

That inquisitor called Denerim came back as Viv was having breakfast. Marruk was chewing on a warm bun with a vacant expression as the man let himself in with that weird dude that gave Viv punk vibes. The idealized type that screamed their rage with a guitar and threw rocks at riot cops. And he had shiny tattoos. Her inspection skill only said that he was an inquisitor apprentice though.

Denerim told her that he and Orkan had to fetch their gear first, and to wait for them at home. That was fine. Even with the magic reinforcing people's stamina, it was clear that the door-wielding bodyguard was suffering from fatigue. It was an exertion of the mind that made the usually stoic warrior despondent and even a bit grumpy.

Then there was a knock at the door.

Marruk went up and checked through the shuttered window. Her face froze.

"It's Gogen. The housekeeper."

Fuck.

What if...

Viv was getting paranoid. Was the old, portly woman hiding a terrible secret?

She turned to Solfis.

**//If she attacks you while I am here, she will die.**

"Ok. Marruk let her in, but keep a distance. Let Solfis react."

The Kark woman nodded slowly, then opened the door. Gogen unhesitantly entered the room.

"Hello," she said.

Viv looked into the depth of those bovine brown eyes and saw nothing here. Her visitor displayed the malice and cunning of a snail laying waste to a piece of lettuce. She took her surroundings with a look, huffed, and started to dust the table Viv was sitting at.

Gogen was an amazingly ugly woman, as if someone had carefully arranged the proportion of someone to maximize her plain appearance without ever dipping into the unhealthy or the grotesque. Quite an achievement, really.

Viv watched, tense, for a tentacle to sprout out of the woman's back.

It did not happen.

The old Kazaran frump grabbed her broom and swept the floor with practiced efficiency. All the while, she was breathing loudly through her half-open mouth, eyes glazed, with a bit of drool dripping down her lips.

Viv half expected an evil cackle, accompanied by a shriek of “no one ever suspects the cleaning lady nyaaaahahaha!” But no. Gogen finished her task in ten minutes and left, barely acknowledging Viv’s embarrassed ‘thanks’.

“Fuck, I really hope this gets over with soon or I’ll never go out again,” the witch said.

“We must face the challenge head-on,” Marruk agreed. She yawned again.

“If we can find it,” she added.

Thankfully, the inquisitors returned before any more brilliant insight was bestowed upon Viv.

The pair was wearing a more nondescript suits of armor than they had the day before. They look like temple guards now, with a white cape over leather and chainmail.

Viv studied it again. The older one was tall and broad and very scruffy. He was also quite handsome in a dignified, solid kind of way. Even had the grey at the temples. He wore a well-used and quite obviously enchanted broadsword by his side. The younger one had a hooked nose, very dark hair and he was all edges. Especially with those red tattoos. He also wielded a broadsword, but on the other side he had nasty curved blade that looked like it was designed to bite around shields. The contrast between both baldes was quite jarring. The curved one had seen much use.

Viv decided to leave Solfis behind as she thought that the two inquisitors might be enough to at least hold back the thing as Viv ran. They moved out.

“It’s very unlikely that your cleaning servant is the cultist, but you were right to keep your guard up,” Denerim said.

“So, except for, errrr, Gomogog, what other cults do you usually deal with?” Viv asked in an attempt to distract herself.

“The most commonly worshipped one is Efestar. Before I continue, do they not worship dark gods where you come from?”

“This kind of dark knowledge is hidden in my home country. Possibly censored,” Viv answered noncommittally.

The inquisitor looked at her weirdly but he did not comment on the half-truth.

“I see? Well, Efestar is the god of resentment. His domain is that of the petty revenge, the secret scheme, the malevolent lies. His followers are always required to sacrifice something, or someone, of value to them to bring destruction on another. They are always the hardest to detect since the boon comes in a form that could be explained by fate or bad luck. A blight

on one's crop, for example. Once the treachery is found, however, finding the culprit is usually straightforward. Just find whoever suffered as well."

"This seems like a recipe for disaster. People who just got their lives ruined always look for a cause. It's just too easy to blame it on someone else."

Denerim turned to her, showing a bitter smile.

"Dark gods corrupt and destroy as much as they can, and they are most pleased when men turn on themselves without their input. Such is their nature."

Just then, the younger man's tattoos flashed a deeper red before settling down yet again.

"Hmm, can I ask about the tattoos?" Viv asked with all the tact and diplomatic touch of a drunken rhino.

"I used to be a Hallurian warborn," the young man said defensively.

"Ooooooh," Marruk and Viv echoed. Everything had suddenly become clear.

Well, no.

But at least they knew where to start.

The mentee, Orkan, glared at them as if he expected a remark.

"So, tattoos are a warborn thing?" Viv asked.

"Yes."

"Okay."

Her paranoia had successfully been replaced by a deep sense of cringe.

"I'm just tired, makes me say stupid things."

"Do you often wake up tired?" Marruk asked.

"Hey!"

"Huhu."

The discussion was nicely distractive, but it died out as they approached Kazar's central plaza, where the massive purple-leaved tree stood as the original bulwark against the deadlands. Viv had always thought of it as a relaxing, exotic feature. Now that she also knew

that it was a cultist magnet, the imposing paragon of nature had lost some of its charm. The sight of the tower filled her with a deep sense of dread. Not only had Varska become her ex, there was a remote possibility that a tentacular horror hid under all that fragile elegance, the soft skin, the delicate floral touch, the blush, and the way the banished beauty averted her eyes and frowned when she felt attraction.

Fuck.

The Helock mage had burrowed her way to Viv's soft and mushy heart.

Viv banged on the door, and was let in by a particularly grumpy old housekeeper wearing her nightcloth. It was still the ass crack of dawn, after all. They climbed up three sets of stairs and Viv, again, banged on another door.

Varska opened the door wearing something like a bathrobe, but thin. Viv's eyes drifted south to two well-defined pert breasts before she managed to refocus on the grave matter at hand. Damn her brain.

"Sorry, this is serious and concerns Kazar's security. Can you meet us in the lounge?"

Varska's hair was elegantly mussed and she was a little bleary-eyed, but the 'I will throw you off a cliff' expression turned to business as soon as Viv's words registered.

"Give me a minute."

She slammed the door in Viv's face.

Fair.

It still stung a bit.

They went back to sit in the lobby's comfortable chairs, all armed and armored like they had a noon appointment inside the walls of Jerusalem and the moors disagreed. Never had Viv seen such an awkward, socially inept gathering of idiots since her boyfriend's birthday party back when she was eleven. Fucking awful. She almost prayed that the tentacular horror would burst out the door to bring an end to her torture.

Varska walked in exactly two minutes later, wearing a light green dress and hair held up in a no-nonsense tail. She crucified every attendant with her glare as she took her seat. Viv reddened. Marruk lowered her eyes. The paladin gave the fakest of smiles and his apprentice glared back.

"I hope you have excellent reasons to disturb my rest."

Viv had plenty of good reasons to disturb her oh for fuck sake not that again the pressure was making her horny. And now the moment of truth was upon her and her stomach was drilling down her chest in an icy avalanche to settle slightly above her bladder.

Viv did not want Varska to be the worshipper.

Please no. Anything but that.

“There is an acolyte of Gomogog in the city. One who has been here for a while,” Denerim started as Viv was paralyzed by anxiety.

Varska leaned forward, expression blank.

“Are you quite sure?”

“We have found a charnel pit with ritual victims. There is no mistake.”

Varska slowly sits back down into her couch, eyes lost in deep thought in a way that Viv recognized. Varska was in full focus mode. She would not even answer questions. Then, a torrent of words erupted from her lips.

“Here for a long time so no recent immigrant, possibly low-profile, lives alone or with enough personal space to carry out their activity, close to the tree for added potency, unchanged over a period of... oh. OH! THAT MOTHER. FUCKING. BI—”

Viv’s danger sense shook her.

Danger sense: Beginner 5

The door to the lower level exploded inward and a thin clawed limb punched through it.

Everything happened very quickly.

Varska managed to raise a thin shield of brown and green. The attacking bone pierced through it and burrowed deeply into her left arm.

The Hallurian swung and cleanly severed the offending tentacle with Denerim charging right behind.

Marruk dove for Varska’s falling form, interposing her shield. She glanced back to check that Viv was ok.

Viv was last to act despite having used her heightened perception as soon as the noise of cracking wood had reached her ear. She waited for the fighters to engage and angled a purge left, under a couple more tentacles and into the body behind it.

It screeched and threw itself forward.

A solid mass of pinkish flesh slammed into Marruk's door which, against all odds, held. The Kark woman's mace was now playing against her as the single strike she managed hardly had any effect. The two inquisitors were having much more success. Their blades bit deep into the creature and golden flames licked their edges, preventing them from closing at all. Great spurts of blood covered the expensive carpets.

Viv cast successive purge spells. They were barely penetrating the creature's highly resilient flesh, but the wounds were not healing either.

The acolyte shrieked and burst through the nearest window, leaving a man-sized, circular hole behind like a looney toons character. The afterimage of a humanoid shape with tendrils coming out of its back remained seared in Viv's retina. It had been simply too quick to see clearly.

The two inquisitors jumped after it at the same moment. No hesitation.

Viv returned her gaze to Varska, kneeling on the floor and applying a healing spell to her punctured shoulder. Marruk stood protectively above the mage. Viv saw that she was quite pale. Beads of sweat perled on her paling brow.

"Are you alr—"

"What are you waiting for? GO AFTER IT!"

Viv took a few steps forward and looked down.

They were on the fifth floor.

Below, the two men had engaged the monster, which had grown to hippopotamic proportions but not quite elephantine proportion yet. A peasant woman laid in a pool of her blood, the entire right side of her torso missing. A child was screaming.

"It's a bit..."

Marruk grabbed Viv in a firefighter carry and jumped down.

"Ah, FU—"

"Keep it off the tree!" Varska's voice came. It was frantic.

They landed on the plaza's pavement with a grunt. Marruk dropped Viv and charged forward. The acolyte and the two inquisitors were caught in a deadly dance around the tree's base. The acolyte was aiming for the tree, probably to do something drastic now that its cover was blown. The men fought it off, coordination and technique against random savagery. They were not winning, or at least, not fast enough.

Viv sprinted towards the creature while, in her mind, a strange split occurred.

One part was casting overcharged purge after purge on the monster's pink's skin. Grey scales started to form on its flank to mitigate her attacks and a tendril slashed her way, only to be deflected by Marruk's fearless form.

Another part was shocked. The speed at which the combatants moved was like watching a kung-fu movie in fast forward. It was insane. Insane!

The last part was relief.

At least, it was not Varska.

She managed to get close enough.

"Werfer!"

The small, localized, and fast blight spell would not have hit if Orkan had not dug its hooked blade in one of the creature's limbs to throw it off balance. The shadowy flames hit its shoulder with a terrible hiss. The creature recoiled in pain for the first time since the beginning of the fight. It also opened three eyes from under its armpit — tentacle pit? — and they zeroed on Viv.

The acolyte bounded away towards her, ignoring two devastating slashes on its flank. Viv noted in passing a limb going up and raking a low branch. Violet flowers faded and fell where it hit.

That was bad.

The creature dodged under another werfer and simply tanked an overcharged purge, swallowing back eyes under thick scales before they could be burnt. Marruk expertly blocked three strikes.

Then the creature's chest split open like an exploding carcass, showing purple, veiny flesh and half-formed, football-sized human molars.

It screamed.

Viv yelled in pain and brought her hands to her ears, and so did the two inquisitors. Only Marruk stood steadfast. A few tentacles merged into a larger limb with impossible, horrific speed and slammed the brave defender aside. The creature jumped on Viv.

Mages often depended on gestures and rituals.

Instinctive casters like Viv did not.

"Werfer"

Hands still clutched on her ears, Viv allowed the wave of pure, destructive black mana to emerge from her core instead of her arms. The familiar, eager power overloaded her

conduits in its enthusiasm to get out and do what it was designed to do. The spell caught the acolyte full on as it was already in the air and incapable of dodging. Viv felt a moment of triumph as she rolled to the side and let the smoldering horror show screech its way above her head.

She sprinted away and towards Marruk while looking back. The thing flayed with small tendrils which she blocked with a large, all directional nope shield. She felt exhilaration when a large chunk of corrupted flesh simply shed from the whole, reducing the creature to a more manageable size.

Marruk rushed back in and thwacked a tentacle away, the pair of inquisitors fanning around her. They renewed their attacks. Viv's mind was getting tired though and her perception slowed down. It became difficult to follow the insanely quick combat. The combatants were barely more than blurry form to her at this stage, striding across the plaza in a flurry of flesh and golden-tinged steel. A show as terrifying as it was awesome.

Viv shook her head and resolved to help however she could by throwing overcharged purge when she thought she could land one. The inquisitors somehow gave her openings despite their lack of familiarity with her fighting style. Every time they left her a clear path, she flayed the creature's flesh with thick threads of annihilation. Marruk repulsed any attempt at killing her from afar.

But the fighters were tiring. As they finished a full circle of the plaza and were back where they had started, the acolyte tore off and threw one of its arms in the path of one of Viv's spell. It rushed between the pair and ignored the attacks on its back.

It was aiming straight for the tree.

Viv was no expert, but she guessed that a creature of corruption touching a defenseless symbol of purity was a bad thing. She raced after it with Marruk by her side.

"Help me stop it."

"WHAT?"

Viv looked to the side. The Kark warrior's eyes were bloodshot and she was bleeding from both ears.

"You're defeaned."

"YES! I DEFEND!"

"Fuck."

They were not going to make it in time.

Denerim screamed something and the symbol of Neriad appeared on the creature's back. It slowed down the more it tried to flee. Orkan's tattoos flashed red and he planted his hooked



blade into the ground, through the thing's temporary back leg. Once more, the creature shed flesh to escape.

Corded muscle stretched to the undefended trunk.

There was a thud, like a baseball bat hitting a face if both were the size of bus.

Where the acolyte used to be, there was now a denuded root jutting up. Viv backpedaled and looked around, not quite understanding, until something smashed into a far wall.

The other three were already sprinting back. The acolyte's diminished form was rebuilding bones at the base of Varska's tower but the mage of Kazar had apparently had enough. Thorny brambles burst through the pavement to form manacles around it. For every one it tore off, three more encircled it. Viv did not dare cast to avoid destroying the binds, and she did not have to. A heavy arrow punched through the heavy plates forming on the monster's surface. The projectile came from Koro, the Amazon member of the Temple Guard. Their leader Lorn joined the fray.

Their coming heralded the beginning of the end. The front of the tower soon turned into a veritable butcher shop of wrecked stone and slabs of bloody, pulsating flesh of various sizes. The acolyte had to discard gobbets of meat as soon as they were burned and purified. In the end, only a heavily deformed head filled with serrated teeth was left in the midst of an expanding pool of gore.