

“What the hell was that about?” Viv asked.

Varska poured them two glasses of cold tea, taking some time before answering.

“We are being robbed.”

“By the Crown?”

“It takes a lot of money to wage a war and the current king is... tired. Old. His two sons and one daughter are contending for the throne. The second son in particular seems quite eager to prove himself. Surely, you remember his name?”

It only took a moment for Viv to remember the expedition to the Min Goles mines a month before, in particular the fate of the Yiries.

“They were chased, their village destroyed. Oh damn it was prince Lancer. He tried to enslave them as well.”

“Indeed. Farren informed me of this, but I did not think that he would have the arrogance to disrupt the good functionment of Kazar. The church of Neriad is quite powerful there, and you don’t want the god of righteous war against you in a hotly disputed conflict. In any case, we are indeed being robbed. Well, the villagers are, probably. Have you deposited your gold at the bank?”

“Yes, as you suggested.”

“The Manipeleso bank is not one to be trifled with. Even he should know that much and avoid doing anything. We are certainly going to feel some upheaval, however.”

“Should we do anything?”

“My dear, I love you for your kind heart, but you are being a moron. The path to salvation lies in diplomacy when facing an entire kingdom, even one split in two.”

“I just have a bad feeling about it.”

“Let me be prosaic. You wild witch. You no diplomat. You no can solve problem. More tea?”

“Some say that war is the continuation of diplomacy by other means,” Viv replied, massacring Clausewitz for the sake of sounding smart, “and I include covert actions in it. It is too early in the game to decide but let’s not just immediately give up on doing anything.”

Viv had forestalled Varska’s protests by postponing a decision as she very well knew that she had much to lose and little to win in this whole affair.

Actually that was not quite right.

“Shit, everyone knows about Solfis. What if they try to take him away?”

“You let them, and one week later he will return covered in blood and, I hope, less uptight.”

“I don’t know, Varska, I really don’t.”

The mage stood up and sat by her side. She smelled nicely of flowers, as always, The familiar perfume soothed Viv.

“If it really scares you we can leave for a while. Go visit those mountain tribe people you mentioned a few times. Live in a hut?”

“Would you?”

“You are asking me if I would exile myself when facing impossible odds?”

“Heh. Alright.”

Varska extended a small hand and took Viv’s. The witch enjoyed its warmth, the thin fingers, and the familiar small calluses that came from constant gardening. It was a hand she knew.

They spent some time together then Viv headed back, picking Marruk from the temple as she went. They had another war council at home.

**//This is unexpected, and unwelcome.**

“You may be spared on account of being a caster, but they’ll definitely rob me blind,” Marruk grumbled, “everyone knows that I am rich now.”

“How about putting money in the bank?”

“First, I’ll trust those northerners when I’m dead. Second, the Enorians can force me to make a withdrawal by removing a few toes. You think they will care? I’m a Kark. They’ll do whatever they want.”

“We could have some time before... No. They will already be on their way.”

**//There is a 97% likelihood that enforcers are close, in the Deadshield Woods.**

**//And another 56% likelihood that the envoy came with them.**

**//They used the envoy to establish a minimum of legitimacy.**

**//But they do not want to leave Kazar time to negotiate for outside help**

“Damn. Then we must run, go somewhere else for a while. Solfis, is there anything we can do?” Viv asked.

**//This is a surprise attack by one who violated a treaty, Your Grace.**

**//You can only weather it and plan your counter-attack.**

**//Make sure that you keep the black mana core on you, as it is quite valuable.**

**//I would suggest a plan to pack up and leave in ten minutes.**

“Yeah. You’re right. I got comfortable here, huh? Shit was bound to happen.”

**//You had no reason to expect this treachery, Your Grace.**

“But yes, shit is always bound to happen,” Marruk finished.

“Squee.”

Even Arthur could feel the tension and sadness in the air.

Viv went to bed last night and had trouble falling asleep. It didn’t help that she was awakened two hours later by a hand on her mouth.

“Mmmflg!”

“Good evening.”

“Ah. FUCK! Irao, what gives? You scared me.”

Two yellow eyes stared at her from the Hadal human’s bald face, glinting silently under the light of Nyil’s single moon. Below the neck, he was pure darkness.

“You must see this. Come with me.”

“Now?”

“Yes. Time is of the essence.”

The pair silently went into the main room and Viv took the time to pet a slightly worried dragon.

**//I will come as well.**

“We will be covering a lot of ground. You should save your strength. I swear on my entire race that I will bring her back safe and sound or die trying,” Irao replied.

Solfis took a few seconds to reply, which was uncharacteristic enough to worry Viv a bit.

**//Your assessment is correct.**

**//I know that you spoke the truth.**

**//I am taking a small gamble, do not make me regret it.**

“We will be careful. I just need to show her.”

And that was that. Viv followed Irao out and towards the edge of the forest at a trot, head still swimming with sleep and the strangeness of the situation. She swallowed a snack and took a gulp of water from her canteen and felt alive again. She missed coffee.

The edge of the forest swallowed them.

“We will go faster now,” Irao said laconically. Then he must have triggered a skill.

Viv felt her entire being balloon with energy. The shadows of the night fell away and everything appeared in sharp relief. Viv could see every bramble, every thorn, feel the loam under her soles and how it would affect the race, and race she did.

Irao was ahead, running and showing the path but she herself could feel it call to her. A secret way drew her in. That exposed root needed her toes, and she had to duck under that branch just right. Those ferns would give way under her body, and there was sure footing beyond. They ran. Viv breathed big gulps of air, fresh and crisp. She just knew how everything should be.

A part of her almost resisted the effects, but she knew it was Irao's doing and so she let it happen.

Finesse +1

You have reached a milestone! Your coordination and reflex are vastly improved. You will find it easier to execute precise movements. You can move faster.

Viv felt part of her body and soul absorb all those instincts and retain some of them, only an infinitesimal fragment and yet it made a difference. To be that good, Irao's finesse had to be... she could not imagine, but he had to sense the world differently.

Viv's consideration lasted as they kept going. Her improved mind could process the travel and take some distance at the same time. Her earth brain would have been overwhelmed by the influx of information in a mere minute, yet now she could keep going for the whole night.

She really could.

Realistically her body should have dropped very quickly, unable to bear the strain, yet she kept going without much discomfort. It was as if the power she used was borrowed. Diving deeper, she found traces of colorless mana in her conduits.

They went faster still.

Irao's effects on his surroundings were amazing. He was doing something with the shadows, something that used black mana. She tried to focus on it but had little success. The black mana carried a meaning that escaped her. The concept was simply too mind-defying, or she was not experienced enough.

Exactly how powerful was the Hadal strain human?

Viv did not know, but she suspected that Kazar had two of the most dangerous entities on Param. And they both lived in her house.

Little by little, her considerations faded away until the path ahead became the center of her focus. It was not by choice. The pressure on her mind simply grew too much as minutes turned to hours. Eventually, it was well past midnight when they slowed down.

“Stop,” Irao said.

Viv resisted. They were so slow. it wasn't right. The next spot of shadow was just over there.

“Stop. We have arrived.”

No.

“Wake up, Viv. Qi Chuang.”

“What?”

The strange language woke her up from her reverie. The skill broke and she collapsed forward, only saved from kissing the dirt by Irao's timely support.

“Ooowwww.”

She had the mother of all hangovers.

“You did well. Your mind is very resilient, it compensates for your lack of finesse well,” Irao said.

“It hurts...”

“Drink and eat, it will help.”

Viv grabbed for another energy snack and ate it thoughtfully. She took her time to drink slowly to keep the nausea at bay. They were smack in the middle of a thicket of ancient trees, their barks marked by the passage of generations of predators. Stunted shrubs battled for the few holes in the canopy, though only the moon shone through them at that moment.

“We have arrived. We are about forty Halurian leagues from Kazar.”

Viv searched her mind and calculated that it was a bit less than sixty kilometers. They had traveled at the speed of a car. Not a very fast one, but still an impressive performance.

“Arrived where?”

“Come and look.”

Viv stood up on shaky legs and followed the bald quasi-human as he guided her up a beast trail. They ended up on a small elevation, barely deserving the term ‘hill’. There, a small promontory gave a decent view of the valley below and the massive encampment sprawling there.

Viv’s heart sank in her chest.

“At least... three hundred combatants. Heavy infantry. Horses,” she counted.

“Forty cavalymen. Useless here but useful for roaming at the edge of the deadlands. They have black-mana shielding cloaks,” Irao said with the same detached tone.

The fighters had pitched their tents in orderly rows along the edge of the road. There were earthworks as well.

“They must have been here for a while.”

“No, this is earth magic.”

“They have a caster?”

“Three of them. Much weaker than you.”

That would not help.

The simple tents surrounded a much larger one topped by a white and blue flag displaying an unfamiliar heraldry, but she knew what that army was here for.

Beyond the army camp, there was a much larger, messier one composed of massive carriages drawn by teams of cornadons. A few sentries milled around, wearing no uniforms. It was a civilian camp, and it was at least twice as large as the military one.

They had not come to collect taxes.

“They are here to evict the local folks and replace them with loyalists,” Viv whispered.

“The earth at the edge of the deadlands is very fertile. The dust is filled with nutrients,” Irao said.

The locals were going to be forced out, then they would starve to death in the wilderness. The fields were long-seeded. The granaries stood almost empty.

Even with passing soldiers and the temple guard, there was no stopping that army. Not with three casters who could manipulate earth.

The walls of Kazar were going to fall.

People's houses and belongings would be seized.

They were going to lose the city.

All those folks she had been helping would end up dead. They would fall one by one.

"Maybe..."

"Even if I assassinate the Prince, it will not help. They will still come, but they will come to kill indiscriminately" Irao said.

Viv had meant to use Solfis, but the result was going to be the same. Viv suspected that Irao could slay an emperor, but he could not slay a thousand people. Maybe, just maybe, Solfis could. But Viv would not give the order to kill hundreds of civilians. She was not insane.

"Could we lure savage beasts to them, delay them a bit?" she asked.

"If we had more time. They will reach the city in three days."

The Hadal human studied Viv's downcast expressions for a few seconds.

"I did not notice them before," he finally said, "I am sorry."

"Not your fault."

She thought about it. Mayor Ganimatalo had to be told. They would probably have to evacuate the city with whatever food they could carry. There was no other way.

"We need to head back."

"Not now. You must rest first."

"I cannot rest while this band of legal highwaymen is set to fall upon all of us."

"You must, or you will not be able to withstand the skill. Sleep first."

Viv made a token effort to protest, but exhaustion quickly caught up to her. No matter how good Irao's skill was, she still had to make some effort herself. She found a recess between two roots and placed her head against her backpack. She was out in seconds.