viv had expected it.

"Glastian shredder."

The equivalent of a transparent industrial saw lacerated the far end of the wall from one side to the other. Sonagi cursed as he jumped aside. Viv had lost sight of him so she raced forward.

"Alright! Stop, stop, that was well done. I need to set up another strategy to challenge you."

He appeared from farther away than she expected thanks to a gray-mana based intent that muddled the perception. Sonagi never fought to the bitter end in training, not because it wasn't good practice but because mana remained a premium for them. She had an enormous tank thanks to being born talented. Sonagi didn't have her reserves. He relied on his fine control and intelligent use of colors to gain the upper hand.

"Has anyone ever told you you are a frustrating opponent?" he asked without anger.

"Yes. Many times."

"Excellent. It's a good sign. You really are powerful, you know? Anyway, give me a moment I need to prepare for the next round."

Viv left the sandy expanse of the Academy's training arena. Sonagi was doing his best and she appreciated it. Confronting the many styles he knew how to replicate gave her some of the experience she would need against the battle-hardened mages of the other competitors. He even borrowed casting aides for some elements so he could emulate the style of blue and red mana specialists. In a way, her monochrome nature made training considerably faster. There was no need to learn color combination, mana balancing among the elements or any of those subtle aspects. She didn't have to study which spell countered which other in the most efficient manner. She had her collection of spells she had made herself, and they were good. She knew how to use them. She was really, really proficient with them, and she had the attunement to cast them with matchless power. No one could beat her efficiency at her step of the path. She could stop an attack with only a fraction of the mana and cast three more before most people could cast one.

And there was the power of her color as well.

Black mana was not exactly as versatile as the other hues. It could not really build defenses, nor control the environment, but if there was one thing it was really good at, it was destruction.

Being the heaviest hitter around was pretty good in a duel.

Viv was feeling confident. She also trusted Sidjin who had forfeited all training in favor of information gathering. Not that he needed any of it. No, it was the preparation of the last member of their little squad that gave her a conviction.

Viv moved to Rakan, deliberately sitting next to him while Sonagi meditated. The expert duelist was pulling double duty to make sure his trainees were up to speed for the competition.

"Did the exercise I suggest help?" she asked.

"Yes. Thank you."

He kept silent for a while.

"You're doing your best to help," he said, a little defensive.

"Yes. Of course."

"I thought you might be angry."

"I am. I also won't let my anger interfere with our preparations, especially not preparations to try and keep you alive."

"I was... hoping you'd approve. You've been the person I wanted to be since I met you. A stranger surrounded by friends. Heh. Damn, I don't want to sound like a wimp."

"Keeping everything inside all the time isn't manly, Rakan. It's just stupid."

"You said the same thing about me joining."

“I stand by what I said but it’s not important right now. What’s important is to be as ready as we can be.”

“Even if it proves you wrong?” the young man said with a sarcastic smile.

It felt forced.

“My problem is never risk, Rakan. My problem is who takes it and why. No amount of victories will change that. Mages are survivors until they’re not, young idiot. It takes only one spell to off you.”

“We have protective garb.”

“If I really want to kill one of them, what amount of protective garb you reckon will save them?”

“I can indeed say that you are still angry,” the young man grumbled in his teeth.

“And you’d better not make me even angrier by having something happen.”

“Enough, enough,” Sonagi interrupted.

The trainer came, sitting near the two by the edge of the small arena.

“You guys are doing great. Nothing will happen, and besides Rakan is our fourth. Most combats will be decided by the time we reach him. So no pressure. Listen, since we are fighting duels, one may believe that team spirit is not required!”

“Or not the most important thing.”

“And it is wrong. We will be fighting for three days. Unless we lose immediately. It will be a harrowing experience. Cohesion will be important, even more because one of us may lose, putting pressure on the others. It could be anyone, and I mean anyone. Each team has four fighters, the first going against the first, the second against the second and so on. Some teams may have exceptional firsts and no follow-ups. Do you understand?”

“Yes yes,” Viv said.

“You two are the best students I’ve ever had but don’t forget you alone cannot win. We must be here for each other.”

“We will be,” Viv assured.

“Yes, I won’t let you down. And I won’t complain.”

“Good. Now come, let’s get back to it!”

The first decision Sidjin made after leaving the town hall was to place Sonagi and his mother in the arena full time, in specifically designated quarters made to protect fighters from the outside and each other. The move received the blessing of the bereaved family, which Viv found a little curious, but could be explained by their willingness to make something out of that grudge. It had been years since the death of their scion, so it was easy for Sidjin to negotiate an agreement. Perhaps they were open to negotiation against compensation. Something to pursue after the arena, to bring some more skill to her budding nation. The rest of the time was spent between the few remaining classes she had, the hospital, and physical training with an Academy trainer.

“Where is your sword?” he asked him the first time they met.

“Excalibur.”

The instructor briefly inspected the two meters long blade of hungering darkness.

“Aye, that will do.”

She only had time to work on the basics like how to move and block, but it would help. Parts of her wondered if she was wasting her time, if she was not spreading herself too thin. Her friend Gevaudan back on earth often talked about ‘builds’ and how specialized was better than spread out and ineffective. But this was Nyil and it didn’t care about ‘points’ and ‘balance’. She was trying to get all the low-hanging fruits to increase her survivability. More importantly, most of her battles had been at close-range and she didn’t think it would change much in the foreseeable future. Nous had given her the option to be an artillery specialist many times and she had not taken it. Her priority was clear.

She hoped it was the right decision.

Finally, any boost in stats now had a major influence and would hopefully help her survive the transition. It seemed logical. The more magical her body already was, the easier it would be to infuse it more. Or so she hoped. There would be time to fine-tune her training later.

After three weeks of intense preparations against the enemy teams, Sidjin came to see her. She knew she’d been postponing the discussion.

“You have been avoiding me,” Sidjin said.

It was not a question but a statement, not a reproach but a remark. He waited calm, standing near the entrance to their training room. He was dressed well, as he tended to do since regaining full control of his body. He looked good. Viv found she liked him just as before as this was the same Sidjin she’d grown to know, but the weight of Rakan’s fate weighed on her. He could still say no, though she wouldn’t ask him to do so. The two men had made it clear it was their decision, and that her input was neither required nor welcome.

“I’m sorry. I don’t hate you. I understand why you did what you did... I just can’t let it go.”

“You understand but you do not accept.”

“He’s a damn kid!”

“He is not.”

Viv sighed.

Men younger than him had been conscripted by her own country, and that was just in the twentieth century. She was being a little hypocritical. No, that wasn’t it. They’d been sent as a measure of desperation. Rakan’s presence was not required.

“He has no need to be here. Sonagi said he was not ready. He said he was skilled as a mage but not as a duelist. You know this. We can achieve whatever result you wish with a talented mercenary. There will be plenty of opportunities for him to show the strength of his arms. Yet you still said yes. Every time I smell the bloody sands of the arena, every time someone mentions a champion, he’s all I can think of. And when I look at you, it’s the same thing. All I can see is white skin. Glassy eyes.”

“You have seen dead children before.”

“Yeah. And not just on Nyil. It’s not worth it, Sidjin.”

“I know it is not safe. I know it can happen. I will not insult you by pretending the risks are what matter. By fighting, we take a risk. You know this, I know this, and I am sorry to say, Rakan knows this. Rakan is an adult here, and a full-fledged mage.”

“Bullshit.”

“It does not take a degree from the Academy to be one, Viv. Or there would be very few. He can cast spells with five sigils or more. He has formed an air intent. Rakan is a mage. He has trained hard. I cannot refuse him without breaking his honor.”

“His honor can wait six more months and the approval of his teacher.”

“You do not cut the wings of young hawks, Viv. Nyil is a merciless place, especially for his compatriots. You have protected him and his sister. Let them walk their own path. Please.”

“What do you call a swordsman who leaves the school before his master agrees he’s ready?”

“Viviane.”

“You and the boy have decided he was strong enough to stand in front of hardened warriors, some of whom have defended the wall. Sonagi and I have not. I hope for everyone that I’m wrong, but until it’s proven I can’t hug you and relax. I’m sorry.”

“There will always be differences between us, Viv. Differences because... we come from very different cultures. Does it mean... it’s over?”

“You can end it if you want, but as long as Rakan is in danger because of your decision, I can’t tell you I love you and truly mean it. I’m sorry.”

“We... I understand. We will... talk again after everything is over. Decide. The both of us.”

“I’m sorry Sidjin. I wish I could tell you I love you without conditions but this isn’t the case.”

“Goodbye Viv. And take care.”

“You too.”

Viv dreamed that night in her Academy room.

Rakan was fighting against a lich in the arena while she watched powerless from the rafters. He was winning, but then he stopped to examine a circle the lich had created. She screamed at him to finish off his opponent but her voice wouldn’t come out. The nightmare ended as the lich gripped Rakan.

Something pulled her up. The part of her that was her soul woke up then, aware of a foreign influence and powerless to stop it. The divine hand dragging her was not familiar, yet it reminded her of a part of her, the one that drew in fate’s whims.

The in-between greeted her in all its incomprehensible beauty. Her senses merged and let her taste the vastness of it through a strange synesthesia. The section she was in held a strange flavor, abandoned yet still smelling of wine and fine arts. And luck. She tested the... the space around her, though that didn’t feel quite right. Where she could aim her thoughts. Before much could happen though, a powerful tug dragged her back down.

But not back to Nyil.

Her soul screamed. This was not a very well-used conduit and the jagged edges scared her but whatever will guided her, carried her expertly through the various reefs that formed a path back to... she could see it now. A planet, blue and familiar but more orange than she remembered. She was pulled down, impossibly fast. She—

She was in an office, facing herself.

Viv took in her surroundings with a sense of sight that didn’t use eyes. Something was allowing her to see, to experience. The room she hovered in was spacious, all edges of glass and black metal. Few decorations adorned the otherwise austere place, and the austere woman sat in a leather chair as if it were a throne. She wore an asymmetrical gray suit complimented with a golden pin. Her face was Viv’s if Viv was older with access to the best skin routine earth had ever designed. A strand of gray hair snaked down from each temple, granting the woman an air of experience. Twin emerald eyes watched Viv with a bittersweet attention.

A distant part of Viv's mind screamed at her through the void. It screamed with grief and outrage. More details emerged, reinforcing what she already knew deep inside. There was a picture in the background of the same Viv with three adult children and a handsome husband, all with rare green eyes. Plates on the wall spoke of degrees, rewards. A logo decorated the desk with the word Euronics and below, Safran and Rheinmetall. The screen between them was flexible and transparent. Rows of data danced in its depths in a script she was no longer used to read. It took her a moment to recognize the background far below because the landscape had changed so much. Trees of tropical essence lined every piece of space not covered by solar panels. New skyscrapers had popped up but there was no mistaking the esplanade below, or the distant shape of Paris in the distance. Volutes of heated air covered every exposed piece of metal like a shield outside. Inside, the air was cold and clean. It smelled vaguely of industrial soap.

"No," Viv finally managed. "No no no no no no it's only been two years. No. Impossible!"

"Time does not carry us at the same speed everywhere," the older Viv rasped between tight lips.

"Emeric..."

"In the flesh. Well, in your flesh."

The hidden god took a sip of something amber. Now Viv finally noticed the crystal decanter on a table, half empty. Emeric let the glass rest against his... her thigh, for now, the contrast between the carefully controlled environment and languid posture jarring.

"What..."

"I am sorry. That is what I want to say first. I am so sorry."

"For stealing my life?!"

"Yes. I was... callous. Needlessly brutish. I hurt you when you did not deserve it. I have been following your progress, of course. I know you did well for yourself but it does not absolve me of my sin. The truth is that I could have used a dying body and replaced it. I could have waited for a good vessel as they died, but I didn't. The throne of the gods corrupted me. It took being you to remember that... that people mattered."

"I wanted to warn my family," Viv's soul wailed. "To tell them I was alive."

"They thought you were. They still do. Only your father realized... you'd been replaced. He confronted me. I told him the truth. He said he'd shoot me if I were not in his daughter's body."

"I don't care I don't care I don't care give me back my family!"

"I can't!" Emeric roared, then softer. "I can't. It's already too late. I don't have the means to swap you back. Even if I did, it would cancel all the pain we went through to trap Maranor. I can't do it. I'm sorry."

“Why why why why why why.”

“Quiet.”

Viv’s soul was forcefully stabilized by the hand of the god. Anguish tasted different for a soul. Less raw and much, much deeper, and she had no tears to cry.

“I owe you an explanation I suppose, but after that I will seal the memory of this exchange to others. You will not be able to mention it. Whether you want it or not. Simply put... I fled here to stop my wife from dooming us all. She wants my crown and for that she needs to challenge me. To challenge me, she needs to demonstrate I am unfit.”

“Unfit unfit unfit.”

Emeric took another sip of alcohol.

“Unfortunately, being a decent person has never been a requirement for leadership. Quite the contrary, in fact. Maranor has found her cause and ally and promised to unseal him if he cooperated. It, I guess. I am talking about the leader of the first pantheon. Katon the harvester. The first of us all. Currently in the middle of a botched reincarnation.”

Viv wished she could flee and cry, return to the physical world where yelling and throwing stuff was a distinct possibility. It didn’t happen. Emeric wasn’t done with her.

“Gomogog the jovial feaster. He empowered his followers who engaged in ritualistic cannibalism. Octas the grafter. She advocated becoming monsters ourselves as the only way to power. She affixed monster parts on people. Enttiku guardian of repose. We turned them to our cause for they only cared about the peace of souls. Faen the Vile. He made his believers stronger according to the pain and terror they inflicted. And Katon the Harvester. Those were the ones we worshiped for a time. Maranor slew Faen and Katon but Katon returned.”

Viv felt curiosity despite herself. Being merely a soul gave her entirely too many avenues of reflection.

“How?”

“As the god of the only fitting entity: he’s an aberrant.”

A chill plunged Viv’s soul in a cold pond.

“That is bad.”

“It is, but his power wanes. I needed some more time, so I fled here. I stole your life. Your friends. I stole your family. I have built a life here and realized what I had done. Godlike power, it does something to you. There are so many deaths, so many prayers left unfulfilled. After a while, your heart hardens like a stone. It took me quite a while to remember what it meant to be mortal. I’m sorry, Viv. And I... am sorry for your loss. “

A new wave of horror flashed through Viv while Emeric took another sip with an emotion she never expected in such a detestable man: guilt.

“Your father died this morning. Heart attack. You’ve been gone for thirty-three years. He is... was... an old man. I... I told him to slow down. That he wasn’t that young anymore. He wouldn’t listen.”

“Fuck you fuck you fuck your fuck you”

“Quiet. I will say it again: I am sorry. There is a debt between us. So... I can’t bring back your life but I can make up for it. Pay the debt. Do you know why there are no temples to me and yet I am king?”

Viv didn’t. She’d never wondered.

“I am Luck. People call my name in the recess of their hearts and sometimes I help them. There are many people who need help at any given time, but I will not come to those who demand, who worship, or beg or whine or scream. I only come to those who act as they ask. But I will come for you. Talk to me in your heart and I will atone for the sin that binds us. Remember me. I will give you a sample of what can be done. Remember me in your hour of need. Do not let your grudge cause your death. Goodbye, Viviane the Exile. Maybe we will meet again, one day.”

“I’ll fucking kil —”

Viv was projected back to the in-between, then back to her room screaming and panting. Light invaded her vision, hurting her eyes. She flipped to her side to empty her stomach. Tendrils of black mana lashed, cutting her bed table in two. Another pinged against a shield.

“Calm down! By Sardanal, Viv!”

A hand grabbed her. She recognized the familiar perfume of Ereska, her roommate.

“MERDE!”

“I do not know this tongue but I can gather you are angry.”

“Gah! That cock-sucking, rotten, poxed-ridden—”

“You are quite angry.”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH.”

Viv breathed, trying to reassert herself. Her body felt weird. Out of place.

Soul Mastery has vastly improved due to repeated contacts with divinities.

Soul Mastery: Intermediate 1

You may now travel to the in-between voluntarily.

She felt disconnected. Stats didn't help. It was like the throne room back in Harak. Her soul, gone too far and slapped back like a metaphysical rubber band. Straight at her.

"That fucker," she sobbed. Then, softly, "Papa..."

"We... have the same word in the northern tongue. I am sorry."

"I just wanted to say goodbye. I just wanted to tell them I was alright."

But they didn't need it. Didn't need her. She'd been replaced.

"What happened, Viv?"

"I was told. I was told my father died. I just... I just wanted to see him again."

Viv let herself be consumed by grief, here in her room where it was safe. Ereska stayed.

"I knew I could die so I made letters. But that's not the same. I am NOT dead. I am not dead at all. I just wanted to see him, to tell him I was sorry for what I said. Not all I said but some. Tell him I was a hypocrite, that I knew the tools he used were more... neutral than evil. I used them as well. I wanted to tell him that he was right, that I was more like him than I admitted. Even though he was an asshole. Fuck. I just wanted to talk. Now that I was my own person. Not like this."

Ereska hugged her.

"Not like this. Why?"

"I'm sorry. It's not fair to you, and nothing will replace him... but I'm still glad you're here. Forgive me. If you were not here... Varska would have died alone."

"She *did* die alone! That idiot wanted her heroic death so much!"

"But she died for someone. Sorry, I'm bad at this. I wish I had a skill."

There was a skill for grief counseling here. For fuck sake.

"What I wish to express is that your sacrifice has changed a lot for many people. People who deserved a second chance. Like your, and I cannot believe I am saying this, daughter."

"True," Viv sniffed.

"You were dealt a loaded die but you made what you could of it. I'm happy you were here for Varska, at the end. So, please do not be angry. Instead, please tell me about your father."

Viv sat back down. She knew what Ereska was doing and wanted to slap her. Yet, the girl meant well. Screaming would help nobody. She had to be the adult for now. Maybe scream later. Alone.

“He was a politician, a businessman, an amoral twat and... a great dad.”

“Oh he would have loved it here.”

Viv sniffed. With her magic and her dad’s political acumen, with the two of them they would be halfway through Enoria by now. And the Enorians would be thanking them for it.

“Wait... what is that thing?” Ereska suddenly asked.

On Viv’s bed, a black, squarish box waited. Viv blinked because she was pretty sure there was plastic in that thing. The design felt like a boy version of those revolutionary smartphones that had just... but no. With earth thirty years in the future, smartphones were probably obsolete by then. Maybe people watched tv series on the toilet with eye implants. Maybe toilets were obsolete. Viv grabbed for the box, which lit up at her touch.

The back was made of shiny plates with a small inscription reading ‘solar panels’ in French. A click on the side revealed a pair of earplugs linked back to the box with thick cables that looked like they could resist an axe chop. The shiny text on the edge read: Survivalist Vault 3, and listed a storage capacity of 124 terabytes of data. It seemed like... quite a lot to Viv.

She opened and found text in blockish script. She was thirty years in the past and still found the look retro. Inside, there was a menu with videos, music, and photos. She opened the first one and found a tanned version of herself posing in the Charles de Gaulle airport lobby with her smiling brother. She smashed the thing down on her bed. It bounced merrily.

“What is that? It looks like the most advanced piece of magitech I have ever seen!”

“It’s a... a depository of knowledge. From my world.”

“Whoever sent it to you—”

“Must remain secret. Absolutely secret.”

“Of course. Naturally,”

There were notes on the main menu. The first told her the box was locked to her face, which felt weird to her but seemed to be working. The second was that it was enchanted to escape scrutiny from hostiles. Divine shenanigans probably. She tried to inspect it. The skill just drifted off it.

She opened it again and picked a random song. Saint Saens’ ‘Dance Macabre’ rang through the ravaged room. She had to admit, the sound system was nice.

For a consolation prize.

Viv grabbed the box, though she refused to open the pictures, refused to read the notes on what had happened to her friends while a mad god meat-puppeted her true body for his enjoyment. She wanted to throw that shit off the window but she didn't. She couldn't. She didn't have the strength. It was all she had left, a pity gift from a regretful man so she could get the drags of the life she would never live, the one he'd stolen from her.

"That music! It's... it's so beautiful!"

It appeared Ereska was crying.

"Take it," she said.

"What?"

"Take it. I don't need it right now. Go. I want to be alone."

"If you are sure..."

Ereska left clutching her prize in her hands while violins sang according to the whims of a talented director. Fucking music. He'd sent her music and a photo album. Jesus.

Viv curled on herself in her savaged bed. As hard as she tried, sleep wouldn't come to her that night. In the morning, her nose bled uncontrollably.

Current attunement: 42.1%

Time was catching up to her.