

Viv charged Solfis' battery and left him to his calibrations. The golem was patiently working through the operation of his new makeshift arm knuckle by knuckle, and she had better things to do. She left her room and came out into the courtyard, then into the barracks facing her. The smell hit her immediately. The handful of soldiers there studiously avoided her gaze.

All except one. A short man with a shaved head. He crossed eyes with her for just a second, but in there she saw something that she did not like.

She should not be surprised that Varran would send its more... problematic recruits here. Thankfully, she had her spells and the favor of the leaders. She would still keep her guard up.

The short incident reminded her that humanity had not changed simply because it could create flames from thin air. The caution she had displayed during her previous life would serve her well here.

She turned to the side and into the main dormitory. It was time for her to get her books.

The barracks was the only building with two levels besides the tower. The ground floor was a single room covered in bunks that smelled like a dead skunk. A set of stairs led up and to the knights' individual rooms. There were soldiers resting, all of whom huddled fearfully when she stepped in. She climbed and found Cernit's quarters.

The lieutenant glanced up from his desk with the face of a deer caught in headlights. He blushed and comically straightened himself, looking around to see that he left his knickers on his straw bed.

The place was spartan. Just like everything else here, it was saturated with the overpowering stench of old sweat. The limited water made any cleaning arduous, so she could hardly blame the bashful man. It was just a shocking fact of life that a zombie — sorry, revenant — infested plain smelled better than a fort populated by the living.

Viv made the universal sign of opening a book and the man uttered a few words she did not understand, probably along the line of 'oh right you want my books' or whatever. He opened a drawer and took out three heavy tomes bound in leather. They looked well-worn, but were otherwise in a surprisingly good condition.

Then, he opened the first one and started pointing at things.

She approached and looked at the page. It was, she realized, the first time she saw Varran written down. Fortunately, it appeared that the Old Empire writing system was the same as theirs, so she could read it without issue, although it was difficult to understand. It was a bit like reading a latin language when you already knew another. She could only get the general gist of the story.

Not that it was all that difficult. The book was a bestiary with images of monsters on one side, and detailed explanation on the other.

Cernit stepped back into his desk and she started turning the pages, curious. Some entries included only a very small image and little text. Most concerned what appeared to be small woodland creatures.

The entry for dragons alone took three pages.

She traced the illustration with a finger. It depicted an adult dragon roasting a full contingent of knights at a cavern's entrance. The artist had spared no efforts to make the beast look fearsome. It was surprising to see that the depiction matched the image of a Western dragon to a curious degree. She wondered how that could have happened.

She grabbed the three tomes under her arm and saluted Cernit, who appeared relieved to see her go. Besides the bestiary, there was also a primer on spell recognition and a brief history of the region complete with map. They all looked heavily used, if still in a good state. She supposed that there were not a lot of distractions here.

Solfis was still practicing simple gestures when she returned.

Back in the office, Cernit dismissed his fear. That was ridiculous. The woman clearly followed a path of wild magic mixed with taming, and the beast was a marsh drake. Or something similar. Nobody would be stupid enough to try and tame a dragon. It was a suicidal endeavor that always ended in blood and flames. Dragons were proud creatures with an instinctive understanding of magic and an intelligence that only grew keener as time went on. They would always fight against their bonds and escape in the end. The woman was simply being curious. That was it.

He shook his head and stared at the map before him. All his notes were ready.

It was time to go on the offensive.

Viv was trying to create a ball of black mana.

The energy in her hand was, errr, an ellipsoid. If one was generous. She had already taken the first step which consisted of making it move around itself. Mana was a living thing, even the black one, and it was easier to move it than to make it stay.

She still faced difficulties.

She could feel her conduit most of the time and send tendrils reliably and accurately, but her fine control was still garbage. Even Bzzt looked a bit frayed. The current training aimed at improving that.

“At least, this is fun,” she admitted to herself.

**//The method I teach you was designed to be perceived as a game by the participants.  
//A necessary step when said participants are six years old at the beginning of the training.**

“Yes, you mentioned it before. I like it. And you always vary the tasks as well.”

**//Your training conditions have been assessed as: extremely adversarial, Your Grace.  
//Your commitment has exceeded this unit’s expectations.**

“I told you that there was no magic where I come from, yes? This is not just new to me, it also represents something... unbelievable. I cannot get enough of watching the magic move around. Feel it. And when it flows where I guide it, I feel wonder.”

**//Apologies, Your Grace, this unit cannot empathize.**

“Just imagine that you spend years inside of a basic frame thinking there is nothing else to the world, then someone transfers your core to a powerful frame and now you realize how much more you could be.”

**//Processing.**

**//This unit understands.**

**//Then, you do believe that this world is superior to the previous one, with regard to your own experience?**

Viv realized that she had stepped right into that one.

“This is not about the world, it’s about the people in it. I left everyone behind.”

**//What if you could leave now?**

“What do you mean?”

**//Rewording.**

**//If you could leave now, how many people would you leave behind, your grace?**

**//How many people would die?**

“I... It’s...I would not leave you now. Not until the necromancer is dealt with.”

**//And once it is done, Your Grace, what then?**

**//In your own world, you can make an impact.**

**//You could usher this world into a new era of peace and prosperity.**

**//You can reach the very heights of power and magic mastery.**

**//You certainly have the skill and discipline.**

**//Imagine how much good we could achieve, together.**

“I do not owe the world its salvation, Solfis. You probably also overestimate me.”

**//This unit does not overestimate fleshy beings.**

That was true, but he did not understand them either.

“Even if I could become a powerful caster, I am no politician. I lack the savviness.”

And the poker face. And the patience. And... the list was long, as her father had once noted.

**//You would be amazed how smooth negotiations proceed when the other side knows it can be wiped out.**

**//And you already acquired the intimidation skill.**

**//We are well on schedule for the genocidal maniac skill.**

“There is no such a thing,” Viv grumbled.

Solfis’ words were a venom coursing through her mind. Pride, greed, the lust for power, the desire to change the world for the better and to leave an impact. It called to all of her most basic elements of her human nature. The worst thing was that she knew it and was still tempted. That particular snake understood her only too well.

A knock on the door, and she lost her focus, the black orb dispersing harmlessly.

“Come on in,” she offered.

Cernit entered, dressed in his armor. He carried a rolled parchment under one arm.

“Hello, miss,” he told her in Old Imperial. He looked pleased when she replied, and turned to Solfis for a quick conversation. Viv used the opportunity to remake the ball.

**//Lieutenant Cernit has an intriguing proposal, Your Grace.**

“Do tell.”

**//As you know, we expect the necromancer to come here to destroy the fort, as it has destroyed the other ones.**

**//Cernit proposes to take the offensive and deplete them of resources.**

“He wants to go out and kill revenants?”

**//No, your grace.**

**//Revenants are inconsequential in the siege to come.**

**//The necromancer’s strength will come from special undead, like the gut spiller you slew last night.**

Wow, it had been less than a day. It felt like longer.

**//Lieutenant Cernit has documented the nearby lairs that may harbor special undead.**

**//Slaying them preemptively will deny the necromancer access to easily obtained, valuable assets.**

**//In addition, they will be easier to kill when nobody controls them.**

**//If possible, this unit could use a large ribcage as well.**

**//If you would be so kind as to acquire one.**

“Yeah, that’s a great idea. The killing, I mean. When are we leaving?”

Solfis relayed the question. Cernit seemed a bit taken aback.

**//I believe that he expected more resistance on your part, Your Grace.**

“I don’t have time for this. Though, we cannot take you with us so we should discuss strategy here and now.”

Solfis translated and Cernit left the parchment unrolled on a table, then rushed off to fetch his mates. Viv decided to have a gander.

Cernit’s drawing skills were, well, the less said, the better. She did recognize the fort at the center and several other landmarks. Three of the closest ones had been circled in red.

“I am no detective, but I bet those are the ones he wants to visit.”

**//Your fleshy intellect does you credit, Your Grace.**

She rolled her eyes. Soon, Cernit returned with Jor and Benetti and her bedroom smelled of a locker room again. She winced.

As before, Cernit talked and Solfis translated.

**//The lieutenant proposes to ride to the first village and set up at the top of a small hill.**

“Ride? Only the three of you?” she asked. She had noticed the stable, but she was pretty sure that it did not host eighteen horses.

**//The lieutenant says that the soldiers are here to watch and defend the fort.**

**//Their armors are not enchanted.**

**//Only knights may safely ride out.**

**//Even then, they will suffer from mild poisoning before the end of their shift.**

“Will the three of us suffice to hold back the population of a village?”

Another discussion, during which Benetti also offered an input.

**//He says that they will fight from horseback.**

**//If the pressure becomes too much, You will all ride out.**

**//Their horses can outrun most creatures, at least for a short while.**

“So they bring me close and keep the revenants away as I prioritize the big ones?”

**//Indeed.**

**//Although, if you can, thin the herd as well.**

**//Any revenant you kill now will be one less revenant climbing the walls.**

**//Necromancers always aim for population centers, for efficiency.**

“I understand. I do get tired if I cast too much in quick succession.”

**//I shall relay this information to them.**

**//As well as the effective range and casting time of... ‘Yoink’.**

His voice conveyed mild disapproval. Her spell names sure wouldn’t increase her intimidation skill any time soon.

They spent a few more minutes to learn a few key words like ‘flee’, ‘left’, ‘right’, ‘help’ at Viv’s insistence, then the men left to grab their weapons. They all gathered in the main court, Viv climbed behind Jor once again and then they were off through the fortress gates and into the deadlands.

Back in Viv's room, Solfis turned around when the lock clicked and the door unlocked. The bald man Viv had noticed entered with a wild look, followed by another with dirty blond hair and a large scar on his cheek. The blond man pocketed a lockpick and looked around warily.

"Don't know about that, Hern. Spellcaster business is bad business. I got only one cheek left."

"Relax. We're only looking."

The bald man's filthy meatbag eyes descended on the perfect and glossy surface of Solfis' core. The golem had stopped working on his calibration and started to engrave the next arm, but he stopped when he recognized the presence of intruders.

"So that's the core hey? What do you reckon it could weigh?"

"At least six stones. Maybe more. Would take two strong men to carry over a long distance. Very strong. Power of thirty, at least."

"Not you then, Rayd you twig. I reckon Parek could use the money. We steal the knight armors, one each, and leg it. They cannot follow if they get poisoned."

"Still gotta be a lot of money to risk it."

"It sure is. Those fancy toys always fetch their weight in gold, I tell ya."

**//The question, then, is whether or not you will live to enjoy it.**

The two intruders jump and stare wide-eyed at the glistening perfection. It had addressed them in proper Varran.

"Did it speak?"

**//Yes, 'Hern', this unit spoke to you.**

**//The deadlands will eat you alive.**

**//But even assuming you escape it.**

**//Even assuming you somehow bypass the ones who destroyed Fort Stone.**

**//Even assuming you find a buyer.**

**//This unit will make itself valuable to the buyer.**

**//This unit will wait until it is encased in a mighty frame.**

**//Then, this unit will leave to find a balding man named Hern and a scarred man named Reyd.**

**//This unit never tires, never sleeps, and never stops.**

**//This unit will find you.**

**//This unit will kill you.**

**//In the most painful manner it can figure out.**

**//And it will have ample time to figure it out.**

“Alright, fuck. Calm down you bucket of rust. We’re leaving!”

**//Not so fast, Hern.**

**//You would not leave without a suitable punishment, would you?**

“And you’re going to punish me?” the fleshbag demanded, though Solfis could spot signs of fear.

**//Not me, meat.**

**//Her.**

Hern turned when he heard a screech of rage, but even his dexterity only allowed him to save his eyes. A winged form jumped on him from the separation leading to the bed. Talons dug painfully into his face.

“Aaaaaah get it off! Get it off!”

Rayd had already left, as expected of the wise coward. Hern managed to detach the four claws and maw from his fleshy self and ran through the door, slamming it behind him.

Solfis looked on as Arthur spread her wings and screeched in victory. She licked her chops, fixed the golem with her malevolent crimson eyes, and climbed to her bed. She monched the piece of ear she had successfully glomped and returned to the beatific sleep of the just. The intruder had been defeated. Order had prevailed. It was time for a nap.

Solfis returned to his calibration. He was almost done. Then, the real work could begin.

Viv yawned.

“Yoink,” she breathed half-assedly. The revenant fell back in a pile of ash and bone. Those horses the knights were riding were fucky to be sure, they should have been tired by now. It was



fast, though, much faster than dragging a sled behind her like a smelly husky, not that she was jealous.

Technically, the knights had magical horses. That made them horse girls, which Viv only had a lukewarm opinion of. She, however, had a semi-tamed dragon and a golem. That made her a Pokemon trainer which was much cooler. There were already six balls right next to her, haha. Probably.

You are suffering from mild mana poisoning.

Alright, that meant water treatment when she got back. Her supply was almost exhausted and the effects were fading anyway.

The trip continued for only a few minutes. The plains being flat and boring, she could spot her destination from afar. The town emerged from the sea of dust and sand like so many white bones, the walls flayed by the sands over the centuries. She wondered why any undead creature would want to stay there.

They stopped about fifty meters away from the closest house, facing the main street. It was also, in fact, the only real street. Viv quickly yoinked the surrounding revenants and waited. She hoped that they had a way to attract the closest monster.

Her answer came quickly. Benetti rode ahead alone and removed a rapier-like sword from its sheath on his flank. He clanged his push-blade.

Viv wondered if he was serious.

Revenants slammed into the ground from inside a nearby hovel. A massive arm emerged from inside, quickly followed by the rest of the obese body. She recognized the gut spiller from its strangely horned face.

Benetti swore and rode back, creatures in tow. More of the gut spillers were now after him, as well as a pair of much faster crawlers. They all turned around and left at a trot.

It was now clear that the crawlers were very fast, much faster than the ponderous gut spiller. Their unnatural gait allowed them to move forward at surprising speeds. Viv calmed down and aimed at the first one as soon as it was in range.

“Yoink.”

Her mana flooded a complex channel and withdrew without too much difficulty. The mana was dense in her conduits. Eager. It pushed into her with an intimate pain that made her want to use it. Her next drain spell flew like a snake and robbed the crawler of its strength mid-jump.

Jor pushed the falling body away, some of it disintegrating on his blade.

The trio of cavalymen turned and started to encircle the mass of spillers at the edge of Viv's range. The stupid things walked on each other in their eagerness to reach their juicy targets. The three focused on pushing back nearby revenants while Viv went to work on the special enemies. Each one of her spells found soft tissue and pulled unlife from it. She was regaining more mana than she could consume. Her conduits burned.

In desperation she simply let mana vent from the conduits on her back. Cernit looked back with panic in his eyes. She turned as well.

Two wings of darkness flew from her shoulders like demon regalia.

Intimidation has reached Beginner 5

Neat, but pointless. With less risks of exploding like a balloon, she kept firing at the spillers. An observation nagged at her confidence.

She was slowing down.

She had never had to use so many yinks in such a short time. The repeated spells were easy, but they added up to form a burden on her mind. It was getting more difficult to guide the mana, make it understand what it was supposed to do.

Viv gritted her teeth and endured. A spiller fell. Another. She coughed, suddenly short of breath.

Jor turned to her and said something. Viv could not exactly follow. One last spiller missing a leg clobbered out of the village, smashing aside the crowd of revenant now slowly spilling out of the derelict. Almost there.

Then, there was a screech like a hundred nails on a gritty hardboard. She winced and grabbed her rider, feeling dizzy.

Cernit yelled something and the trio raced away at great speed. Viv coughed again but it felt different this time. She tasted iron on her tongue. Something burned inside of her, even as a dark bird launched up and towards them.

The knights were pushing their mounts as much as possible. The armored horses now moved so fast that Viv felt wind on her face.

Once more, Viv called upon the black mana flowing inside of her, with her frayed mind and her tired will. She dragged on it. She pulled it out of herself piece by piece, feeling like she was

dragging herself up a rope with exhausted muscles. The black mana answered her call. It wanted to be used, but she had trouble guiding it. Molding it. A shadow wrapped over her.

A horrid stench made her gag.

Even through the mask on her face, the dreadful odor made her want to wretch. The spell wavered in her hands.

Jor turned around and his eyes met hers. She saw no hesitation in those brown depths, not a wrinkle on the corners of his strangely greenish skin. His gaze drifted from the tears marring her cheek to the horror approaching with only acceptance. He fluidly jumped on the saddle until he was standing on it, turned around and jumped out, polearm brandished in his muscular arm.

She knew that it would not be enough.

Viv smashed through her pain and confusion, she turned to face the creature at their back and slowed time. It was a gigantic undead bat with rotten skin held taut between skeletal fingers. The tendril caught the thing in the face. It reeled. The distraction gave Jor a moment, which he seized. His crescent blade dug into the beast's chest, then his feet touched the ground.

The beast flayed and fought, held back and blinded by a colossal strength and a colossal will respectively. Meanwhile Viv was fighting.

The thing was immensely powerful. Her mana struggled to fill its deep conduits, it was like trying to push water through a small hose to fill a bathtub. No matter how she forced herself, progress was agonizingly slow.

Focus +1

She was close. So close. The big fucking thing would fall. She was going to kill it.

“Die!” she screamed “yoink!”

A threshold was reached. Her mana reached the point where it occupied more than half of the creature's conduits. Its resistance collapsed.

With one last screech, the beast's resistance stopped.

Power flooded her veins then, it was too much, and she raised her trembling arms to release it. A column of black escaped from her fingers.

She started to slip back.

Benetti and Cernit turned around, the lieutenant holding the reins to her ride. They were staring ahead and did not notice. She feebly grabbed the saddle and pulled herself forward.

Not gonna fall. Not gonna faint like some weakling. Not before those idiots.

Willpower +1

She was at twenty-nine on all mental stats. There were surely some juicy rewards for reaching the threshold. But only for people who could hold on.

She found her balance.

And immediately collapsed forward into darkness.

Viv woke up in her bed feeling strangely warm. There was a heavy weight on her chest. She looked down to investigate and found herself nose-to-maw with two evil scarlet eyes. And a lot of blood.

Arthur's jaws shone crimson...

Viv's first thought was unkind.

'That motherfucking twit finally went and ate my entrails.'

Then, she realized there was far too little red stuff and that she would have gone into shock by now. Being exsanguinated and eaten alive also came with a slew of symptoms that she was mercifully exempt of. It was warm and toasty under the cover.

**//You are awake, Your Grace.**

**//Your condition is stable.**

Arthur spread her wings and stood on her back legs, her front paws clawing the air.

"Squee."

"Thank you for watching over me, Arthur. You did an amazing job."

Viv scratched the dragonling's chest, eliciting a strange sound between a soft roar and a purr. Her task completed, the almost pet slithered away and jumped on her bedrest, which Viv had placed on a table by her bed. She also found a wooden cup filled with water and a small grey pill on a stool within arm's reach.

**//The water and medicine will help with the nausea.**

"What nausea? Ow!"

Should have known better than to invoke that dreaded name.

**//You are suffering from overcasting.**

**//It was a mild case, and your recovery was quite fast.**

**//I would recommend avoiding any strenuous activity until tomorrow.**

**//We will suspend your training until then.**

**//I will still require a charge.**

Mana manipulation reached Beginner 6

Viv swallowed the water and the [mild rejuvenative pill]. She had questions.

"Why does Arthur have blood on her mouth? Did someone feed her meat?"

**//In a manner of speaking, Your Grace.**

**//Someone broke into our room with designs on my person.**

**//I have already notified the relevant authorities.**

Viv stopped for a moment. Snitching on your first day would make the soldiers mistrust her. On the other hand...

"Did one of the intruders happen to be bald?"

**//Yes, Your Grace.**

**//A despicable man by the name Hern.**

**//Arthur marked him.**

"I see."

It was better to be feared than to be dismissed, especially as the lone woman in a camp full of men. She would never be able to make them see her as an ally anyway, not without spending an inordinate amount of time doing so. They did not even share a language. It would take too much time and effort. Being feared was fine in her book. She had no intention of sticking around.

A little voice inside of Viv told her that it was a lie, that showing respect and decency would go a long way. It said that she was still the entitled, privileged princess who had left a rich home behind because she already had an out with the army. It said that, at heart, she was still the arrogant bitch who had enjoyed watching her father humiliate others, who had done so herself.

She crushed that voice.

Fighting for the others was a good start. She did not owe them to try and be friends.

And speaking of helping others.

“Do you know what happened to Jor? Is he still... alive?”

**//Jor was alive when he was brought here.**

**//However, he was wounded by an undead creature.**

**//This usually creates a pocket of foreign black mana that slowly poisons the host.**

**//If untreated, the victim will eventually die and join the ranks of the undead.**

“Hold on, people killed by the undead become undead?”

**//If there is enough of the body left, any dead body tainted by black mana will be reanimated as an undead.**

“You told me that black mana was not evil!”

**//Any excess is dangerous.**

**//Bodies saturated with blue mana will liquefy.**

**//Black mana is simply... significantly more virulent... than the others.**

“Is there any way to help him?”

Solfis remained silent for a spell. Arthur yawned and jumped on the partition separating their bed from the entrance, flapped her wings, and crashed somewhere on the other side. Viv heard claws scraping on stone and a frustrated ‘squee’.

“Hey, since I’m a sort of black mana specialist, any way for me to help with that?”

**//Yes, in fact, you may.**

**//You merely need to pass your hand over the wound and call black mana to you.**

**//It would be a low intensity exercise that could favor mana perception.**

**//Mana perception is vital for a mage.**

“If it is, how come we have never practiced it yet?”

**//Because the world so far has been saturated with black mana and black mana only.  
//It would be easier to teach depth perception in a dark cave.**

“Oh.”

**//Do not worry, Your Grace, we are on schedule with your training.  
//Now, kindly recharge me before you leave.**

Viv stood up and realized that she felt sort of okay now. Her head hurt as if she had spent eight hours on an essay and coffee had run out. She was still physically fit, but her thoughts moved through cotton paddings. It was not too bad.

She approached the table and realized that Solfis had managed to extract two bone cylinders from the head of the dragon’s humerus, and they were now circling the dragon’s stone. His long arm was mechanically cutting patterns on the surface with inhuman precision. He appeared almost done.

She grabbed the plug and charged the golem as he kept working.

“It’s taking shape.”

**//We are indeed on schedule.  
//This unit will require your assistance with charging the main core.  
//It can wait, however.**

She nodded and kept working in silence. Arthur crashed against the ground again.

“She’s learning how to fly.”

**//An astute observation, Your Grace.  
//If you wish, you may leave now  
//I will be able to operate for a few more hours.**

“Alright.”

**//You may want to wash your face before you leave.  
//You have blood around your eyes and lips.  
//A normal consequence of minor overcast.**

“Oh.”

Viv made use of the basin, drank the last of the pure water.

You are no longer suffering from mana poisoning.

“Until next time.”

Viv left Arthur and Solfis to their devices. She caught the attention of a nearby soldier and said ‘hi’ in Varran. He looked a bit scared.

“Jor?” she asked.

The main pointed to a small house attendant to the barracks. She aimed there and winced when she realized that the door was reinforced and the windows had bars on them. She knocked and entered.

The typical tang of blood greeted her as she took in her surroundings. There were two beds and room for one more in the tiny space. Jor was lying in the closest one, expression placid. The muscular man laid on his back in a shirt that revealed an imposing body. Coarse black hair covered him almost entirely. He had gashes on his deltoid, abdominals and quadriceps. Not bleeding, and he did not appear to be in much pain. Benetti was by his side, holding a sort of medal and praying in a soft voice. Three soldiers held their hands over his wounds. They were tainted with black, she saw, and the invasive color was pushed back by the concerted efforts of his attendant, whose hands glowed softly white.

All eyes turned to her when she entered. She met every gaze and nodded politely. Her steps led her to the side of the man who had risked his life to protect her’s without a sliver of hesitation. She held a hand over one of the wounds and closed her eyes.

Another kind of mana.

The Cassian sources had felt like magic too, but it had been different. Transformed. It was more complex than the fundamental truth pulsing under her limb. There was a purity there, made more flagrant by the foreign source assaulting it.

It was barely holding on.

Black mana was extraordinarily deleterious. It was destruction and change while the other was preservation and control. Change fed itself on change, while life was struggling to maintain the status quo. She could not detect will or malice in the wound. It was no more evil than a tsunami. Destructive, yes, but directionless. Blind.

She would guide it out.

Viv settled her breath and plunged into meditation. She could see without eyes. It took some getting used to.



You have gained: mana sense at Beginner 1

Black Hedge Witch (6)

The black was familiar to her, while the life one was foreign. She understood it and felt a kinship with life as a breathing individual herself, but she could simply not latch on it in any way. There was none in her conduits either. Only the endless tides of the black.

She called on them now.

The black below her was directionless. It was not her yet. She slowly, slowly delimited it and started to push her own into the swampy mix. There were some noises outside. They were unimportant.

Piece by piece, she made the black her and pulled it. She soon hit a snag. She could still feel a bit of black, but it was too diffuse. The light had replaced it.

She opened her eyes.

Mana sense: Beginner 2

Intimidation: Beginner 5

Mana manipulation: Beginner 7

Why was there intimidation? Gah.

She inspected the wound. Small pockets of black mana still clung to the edge of a gash in the knight's shoulder, but the worst of the contagion was over and the rest would fade, she knew.

Jor nodded to her and Benetti smiled. The soldiers were more cautious, and would not meet her gaze. She smiled too, and moved to his torso. As she progressed on, the soldiers alternated, fresh men coming every ten minutes or so. Benetti also cast that strange healing thing and Jor's cleaner wounds closed in record time.

The abs laceration turned out to be slightly harder to handle and she left more spots. The one on his leg, she managed to clean almost entirely. She took her time working. Her head still felt tender, but this was not something where power would matter. She had to coax the energy out, not pull it.

Acuity +1

You have reached a milestone! Your ability to cast and maintain several spells at once is significantly increased. Your thought process speed is increased. You will find casting complex spells to be easier.

Wow, several spells at once? More complex spells? Yes, please. She would need to have Solfis guide her.

Viv lifted her gaze from the last gash to find Cernit smiling at her. He gave her another glass of water and a pill which she gulped down greedily. Jor was asleep and the soldiers were gone.

“Thank you,” the officer said in Old Imperial.

“You are welcome.”

The officer smiled, but soon his expression turned sour.

“Mine soldier. Errr. My great fault. House of you.”

He must be talking about the burglar.

“Soldier Hern tortured.”

Errrr tortured?

Benetti laughed when he saw her alarmed expression, and corrected his boss

“Punished.”

“Oh.”

“My great fault,” Cernit continued as he gave her a stiff bow. This was a perfect opportunity to create a favorable working relationship with the man. She turned to Benetti.

“Your soldiers. Your punishment. I am satisfied.”

Benetti found the message simple enough and relayed her words. They all nodded in a very manly way, all formal and honorable and respectful of due process and the chain of command. Viv decided to leave before hair started to grow on her tits. Outside, the day was getting darker.

Hard to believe that she had been dragging her sled this very morning. So much had happened. By all rights, she should be collapsed in her bed right now. Magic was making her body a little bit stronger. Perhaps the stronger warriors could fight for days before collapsing for a few hours and doing it again.

The longer days also messed with her. Even after weeks, she was not used to how stupidly long they were. At least two or three more hours of daylight compared to earth.

Her mind was in shambles. She had to find a relaxing way to spend the early evening. Then, she would read the bestiary or something.

Cernit was relieved. Jor had been saved without using one of their three precious potions. He really wanted to keep those for the siege. Losing one so fast would have been a terrible blow.

Thankfully, the witch had come through again. She had also slain creatures that took squads of trained mercenaries to put down in an open field, and done so in one spell.

It was just a bit terrifying. Even if he knew she was not a good mage. Yet. Her spells were too messy, the edges frayed and the mana bleeding out of the constructs. It reminded him of trainees he had seen practice.

Best he could guess was that the woman had been a civvie until her 'teleportation accident'. Now, she had tossed away her previous, leisurely path and embraced a path that allowed her to cast on the go with minimal training. Her dedication surprised him. Who could be so good at casting, so hard-working, and choose another path until forced to turn to magic? It was unbelievable.

A clamor made him stand up and open his shutters wide. The biting, dry air of the deadlands greeted him.

The small white drake clambered across the inner court, its gait smooth and sinuous despite the large wings on its back. Drakes and all draconids relied on grey mana to help them lift their impressive weight, but their wings were still imposing, even on the youngest specimen.

The tamed monster hopped up the stairs to the wall and stood on the inner edge, waddling weirdly. The sentries gave it a wide berth.

The creature jumped.

It managed to catch wind, though not too well, and smacked into the waiting arms of the fully armored witch. She fell over backward. A second later, she petted the horrid creature, who let out one of its blood-curdling cries. The caster made cooing sounds and the small drake sprinted up the stairs again with eagerness.

This went on for a while.

The show was strangely relaxing. The witch fell on purpose as a way to lessen the impact.

She really was a weird one, and yet, in a way, it gave Cernit hope. No caster he knew of would have willingly saved Jor, a nobody, without some sort of compensation. No royal mage would have risked her life so readily. She was with them. It would take at least that to save them from a necromancer in the deadlands.

Cernit opened his map and pondered his next move.

Viv spent her evening with a book for the first time in two weeks, or maybe more if you counted time the earth way. Cernit had kindly provided her with a magical candle, a sort of rave glowstick that she could charge and be done for a few hours. The light was more than enough for her needs. It was also easier to use than her stone. Reading with that thing required her to always have it in hand with a clear line of view to the text. And that was annoying.

Arthur made a choice just before it was time to sleep. The tiny dragon decided that it was too bloody cold and climbed on the back of her bed with her sleeping bag in her maw. Viv used to have a dog who did that, so it wasn't too weird. Kind of nostalgic, in fact. She managed to steal a few scratches on her companion's smooth, soft scales and then, she was out in seconds.

The in-between.

Two souls manifested from the void. The in-between was a curious place where euclidian notions like distance only had a tenuous grip. Space itself was merely a reference used by entities used to more traditional dimensions. The souls were infinitely far apart, yet in other ways they were quite close. Close enough to communicate.

“How are things on your end?” Maradoc, the God of Secrets, asked.

“Decent enough. I am honor-bound to serve this land’s military for another two years but I already sent some feelers for when I get out. This Viviane Saint-Lys’ resources are amazing. How are things on your end?”

“The throne remains empty. Your wife cannot claim it since you were not defeated or cast out, just as you said.”

“Your sister, you mean?”

“I know what I said.”

There was, for lack of a better term, a pause.

“Just be careful. She will be more destructive when she turns desperate,” Emeric continued.

“I know.”

Another pause.

“Your... replacement. She is still alive.”

“Why wouldn’t she be? I sent her to the concentration of magic that best matched her personality. Priests would know what she is worth with one look.”

“There were no priests, Emeric.”

“What do you mean?”

“You sent her straight to Harrakan. In the imperial palace.”

Another pause.

“Fuuuuuuck I should have guessed it. Dammit! Arg.”

“How did it even happen? Could you not tell that she was black-aligned?”

“There were no signs. She was rich, from a powerful family. No quest for vengeance or anything. I did not know until I searched her memories.”

A pause.

“You know, she chose to be a medic in the army? That’s a healer of sorts. I thought that she was a kind-hearted soul with a care for her fellow people, until I dug deeper. One day, there was a fuckup and the perimeter where the wounded were kept got breached. A wall that fell down. She threw a... sort of fireball in the hall, then walked through and executed four soldiers by shooting them in the head. Calmly, and one by one. And she enjoyed it. She returned to her patient after that as if it was no big deal.”

“I like her already. I don’t see the problem.”

“She is no Halurian warborn, you dunce. Her world is not as warlike as ours, especially not the place she came from. She’s... not kind at heart, although she thinks she should be. It took me a while to understand that.”

“Relax, Emeric. Even if she makes waves, your pursuers will never tie her to you. She is not the only one with a divine spark of luck. Maranor will just think that she’s a lucky inheritor.”

“Yeah. I don’t know why I worry. About her and the world. I think this human shape is messing with me.”

“Perhaps for the best. You have been an insufferable asshole for the past two centuries, so much that I considered siding with your wife.”

“...Thanks Maradoc, you’re a good friend.”

“The best. See you next time.”

“Take care.”

Viv woke up to someone rummaging through her stuff.

“Arthur, no!”

“Squee!”

“Arthur, no. No stealing. You wait. I said no.”

“Squeeeee!”

“I know you are hungry. Now, kindly fuck off.”

**//Good morning, Your Grace.**

“And to you too, Solfis. Need a charge?”

**//Please.**

Viv stood up and tried to stretch but Arthur kept squawking, so she fed her. Then it was time to help Solfis, who had finished the enchantments for the core and part of another arm during the night. She pushed power into the massive core. It felt like trying to inflate a bouncing castle with her mouth.

When she was done, she plugged the now operational power-core with the hose-like cable she had used to charge the emergency batteries. It was impressive how much progress Solfis had managed to make in such a short time.

A short cleaning session later, she came out in search of food like some sort of cavewoman. It was early morning outside. A soldier jumped to his feet when he saw her and ran into the barracks, from which Cernit promptly exited. The tanned soldier looked a bit green around the gills which was his normal state so that was fine. It was just... still strange. It also made her realize that she would look like a stranger around here no matter what she did.

The lieutenant escorted her to the mess hall where soldiers were already dining. They sat at a separate table, soon joined by Benetti. Breakfast was a congee soup with pieces of pickled vegetables and salty meat in it. It tasted simple but nice. It also made her feel warm.

“Today. Go out at battle again?”

“Yes, Cernit. Agreed.”

The man smiled. He was more confident now. His eyes turned to the side and she could almost see the cogs turning in the man’s mind. He had a plan.

They ate quickly, then she went back to her room. She spent a few minutes teaching Arthur basic hygiene rules, charged Solfis while practicing forms, stretched, and then it was time.

The second village was further away, to the north when considering the axis between Fort Stone and Fort Sky. As far as she could tell, they were south of Harrak, so going north meant more concentration of black mana and more powerful undead.

She realized Cernit’s logic. Fort Stone, which had been demolished, lay to the east. He had emptied the village directly between the two forts because it was the closest to the

necromancer. The next one was the most dangerous and also on the way. After that, they would probably go south-east.

It felt weird to return to a more concentrated part of the deadlands. Jor, before her, felt more tense than usual as the empty plains succeeded each other before them. She kept the poisoning at bay by casting regularly.

“Yoink.”

Hey, she had just gained something, hadn't she?

Viv focused and tried to cast two yoinks at once. It failed miserably, but she realized that she could cast one just after the previous one was in the air.

“Yoinkyoinkyoink.”

That was cool, but tiring. She decided to return to her previous, lazy casting.

#### Intimidation: Beginner 7

Aww come on. Magic was not that scary, she thought, while watching tendrils of absolute darkness ripping the energy out of undead abominations and sending them to an ashy demise.

The trip was quick after that.

The next village was built around a bridge over a dry riverbed. The stone was greyer here, but otherwise there was little to differentiate it from the other wind-swept, ash-mired ruin they had previously visited. They used the same technique as before to empty the south side. There was a small moment of panic when four crawlers jumped out after them, but a burst of speed from the horses allowed them to stay ahead for long enough to avoid dismemberment. She had to take a short break afterward.

As before, the powerful black mana coursing through her conduits brought a sweet sort of pain, and she felt them grow clearer. More defined. It was probably a good thing if she could survive the experience.

They made their way back in and killed a crawling gut spiller which was missing a leg. Then, to her surprise, the three dismounted by the village's entrance. Revenants started to converge on them almost immediately.

Benetti and Cernit took out blades while Jor handled a massive axe.



[Magic sword (enchanted): this officer sword is issued to officers in the Varran military if they do not bring their own. It can pierce through magical and mundane defenses alike.]

[Benetti family rapier (enchanted): this family heirloom can only be wielded by the blood of the Benetti. Precise strikes from this weapon are particularly devastating.]

[Heavy infantry shieldbreaker axe: a standard issue weapon of the Varran military. It is particularly heavy. Designed to break shields and shield-lines.]

The three men stood side by side and dispatched the revenants with grim efficiency. Enemies felled by the enchanted swords stopped moving. Those struck by the axe kept squirming a bit, but they could do little since Jor tended to cleave his targets in two.

Viv was certain that they were using skills. She had difficulties following the speed of their movements and there was a small light coming from the blades sometimes.

The purge lasted for a few minutes, after which the men had a pile of dead at their feet. They were all sweating and breathing heavily though, so fighting at this intensity clearly took a toll. She took the liberty of covering them while they dragged all of the dead in a small mound of rotting bodies. Cernit took a sort of brown ingot from one of his saddlebags. He recited a few words and threw it on the pile.

It ignited and fire slowly spread over the dead, some of whom were already twitching. Black smoke soon filled the air.

“We fight,” Cernit declared, looking pleased with himself. Benetti rolled his eyes.

“We go north to fight the dead,” the smarmy man elaborated. It was his turn to look proud.

Jor said nothing.

They climbed back on their mounts and made their way through the now considerably less crowded streets. They made their way to the south end of the bridge.

It was deserted. There were only a few circling birds — normal-sized this time — and revenants milling in the distance.

“Hold,” she said.

They kept going, though they turned to her.

“Hold. Stop.”

They didn’t get it.

She lifted her right fist in a 'wait' gesture. That made them stop, for some reason.

"Trap?"

No reaction.

"Ambush?"

Ah, they got that one. Possibly a military term or something. They looked around warily.

"No. Ambush. Maybe."

Again with the lost looks.

"Maybe. Perhaps. Possibly. Hypothetically."

"Oooh," Benetti answers before she could go through the whole thesaurus. Honestly though, when they were on the bridge, they would be out in the open with no way to go. It was worth their time making sure that their avenue of retreat remained free.

The knights stepped down and started securing the houses nearby. Viv sighed and approached the bridge, having a look down out of habit. You always checked bridges for IEDs and other stuff if there were any doubt. Otherwise, even if the explosion did not kill you, the fall would.

She looked down and stopped time by instinct.

There were two scythe-like jaws closing in around her head.

[Defiled centipede: very dangerous]

FUCK!

It was Viv's soldier reflexes who saved her. Instead of pulling back into the closing circle of chitinous death, she dived low, behind cover. The dreadful blades snapped close with a dreadful clack. She bumped the top of her skull against one in her rush to escape, but the cloak's hood protected her.

"Yoink!"

The tendril shot out with as much strength as she could manage. It slammed against the creature's head like a slap, then she invaded its conduits.

And slammed into... something else.

If she had to compare, it would be like taking a sledgehammer to a wall, only for the wall to collapse at the last moment and the sledgehammer to end in the bollocks of the person behind it. There was a presence in the insectile monster. Or had been. Her torrential power had kicked it out.

With the death of the creature came a concert of ear-splitting screeches. Another centipede rushed up from below the bridge.

“Yoink!”

She missed. It was too small and too fast.

And then Benetti was here. He pierced the creature’s skull with his rapier and jumped back when the centipede tried to disembowel him. She aimed at the base of the body.

This time, the spell flew true. The centipede could move fast, but it moved in a line. The creature fell and she felt flooded with energy again.

On the other side of the bridge, a mass of revenants was charging, led by a large crawler. Viv was ready to offski the fuck away. Cernit had other ideas. The three knights created a battle line in the narrow corridor and Cernit turned towards her, eyes frantic.

“Necromancer!” he screamed, “Necromancer!”

And she finally realized what had happened. Undead were too stupid to lie in ambush in such a coordinated manner, especially revenants.

They were being controlled.

That was the presence she had felt when she had killed the first. The blow must have made the enemy caster lose control.

She was confused, though. Her understanding was that the necromancer was super dangerous and that they would try to hold in the fort? What had changed?

In the two seconds of hesitation that followed, Cernit screamed her name and pointed at the ghoulish, siminan form of the crawler.

“Yoink!”

It fell dead and black mana flooded her conduits.

They were right in a way. This was a perfect chokehold. And they had cleared most of the houses at their back, which meant that they had several avenues of retreat and horses to do so. She focused on the next large creature, a sort of undead bear covered in tattered fur that trampled revenants in its haste to reach them.

[Defiled grizzly]

Ok.

She lifted a finger and the bear stopped in its track.

The bolt was aiming right at its torso.

An alien intelligence shone in the monster's blue orbs. It grabbed a revenant in its paw and threw it like a puppet in the spell's trajectory.

"Alright then, let's see how you juggle," Viv said with a scowl.

The bear fell back, crushing more undead. Its massive form slowed the flow of revenants considerably, so that the three knights moved onto the bridge and started to dispatch the creatures as they came closer. Some of the revenants even fell into the dry riverbed.

Viv sent spell after spell after the retreating titan. It blocked all of them with his freshly improvised personal shield. She aimed for the flanks, the arms, arced one of the projectiles, and cast three spells in quick succession. That one almost worked, but she stopped herself from pushing too hard. She knew that she had to save her strength.

In the meanwhile, her companions were hacking away. They displayed none of their earlier exhaustion, although the flow of undead was manageable.

The bear reached the other side and ran away. Like an open tap, a flood of revenants limped forth into the space it had freed. Viv observed the developing situation with worry. Some of the revenants that had fallen down were climbing up on the other side of the bridge. Cernit noticed as well, and with one word, the combatants started to run. Jor dropped one of the burning bricks on the pile of dead they had already formed. It appeared that no efforts were to be wasted.

They mounted again, and Viv got another surprise. Cernit rode perpendicular to the riverbed until the slope became more manageable. They made their way down.

They were... crossing to engage the necromancer?

"Why?" she asked, surprised.

"Necromancer... army... very small. Good chance." Benetti said.

THAT was small?

Had they taken leave of their senses?

She grumbled, but what could she do? Jump down?

The horses climbed on the opposite side with some difficulty, and only because they found a practical way. They were, again, in the desert. The second half of the village stood to their right in a loose semi-circle, with its surroundings devoid of revenants in a thirty meters radius. Only a few houses remained standing compared to its southern counterpart, which meant less cover.

They approached it at a trot and stopped at the edge of the main road. The streets were deserted.

She easily spotted the eyes of revenants shining in the dark. One of them had a blue coloration.

“Yoink.”

The light faded as the spell flew, but the revenant still died. Then another, then another. Viv methodically killed those she could spot through broken doors, shattered windows, and crumbling walls. She spaced the spells enough to hit that sweet spot where her exhaustion would only progress slowly.

Then it happened. The necromancer released their hold on their horde and revenants emerged from every nook and cranny. Cernit immediately turned them around and rode completely out of town.

She could not follow his strategy.

He and Benetti exchanged a few quick words, then turned right. They rode to the other side of the half village, having the dry river to their right. Viv finally understood what the crafty lieutenant had been looking for.

A group was leaving the village, using the unleashed horde to keep Viv's group busy. She saw a few wolf-like creatures with reptilian faces, a gut spiller and the massive bear upon which a thin human form clad in black rags rode. Armored revenants trailed behind them, slower than the larger undead. The escaping group was regrouping as they came in view.

Viv glanced up. Two birds were circling above them. The necromancer had kept a visual on them the entire time.

Whelp, it was too late anyway.

As the knights charged in, she realized that they might have a chance. The necromancer's control was messy. Erratic. She could spot the moment where individual undead stopped trying to eat them and returned to formation, only for their control to fray again. Now, how to exploit that?

She had a fairly good idea.

The three riders skirted the back of the formation, now firmly in the open. She could see the last armored revenants pull back one by one. Each creature turned its head away as it was receiving orders. She waited, aimed, and...

"Yoink!"

Her spell latched into the last creature, one with a dented shield and furs, as the enemy spellcaster was still inside. She smacked their presence aside with prejudice and moved herself back afterward.

"Haha!" she exclaimed triumphantly as the horde faltered. Her allies used the opportunity to crash through the ranks of the armored revenants, cutting them down as they milled aimlessly. She did not let the opportunity go to waste.

"Yoink!"

Her spell hit the bear and a struggle began as she attempted to overwhelm its conduits.

And failed.

The mana there was concentrated, and much more potent than anything else she had felt before. A presence was feeding the creature power opposite her. It was the other caster. They were...

They were weak.

She felt the other person's resistance, or presence, buckle under her timid assault. They would break very soon...

But the spell snapped and she withdrew. She was too far.

Viv frowned. The bear was still standing.

The three made another pass. This time, they rode opposite the diminished mass of armored revenants. She took aim at the bear once more, and was propelled to the side.

Jor had turned around and pushed her to the side. The spell went wide.

A moment later, claws lacerated her right shoulder. Cernit yelled an order and they pulled out. Jor was maneuvering with one hand and pushing away a furious undead bird with the other.

[Defiled hawk.]

The necromancer had used his spies as fucking dive bombers.

Viv reacted immediately.

“Yoink.”

The spell exited her back and speared the creature. It disintegrated. She turned around and saw two more flying down. Towards her.

And behind her, a gurgle gave her an ominous warning.

“Nope shield!”

Gut spiller vomit splashed harmlessly against her hastily erected defenses. She gritted her teeth against the pain in her wound and the rapid drain of her resources.

Jor’s axe struck something behind, and she turned to see Cernit cut down the last flyer. They were out.

She grit her teeth. The pain was not too bad, but there was something there as well, the same feverish sensation she associated with mana poisoning, only more virulent.

She closed her eyes and focused on her shoulder. The invasive mana...

It was disappearing. Or rather, it was drained into her conduits and transformed into her own. This would probably lead to her getting poisoned again. She preferred that to fantasy necrosis or mana sepsis or whatever it was called that could turn her into one of the walking dead.

Cernit had them stop at a short distance away from their foe. He turned to her.

She rolled her shoulder, then winced. It would be fine so long as the adrenaline kept flowing. The necromancer was not idle either. They raised two bandaged arms and the armored revenants fell to the ground, twitching. Then, a strange mania animated the surviving beasts. Their orbits shone blue and their movements turned jerky. They moved faster. They were charging!

Cernit seemed to ponder the situation for one second. The necromancer still had the bear, some of those strange dogs with snake heads it had not used, and the one gut spiller.

The officer snapped an order, and Viv was suddenly lifted from the saddle and placed on the ground as if she were but a small child. The lieutenant addressed her.

“Good luck.”

The three knights closed rank.

“FOR Baran. FOR THE KING!”

And they charged.

Like a bunch of fucking meatheads.

Viv spat and cursed, then followed at a run. What were those idiots even thinking? She was not legging it back alone through a horde of revenants! Those fuckwits better not die.

The trio crashed into the pile of monsters with heroic determination. She heard a great commotion but could not quite process who was winning. One of the horses neighed piteously.

The three knights were alive and... whacking. She had trouble following their fast swordwork. For one second, she thought they might win, but then the bear broke through. One horse was dead before it hit the ground, Benetti rolling lightly from his thrashing mount. Jor was pushed aside but managed to remain astride. Cernit and his horse fell down, though he managed to slash the creature's jaw away before it could fasten around his head.

Benetti decapitated a snake dog as he ran back. Jor fought two others. The necromancer lifted a hand towards Cernit who was still reeling from the bear's attack. They were getting overwhelmed.

“NOPE SHIELD!”

Viv's black umbrella deployed between the bear and his prey. A massive paw swiped the air through the shield's obscured membrane, making Viv hiss but missing the knight. She maintained it as another paw attacked it.

Her left foot found the horse's body and she jumped up, using strength boost and slowing her perception of time.

The shield fell as she was casting her next spell.

The bear failed to detect her presence, but the necromancer looked up and... his eyes widened. He was... a child. No, a dirty, malnourished teen under a mask of grime, and tatters of isolating fabric.



It was too late anyway.

Her body smashed against his, and her knife found his chest again, and again, and again. She stabbed him until they fell from the creature. She stabbed until the thin body smacked the ground under her, until no strange magic or high endurance could possibly save his life.

Cernit rolled away and stared, aghast, as the witch launched herself at the necromancer and stabbed him with the cold rage of a Halurian warborn. They disappeared behind the rampaging bear and he made himself scarce.

No one could save her now.

He grabbed his gelding by the harness and dragged him back. The poor beast was at the limit of his strength. Jor joined him soon while Benetti sauntered forth, unharmed despite his fall.

They stared at the melee.

And then, as a dark figure crawled out between two snarling scalehounds. She stood up, brushed dust from her armor and jogged in their direction. It was the witch. She had a weird black fabric covering her armor as part of some spell, no doubt. She was still alive. And the undead ignored her.

He knew that the creatures would not stay confused for long. An attack would come. He pressed onward and helped her up, while Jor recovered Benetti. They ran away.

Meanwhile, Viv was processing.

Finesse +1

Her shoulder was lancing, though that wasn't too bad yet. The two horses carried the four humans to the edge of the village, behind a collapsed barn, but no further. Cernit's horse stumbled and fell. She was saved by the knight as he jumped down and dragged her before she could get trapped beneath the beast. The sudden pull tore a muffled scream out of her.

"Sorry," the lieutenant said.

She could see blood under the horse's torn leather harness. She raised a hand to try and help, but Cernit pushed it down.

“No. Benetti, Jor.”

Both knights' expressions were grim. Benetti was the first she chose to help. He had one long gash across his chest. She peeled off the armor and placed her hand before the wound. The exterior world faded. She had to trust them to hold the line while she worked at saving lives. There were no choppers to load the wounded on in this grim world, but they had magic and it was just as good. She just had to keep them alive. Stable. Instead of an op table and a surgeon, they would have that bullshit life mana. God, how much she would have given to get that back on earth. Twitch your fucking fingers and the wounds close. Maybe even mend shattered vertebrae. And would that not be fucking grand.

She was not ok.

Viv focused harder. The black mana answered her anger with worrying eagerness. It pulled from the wound like a gel, taking blood and skin with it. Benetti mewled in pain.

When it was done, a globule of black and red hovered above her hand. She let it drop.

Benetti's breath was hard and fast. He was pale, with tears down his face. Cernit was whispering something. There was a pathetic neigh, then the sound of metal on flesh. The lieutenant barked an order and the sharp knight grabbed a vial from one of his pouches. He downed half of it and spread the rest over his chest.

It was as if the wound was washed away, to be replaced by pinkish skin.

Viv had never seen such bullshit before.

Shaking her head, she turned to ministrator Jor who had taken the initiative to peel off the armor where he was hurt the most. A small gash on his forearm was cured in moments, but the one on his thigh was mangled and raw. It took her a little bit longer.

Viv pulled back, pale and exhausted. Running on fumes, this time. Not a good idea. But had to keep going.

One last person.

Cernit had his back to her. He was bleeding from the side, where the bear had marked him. Speaking of which.

She heard a sniffing sound at the edge of the crumbling wall they were hiding behind.

Viv stood and stepped forward. Her arms would not raise for some reason. That was fine. The black mana escaped from the captain's flank as she passed him by. He turned to her with an expression of surprise. She grabbed that little ball and made it grow larger. She fed it with her

own depleted power until she was wrenched like a twisted rag and there was nothing left to give. It hovered before her, impatient. A real attack hound, that one.

The bear's ugly mug passed the corner.

Her spell connected to it. It bore through its conduit with ravenous hunger, seeking the power she had lost, consuming all. It broke through everything with such might that black fumaroles breached through the beast's withered skin. The bear exploded in a torrent of ash.

Focus +1

You have reached a milestone! You have gained the ability to overcharge your spells. Your ability to concentrate is vastly improved. Your ability to recall past memories in greater details is vastly improved. You may now cast more powerful spells.

Intimidation: Beginner 8

Mana manipulation: Beginner 8

She turned to Cernit, who was gaping at the carcass like a fucking moron. Trying to catch flies in his mouth or something.

“Just make sure you grab the ribcage. He needs it. Got it? Ribcage. Riiiiibcaaaaaage.”  
When she was done, she nodded once to herself and slowly toppled forward.

Black Hedge Witch (7)

Viv woke up in her bed all warm and dehydrated, with a solid weight curled around her chest.

“Better not make a fucking habit out of it,” she grumbled.

**//Good afternoon, Your Grace.**

“Squee!”

“Hullo everyone. Gh. Head hurts.”

Arthur peeled herself off from Viv's chest and received a scratch on her chest scale for her trouble. Viv luxuriated in the warm sensation while the dragonette spread her wings and held her head high, proud as hell for the worship. Viv managed to reach the side of the creature's neck with a light touch. The scales were warm and smooth and, come on, it was a fucking dragon.

Arthur squawked and retreated to her perch, the separation, which creaked under her increasing weight. She took flight and there was a crash on the other side of the room.

Meanwhile, Viv realized that she felt the rash fabric of her cover on her skin. A brief inspection revealed that the skin suit had been dragged down to her waist, and her shoulder bandaged. That could only mean one thing.

*"Putain de merde. Someone saw my tits."*

**//As a matter of fact, two people had a glance at your chest, Your Grace.**

"Dammit."

**//A soldier by the name of Korad, who has the largest life mana attunement of the camp and is in charge of healing.**

**//And Jor, who held you up and then carried you here.**

"Hold on. How do you know all of this?"

**//Cernit came by and explained everything while standing at the door.**

**//He seemed worried about your reaction.**

**//He also heaped praise upon you for saving their lives.**

**//I requested that he swear allegiance to you as repayment, but he claimed he already had a previous engagement.**

Viv stood up and summarily washed herself with water from her basin. Her shoulder was still painful.

"Does not feel fully healed to me."

**//The good lieutenant mentioned that your body resisted healing.**

**//I was afraid that it might be the case.**

"That's bad."

**//You should be receptive to alchemical healing, Your Grace.**

“Oh, yes, they had potions.”

**//Did they, now?**

**//You should ask for one, Your Grace.**

**//But not for this wound. It would be a waste.**

**//We might need the potion later.**

“Maybe I should ask, yeah,” she agreed. Now dressed, she left her sleeping space and saw a large ribcage by the golem.

“Oh, they listened.”

**//This belonged to a powerful undead beast.**

**//Or, to be precise, it was powerful according to your current, lowly standards.**

**//I shall make good use of it.**

“I thought you already had everything you needed, by the way?” she asked with a bit of suspicion.

**//Indeed.**

**//The ribcage will save me a lot of time.**

“Not that we need it now,” she remarked, “the necromancer is dead. I killed him myself.”

She was pretty sure that he was dead. If that kid, no, if her foe could come back from such a serious case of sieve chest, he could start his own religion.

**//This unit estimates that there is a 67% chance that the necromancer you killed was not responsible for the fall of Fort Stone.**

Viv choked on the glass of water and pill she was draining with the enthusiasm of the severely hungover.

“How do you figure?”

**//As mentioned, Cernit made a full account of the encounter to me.**

**//From the safety of the entrance.**

**//Since Arthur chased them away after they placed you on the bed.**

**//And was hissing and threatening to take flight.**

“Aw. Good dragon.”

**//The necromancer should have had a great many revenants with him.**

Viv stopped to consider.

“Perhaps he left them to search for powerful undead in the village?”

**//No, necromancers have no need for that.**

**//The size of their horde can increase to stupefying amounts with little effort on their part.**

**//As revenants will simply follow the pack without prompt.**

**//However, revenants without impetus, those ‘left behind’, will tend to spread out over time.**

**//A horde left for several days without supervision must be gathered again.**

**//It would be more impractical to split up to move faster.**

**//It would also be safer to stay with the horde.**

**//Therefore, there could be another threat.**

“I guess we shall see.”

**//Yes, Your Grace.**

**//In the meanwhile, this unit requires charging of the main power source, please.**

Viv sighed and complied. The process of charging exhausted her mana but not her mind. She was out rather fast, however, having not entirely recovered from her ordeal.

“I think it’s taking more and more time for me to have a full charge of mana, if you know what I mean.”

**//Yes, that is correct.**

**//But not an urgent issue.**

**//As long as we are in the fallout zone, you can simply step out of the isolation zone and drain black mana from the very air.**

“And get poisoned.”

**//I am sorry, Your Grace.**

**//I am going for efficiency.**

**//For your own sake.**

“Yes, yes, I get it. I’m out of juice and I’m hungry. I’m out of there.”

**//You should take a moment to rest, in any case.**

**//We can continue your education tonight.**

Viv stepped out of her room and made her way to the mess, bleary-eyed. It was deserted at that time, but someone had left cold bread and warm water around to eat. She dug in.

Cernit knocked on the door and joined her a moment later. He was walking slowly and favoring his right leg, but seemed otherwise fine. Benetti and Jor came soon afterward. She narrowed her eyes at the taller soldier who studiously ignored her.

She did not have an issue with nudity when medical professionals were concerned. She did not have an issue with nudity with her fellow female soldiers. The knights were different. They were... other. Not her group.

Viv realized that she was biased. The three knights and all their soldiers had joined the list of outsiders in her mind and it was probably too late to change her own view. Racism perhaps played a role. They had greenish skin for fuck sake. And different traits. And a different tongue. Foreigners, although to be fair she was the foreigner. And they were suicidal morons who had left her behind in their suicidal charge as if she would have stood a chance alone and without a horse had they failed.

No matter the cause, they pissed her off. She had saved them because... because they were on her side and she was supposed to be the medic. Fucking meatheads.

Cernit must have felt something because his hopeful smile fell down. He took something from his back. It was, she realized, an overcoat made of black-shielded material.

“Thank you,” he articulated.

She accepted the gift with a nod. How could she express how annoyed she was? Perhaps this was normal behavior for them.

Yes. Now that she thought about it, it made sense for the knights to risk their lives on a gambit rather than choose the path of caution and regret it later. They were called knights, not mercenaries. She had to expect some sort of honor-based chivalry from them.

She would complain, but a less chivalrous group might have tried to take advantage of her and those clearly didn't. You lose some you win some.

In front of her, Cernit was searching her expression with worry. He was so desperately transparent that she found it amusing. Any of her father's allies or foes would eat him alive. Benetti broke the silence.

“Is Bob... Princess Bob... irate?”

The term he chose was part inappropriate. It sounded like it would be written “meleus”, and was reserved for official proclamations. More specifically, war. The incongruity of the word brought a small smile to her lips. Here she was, in the middle of a shitty fort on planet fuck you, sulking because her comrades-in-arm were behaving exactly the way they were supposed to, while

they were discussing is some long-dead language that magic had imprinted directly into her brain. Was it really worth getting pissed off over?

She shook her head.

“No, I am not irate.”

“Sad?”

“No. Just. Please do not leave me behind.”

That was the crux of the problem. If they were to fight side by side, they should not drop her and fuck off, even if it was supposedly to protect her. They should have counted on her to take the enemy caster down instead of charging forward like retards.

“Sorry,” Cernit told her, “and thank you.”

“You saved our lives,” Benetti continued. Jor nodded, face as expressive as a brick.

“We promise. No leave behind.”

They all conferred and repeated their oath.

“No leaving behind.”

Though they may never achieve friendship, they had achieved respect.

After that very moving moment, the trio looked at each other and the wall with mounting embarrassment until Viv shooed them away. She finished her meal and decided that she would accomplish exactly fuckall magic-related. She was also tired. This place had no internet, however, and that made down-time a thumb-twiddling nightmare. Might as well help Arthur.

She regained her room and scolded the little monster for clawing one of her sleeping bags apart, for some reason. That was annoying, but perhaps she was bored? The dragonette was soon dragged outside for some landing exercise, squealing with delight. After a dozen crashes, she started to get the hang of it. After half an hour, she could stay in the air for a few seconds.

After ten more minutes, the beast was washed and needed a break. Viv retired to her tower. It really sounded nicer than it was.



She leafed through the monster compendium again and tried another book, The history of the region escaped her, but the way to recognize magic had a hidden treasure trove of information: it contained runes. Written runes.

“Solfis, I think we hit the skysteel vein. Look at that!”

The war golem was working relentlessly on his new ribcage. He did not pause.

**//Indeed, Your Grace.**

**//I did not expect the book to have the runes actually written down.**

**//It will accelerate your learning.**

Solfis was right. Viv dug in with eagerness, devouring the instructions with a little translation help from the golem. Her mind latched on the symbols on its own, and she finally came to a realization.

“I can focus better.”

**//That is correct, Your Grace.**

**//The higher your mental score, the easier performing mental tasks will be.**

“Does that mean that I am... smarter than before?”

The golem had no eye, and no face, and it still managed to convey condescension through a second of silence.

**//Is thinking faster and for a longer time the same as intelligence, Your Grace?**

“I believe that you are enjoying putting down organics far too much, Solfis.”

**//This unit admits to a certain bias against fleshbags, present company excluded.**

Arthur squealed weakly from her napping spot.

**//This unit does not extend the exception to your pet.**

**//Returning to the main statement.**

**//On the other hand, you have come across fleshbags yourself, Your Grace.**

“You are too harsh.”

He did not answer. She had to admit that there was a gap between memory, processing speed and focus on one hand, and intelligence on the other. She had a memory of an IT specialist working for her dad's political platform. He was an uncontested genius in his field. He was also convinced that the opposing party was secretly headed by a cabal of freemasons aiming to start

the third world war, and that her father was out to stop them. She and her parents had repeatedly made fun of him behind his back. Damien, her brother, had not. He pitied the man. Her father kept him around because he was cheap and easy to order.

She returned her attention to the book. Any increase in ability was welcome, she just had to remind herself that it did not equate being more competent. She still had to work at that.

The runes flowed into her memory as if latched on. They were magical in nature, each carrying a concept. It was... a universal language. Exhausting universal language. Even just visualizing one drained her focus.

Viv closed the book a bit later. She was now a bit disappointed. Her book's purpose was to allow a soldier to identify the most common spells, enchantments, and traps, with the explicit purpose of surviving them. It was not designed to teach the runes or give general examples of classical combinations. Solfis also declined to teach her.

**//You must rest now, Your Grace.**

**//You have pushed yourself too far for too long.**

**//This unit must also dedicate itself to finishing its frame.**

**//Having me by your side will significantly improve our chances of survival.**

**//This unit would advise thinking about the symbols and how to merge them into spells.**

“Ok, but are there not, I don't know, tried and trusted combinations I could use?”

**//This unit has many such combinations.**

**//Unfortunately, most of them require the use of other mana colors.**

**//At your level of skill, that is.**

**//I can only suggest you to experiment, as witches have a more... organic approach to learning.**

**//You have already demonstrated creativity with the yoink spell.**

Viv mulled this over, then stood up to scream no at Arthur, who was checking if books were edible.

“Damn it, why is she nibbling everything? There are teeth marks on every piece of furniture.”

**//Unknown.**

Perhaps she was being too cloistered? Viv would try to walk the dragonette more often. She just hoped the little terror would not attack anyone.

Shortly after, Viv realized that she was exhausted and laid in her bed. Arthur grabbed one of her covers in her maw and huddled by her feet. It was nice.

The night was dark. There were no stars and no city light to offer any source of illumination. Her mad dash southward had left her exhausted almost every night. It was the first time that there were no clearly identified threat on her life since, well, since she arrived in this land. Nyil, the interface had informed her. The necromancer was dead. Her poisoning level was low. She was among allies in her own room.

It was silent too. With nature deadened, the only thing to disturb her rest was the soft hum of Solfis' engraver as it delicately carved through dragon bone. Loneliness reared its ugly head. Back on earth, Viv had had many acquaintances but few friends. Those who she had clicked with on a fundamental level numbered few, and she had kept their bonds alive with jealous care throughout the years. She missed them terribly now, especially her online friends. She missed Fraise's boundless optimism and Gevaudan's sharp wit. She missed her brother. And Mouq. At least, they were safe back on earth. She had to believe that.

Arthur crawled up between her legs. The warmth the little monster emanated was simply staggering.

That was nice as well.

Viv fell asleep.

Her Grace, the magnificent and stupendous Princess Bob, woke up to a pair of needy assholes. Arthur was fed with one hand and Solfis charged with the other. The golem wanted his core as loaded as possible in preparation for a possible confrontation as his combat mode apparently consumed a lot of energy. Arthur just wanted to grow. Probably.

At least her shoulder was fine. A quick inspection showed that the wound she could see was already close, if still a bit red. That was nice. The skinsuit looked like it was repairing itself as well.

Viv made another discovery while cleaning the litter. The soldiers had dug a small garden between the latrines and the walls and were growing vegetables. It stunk to high heaven, but it was alive and green. The presence of life was almost enough to bring a tear to her eye after so many days spent crossing landscapes of grey, black, and ochre.

She joined the knights for breakfast.

Conversation flowed more smoothly between herself and Benetti. For some reason, his Old Imperial had grown more polished in record time, and it made a world of difference. With the sleek knight as interpreter, she managed to keep the conversation alive with Cernit as well. Jor only answered in grunts and monosyllabic words.

The first question she had, Benetti volunteered. Knights were tasked with patrolling the deadlands, as the sole owners of mounts, as well as the still-expensive mana-blocker armors. However, only Jor's horse had survived the encounter of the day before and patrols were a mandatory three, for safety. They would not get out anymore.

Then came the time-honored tradition of the oral resume, where one lists their achievements in one minute to a group of people they just met, hoping to pass muster. Viv decided to go for honest yet vague. She was the daughter of a political figure, but had started working for the army until the fateful accident that teleported her so far away from her home.

The immediate reaction from Cernit was to ask her why she had not studied magic before. Apparently, her beginner status was clear to all. Casting was so useful that no one in their right mind would neglect their gifts.

She deflected the question by telling them that magic was restricted where she lived, which was technically true.

The knights introduced themselves in turn. First, Benetti stood and bowed, using a sarcastic voice and exaggerated motion to carry his message.

"Ir Leias Benetti, previously heir to the Benetti title."

The man had been banished from his family after an unspecified event left him disgraced. He did not share, and Viv did not pry. He had left with his family blade as a reminder of his lost past, and joined the Baran army where his path and training led him to the role of knight. None of the three had met before being 'volunteered' to the deadlands, but as far as she could tell, it was not usually that dangerous an assignment.

Cernit was next. The solid lieutenant passed heavy hands through his salt and pepper hair, trying to see if his eager subordinate stuck to the script. Benetti introduced him as the last child of a minor noble family, practically just peasants and hunters themselves. He had risen through the ranks through skill and dedication, and had been promoted after one of Baran's many skirmishes with its numerous neighbours. His sword was a gift from the kingdom for years of effective service.

As for Jor, Benetti had little to say, as it was notoriously difficult to pry information from the laconical man. They only knew that he had been promoted from the heavy infantry after a heroic act, and that he was the son of some village's headsman.

The introductions done, Viv tried to understand them a little more and they were only too happy to oblige.

“We are knights not because of our path, but because we swore allegiance to the king, his majesty, Erezak the Third,” Benetti explains with limited excitement.

“Also path must ride,” Cernit added.

“What he means is that our path must include mounted combat.”

“How do they know if your path includes mounted combat?” Viv asked.

“We fight on horseback,” Benetti replied with a laugh. “If no path, then obvious as nose in middle of face!”

“Like you is tamer,” Cernit said.

Huh?

“Knights are very strong. Backbone of army. But three knights are not the same.”

“We do not have our heavier armor.”

“And no captain for better charges.”

Viv imagined that some path would be more of a support role, empowering the other soldiers. A magical power multiplier. She wondered what it meant for the conduct of warfare on Nyil. That, and people lobbing huge spells around. Spells should definitely be a game changer.

“So, once you are a knight, then what?”

They looked at each other with some confusion.

“We stay knights until we die. Serve Baran.”

She must have made a face, because Benetti explained more with a laugh.

“We have homes and families, of course. We can become higher. If we have strong path!”

Ah yes, people here stayed sturdy and healthy until they were very old. She had to remember that if someone looked like a grandpa and still wore heavy armor, he could probably punch her head off.

She only managed to ask a few more questions before the knights had to leave to attend their duties. Apparently, losing horses was a big deal, and so was killing a necromancer. Even the tired soldiers displayed signs of merriment. That meant that they only looked slightly less brain-dead than usual.

Viv had her first free day.

First order of business: magic. She returned to her room and practiced for twenty minutes before realizing that she was out of juice.

“Solfis, why does it feel like I am out of mana?”

**//You are out of mana.**

“Fine. Then why am I out of mana?”

**//You have stayed inside the fort, where black mana is minimal.**

**//Therefore, you did not fill your conduits and core.**

“Are you saying that in order to be able to cast, I need to expose myself?”

**//Using... ‘Yoink’ would also work when the target is strong enough.**

**//Otherwise, only moderately so, Your Grace.**

**//At least until you learn how to draw energy in your core from a normal environment.**

**//This unit estimates that you have a 91% chance of avoiding long-term damage by charging outside.**

“That’s kind of bad.”

**//It is a much higher success rate than your... other endeavors.**

“Like survival?”

**//Perhaps.**

Dammit.

Viv went outside and sat herself on the crenelations facing east, where Fort Sky used to be. She could feel the thicker mana here like feverish pinpricks against her skin. Her presence also meant that this part of the wall was no longer patrolled.

She spent her morning alternating between training there, training back in her room, and playing with Arthur. It was hard work and casting was amusing, but she was getting bored. Even adding a physical training routine to the mix failed to distract her.

Like that, she spent five days, with the knights getting closer in the work acquaintance sort of way. Her experience begged terrible questions, one she had not anticipated at all.

How could one grow so fucking bored in a magical world with dragons?

In fact, how could taking care of said dragons be reduced to cleaning shit and preventing her room's furniture from being reduced to saliva-soaked kindling?

How could said dragons manage to use the very wind instinctively to stay afloat while her own powers were limited to stinky undead disposal and looking edgy?

Why did heroic knights shared the look and fragrance of hobos?

Why did the ENTIRE FUCKING FORT SMELL LIKE SHIT ALL THE FUCKING TIME JESUS IT WAS PESTILENTIAL.

Thus mulling her dire circumstances and the inevitable heat death of the universe while glaring dreamily towards the east, Viv was in a prime spot to see something change in the dreary grey world of the deadlands.

"What the fuck is that?"

'That' was a black spot, an undulating mark far on the horizon. It was barely larger than a gnat for now, but she thought it might not stay that way.

She jumped down to fetch Cernit, and when the officer spotted the spot, so to speak, his expression grew grim.

Nothing happened that night and when she returned on the morrow, the spot had grown. It was still only a distant mark by then. Cernit brought out a brass tube that looked suspiciously like a telescope and handed it to her. She grabbed the contraption, brought it to her eye and saw only darkness.

Cernit helped her remove the cap and pointed at the mana intake.

The dot was a horde.

Now, she had seen masses of people at political events before. Such gatherings often gained a life of their own. Each individual might be vastly different from one group to another, but when the mob started to march, physics replaced intellect and instinct replaced empathy. The mass approaching them was different still.

A dark circle of larger forms moved forward with purpose, attracting a bevy of reventants that glutted its surface, then they themselves were shed at the edge to eventually join the trail of the comet-shaped herd. The slower specimens were slowly shed by the advancing mass as it moved on. It was also aiming right at them.

She did not need Solfis to tell her the score. There was another necromancer. And they were heading right this way.

“Fuck.”

Viv handed the telescope back to Cernit who inspected the incoming force again.

In Viv’s mind a thought occurred. There was one horse left. She knew how to ride. She could be gone before they were surrounded.

She dismissed the thought before it could completely form. Pride held her back. Pride, and greed. She could not leave without Solfis and she would be at a severe disadvantage without him. His knowledge of paths and magic was too good to pass.

They would face the horde and hold it back. She hoped. The walls and soldiers should make a difference.

Cernit was done with his inspection. He turned around and left her alone on the battlements. A moment later, the fire on top of the tower was lit and a great black plume rose into the still air. The gesture was as solemn as it was pointless. No one would come to relieve them. Even the knights knew it.

Viv sat over the edge and extended a hand. A ball slowly formed until it was mostly circular.

Mana manipulation: Beginner 9

She would need all the edge she could get.

Days went on, slow and anxiolytic. There was little to do except train and occasionally take care of Arthur. Even the small dragon felt the change in the air, looking out to the approaching mass between bouts of flying practice. She and the others were suffering from cabin fever and the stress of an imminent attack at the same time. She only managed to buy them some respite by playing fourth in a card game Cernit had introduced. Even then, tensions were running high.

Hern, the bald man, had made a reappearance. His face still bore the traces of Arthur’s attack on his scarred face, and she surmised that he spread rumors behind her back, for the soldiers grew distant again. Even the medic.

On the dawn of the tenth day, the horde arrived. And it was not a moment too soon.



Fort Sky stood on top of a small circular mound, with a single road snaking its way up to the fortified entrance. The walls and cliff on every other side were sheer and vertiginous, and so Cernit concentrated most of his forces forward where, Viv supposed, most of the action would take place.

From up close, the horde was a fascinating phenomenon. A circular concentration of gut spillers, crawlers and beasts held the center, while a ring of fresher revenants surrounded it on all sides with gaunt, caped figures placed at regular intervals. Around those, the milling rabble orbitated like an ocean of moaning flesh and rotten bones. Viv could not spot a single human being in that unholy mess.

Cernit had a last look from the top of the battlements, then he gathered everyone but a few lookouts in the inner courtyard. He gave her the place of honor at his right side.

They were a sorry lot. Barely a dozen soldiers and three knights, two magic weapons or three if you included her dagger. Their only source of fire took ages to work and doubled as cooking implement. If Cernit shared her thoughts, he betrayed none of it. His voice sounded throughout the open space with grim determination.

“Defenders of Baran, we are facing the gravest ordeal of our life. You know what stands outside and you know what they can do, what they will do, if they leave the deadlands. We have fulfilled our sacred duty in warning the royal army. Now, we will fulfill the other one: to stand and fight in the name of our king!” Benetti translated.

The soldiers were already standing straighter. Viv was a little bit impressed.

“Do not falter and do not shy. Protect your brothers-in-arms. Watch each other’s backs. It may be that we all fall today, but we will certainly take as many of them as we can with us. And if there is one chance for us to win, and for some of us to see our families again, I promise you that I will find it. Now, to the walls! Let none pass! For Baran!” he finished.

“For the King!” the small crowd bellowed.

Aw, it was like all those heroic movies where they all die at the end.

Fuck.

Viv shadowed Cernit as he climbed back up and settled down to wait with many people praying to one deity or the other. They did not have to do so for very long.

The core halted three hundred meters away and the horde continued on its course through sheer inertia. Hundreds upon hundreds of forms walked up the road at an irritatingly sedate pace. Viv thought they should be faster. Instead, they stumbled their way forth like piss-drunk cretins. Deadly piss-drunk cretins. It was infuriating.

By her side, Benetti forgot their size difference before the intimidating spectacle. He leaned to the side and whispered into her side boob.

“Wait for big one. No spell.”

“Yeah yeah.”

She had heard him the first four times.

It took another five minutes for the first body to bump against the wall, then another came close and climbed the first one. They stumbled. More and more bodies piled up as more revenants arrived to form a line of flesh ramps. On the wall, the silence was complete.

The first revenant ladder reached half the size of the wall. As more bodies piled up, it teetered to the side. Then, a portion slid to the side and over the edge of the road. The rain of bodies led to a chain reaction that sent over fifty revenant tumbling onto the plain below, including the tallest mound.

They ended up in a squirming pile. Cernit made a gesture and a few soldiers dropped their fire-starting bricks on top of the pile. Like that, at least half of those would be destroyed before they could untangle themselves.

Viv had never seen such display of incompetence.

“Necromancer early on their path. Cannot control so many. But countless dead, much power. Such are the deadlands,” Benetti whispered.

It would be a fucking disgrace to be killed by a buffoon like that. She got what Solfis said about necromancy being an inferior path, in the long term. It was small comfort now that she was in the magical equivalent of a zombie apocalypse.

“How do people kill necromancers? Normally,” she asked.

“Heavy cavalry charge. Otherwise, same as all casters. You send another caster or you send assassins. Maybe a very good archer,” Benetti casually replied.

“Do we have any of those?” she asked, already guessing the answer as Benetti looked up into her eyes. A fatalistic bend tainted his smile.

“We have you.”

Viv looked out towards the sea of dead. Solfis was almost done with his frame and claimed it would solve all her problems. She suddenly had doubts about their success. What could one creature achieve against so many?

Then, she remembered that she was in a world of magic. And that Solfis was hundreds of years old and now built from dragon bone. Surely, that counted for something.

The dead started to pile again.

In the silence that followed, Viv recognized the 'hurry up and wait' aspect she had grown accustomed to in the army. Some operations went on for hours, but most of the firefights she had been on had lasted mere minutes. The battle had started fifteen minutes before. Her side had yet to move a muscle.

Eventually, the first rotten hand grabbed the edge of the first stone and a soldier moved. With economic motion, he used the crescent polearm to push the creature back as it tried to go over. It fell, to be replaced by more.

Three of the soldiers focused on that specific breach. They alternated strikes and rested in-between in a slow dance that minimized the energy spending. A new ramp eventually reached the wall and three more soldiers stepped up to block it. Cernit gave the order, and a few more flaming bricks were thrown over the wall.

And revenants grabbed them.

Viv watched with interest as select individuals took the incandescent objects in their dessicated hands, pulled them to their chest, and jumped off the road to a fiery demise. She could not see the blue glint indicating direct control, but she did not have to. The necromancer wanted the way in kept clear and they would not burn through the horde with impunity.

The foes kept coming. Viv kept waiting. The three knights were around her, on protection detail. It felt weird being part of a fire team again, so to speak. They also clearly knew what they were doing.

The battle reached a weird stalemate. She was... she had never been part of something so bizarre. Like a discount zombie apocalypse. Except, she was in the movie this time. A hand around her throat and her neck would shatter.

Up and down and forth and back the blades went. Both sides of the crescent were sharpened. Sometimes, a revenant managed to grab a polearm. When that happened, the soldier twisted the weapon and brought it back with a harvest of severed digits. They were well-trained.

The rising stench made Viv nauseous through her mask.

It went on for fucking hours.

Eventually, it happened. All the soldiers present were engaged when the necromancer made his move. Crawlers and a few of the cloaked figures with weird tentacles detached themselves from the core and made their way up the road. Their movements were jerky and weird, even more so than usual. They lacked their usual disturbing grace. It felt to Viv as if some invisible hand had been shoved up their asses to use them as sock puppet. She inspected the new type of foe.

[Puppeteer: a dangerous kind of undead. It connects its appendages to revenants and uses them as shock troops. Connected revenants have their abilities improved.]

Improved was putting it mildly. The creatures latched on the nearest specimens and the connected revenants went from shuffle to predatory stalk in a heartbeat. Crawlers opened the path, climbing the wall of flesh with their strange, simian gait. They were a second away from the edge. She could see the necromancer's mind in the blue shine of empty orbits.

"Now," Cernit spoke.

"Yoink!"

Her first, overcharged attack smashed into the first crawler and slapped away the presence there, thrashing it as much as she could. The beast fell and the others faltered, cut off from the one who had needed them on.

Viv let go.

Her high acuity allowed her to throw several 'yoink' spells in such quick succession that she had sent a new one before the last had pulled back. Her black spears landed on every crawler first, turning them into piles of bones. The puppeteers were next and they died with high-pitched shrieks. Black mana sung through her conduits, as thick and syrupy as melted chocolate. It was a good kind of pain.

Cernit gave an order and all the soldiers grabbed a brick from their belt to send the ignited projectiles over the wall. Columns of smoke started to emerge here and there where flesh was the driest and densest. She knew that they would keep burning for hours.

She kept casting. The necromancer tried to regain control of the few special dead left, only to be blasted away a second time.

In less than fifteen seconds, a dozen high-value undead had been wiped out and the offensive had stuttered to a halt. The three knights moved on, hacking and slashing at the closest undead until the ramps collapsed into a mess of intertwined flesh. Smoke soon obscured the view of the valley below.

“What is happening?” a soldier with a scar on his chin asked.

“Silence,” Cernit answered, frowning. He was peering forward as well.

Cernit asked something of Benetti and the knight smiled and extended his hand. A gentle breeze soon rose, pushing away the ashes.

Below them, the revenants were trickling away. The day was won, but the battle had just begun and they had already revealed their ace.

Nothing much happened during the next hour, so Viv stepped down and returned to her tower. Arthur was so agitated that she actively sought pampering, which was rare. Viv sat on her bed and petted the small dragon’s back and neck, marveling once more on how smooth and warm the scales were.

**//Your Grace, if you have enough energy...**

“Ah, yes, you are right.”

Viv had recovered from the very mild mana poisoning she had gained over her several outings, but it would be unwise to get a fever so early in the battle. She stood before the golem’s exposed core to empty her overtaxed conduits.

Solfis had changed considerably since they arrived here. His days and nights of ceaseless labor now bore impressive fruits. The core was clad in a protective layer of folded bear ribs, with the bones broken and fused again until they took the appearance of banded armor. Small openings allowed her and him temporary access to vital compartments until they were sealed shut again. He also had fully formed legs and arms made of dragon wings. They were crossed over his chest now so that his form could remain compact, but she could tell that he would be immensely tall. Taller than the tallest human she had come across. It would be a lean and sinuous and alien build, she could tell. His humanoid appearance was already... unsettling.

“How are we looking?”

**//My core is approaching 8% maximal charge.**

**//It will allow me several minutes of operation at full battle potential.**

**//It might be enough.**

**//However, a higher charge will give me more options and reduce our chances of failure.**

“Hmm.”

She placed her black-clad hand against the core and unleashed her power in. It gulped her mana with endless thirst. Sometimes, it felt like filling the Danaides' barrel: as if the bottom was pierced and her task was pointless and endless. Only Solfis' assurance pushed her doubts away.

The bones shone when she began. Solfis' body was the expected ivory color, except for innumerable runes covering its surface. They were written in tiny scripts with exquisite care and the unfailing precision of their owner's machine mind. It was a tiresome and systematic task. It suited Solfis well.

She finished, and the ribcage closed with nary a noise. The dense lattice looked unnaturally sturdy. Creepy as fuck too.

She glanced up and into a pair of empty orbits.

Solfis had selected the skull of the massive gut spiller she had killed in that tower, what felt like ages ago. It was strangely humanoid except for a pair of thick horns pointing upward and slightly inward. He was now in the process of engraving it with more care and attention than any other part. A large and complex glyph already covered part of its brow.

The runes and horns gave him a devilish countenance that she was not entirely comfortable with. His appearance was too close to that of an undead for comfort.

**//Does my appearance... upset you, Your Grace?**

"A little bit. I know that you are still you, do not worry."

**//This unit gives you credit for overcoming your instinct, Your Grace.**

**//However, this unit would recommend that, in the future, you relied on them.**

**//Not for me, of course.**

**//This unit is yours for all of eternity.**

"All of it?"

**//Well, until you die, Your Grace.**

**//An unfortunate consequence of your own failing fleshiness.**

**//But fret not, we will accomplish much before it happens.**

"I appreciate your trust. Looking outside, I kind of think you might be overconfident."

**//There is always a margin for error, Your Grace.**

**//But this unit always goes for the winning move.**

**//And the winning move, right now, is you.**

**//Hold the line, and you and I will live.**

Viv nodded and returned to Arthur's worried form. What Solfis just said suddenly hit her.

"What do you mean, you and I? What about the others?"

The golem's answer was immediate and unsettling.

**//They do not matter.**

**//They will never matter to me.**

"What if I want them to matter? We fight side by side. I do not know the customs of Harrak, but where I am from it meant something.

**//Your survival is a hard-coded directive that I cannot knowingly circumvent.**

**//If their demise means your survival, this unit will not hesitate.**

**//This unit will never hesitate.**

"Look, I would prefer if your plans included the survival of our allies from now on."

**//Their presence improves our odds.**

**//Therefore they do, Your Grace.**

**//As long as yours is guaranteed.**

**//Consider what will happen to them should you fall.**

**//Because your allies already realized it.**

He was right. If she fell, there would be no one left to stop the horde. The three knights had struggled against a handful of dangerous targets, and there were dozens still out there.

"I'll just have to be careful."

Viv returned to her bed and settled for a quick nap, with her armor still on. She woke up half an hour later to no specific change. The courtyard outside was empty but Jor was standing guard by her door. He turned around when he heard her.

"Food," he said, pointing at the mess hall. The cook was on the wall with the rest, but there were platters of jerky and other stuff that could be eaten cold. She sat alone and loaded up. Jor followed her and kept a silent vigil. When she was done, she climbed up.

On top of the wall, the soldiers were sitting down in clumps, resting and talking in low voices. Visibility had not improved much, however.

"They are waiting," Benetti said.

"Waiting?"

The sharp knight pointed at the tower above her room, where a sentry sat at all times.

“No movement,” he explained, “for now.”

“They will attack again, though.”

“Yes. Necromancer early on their path. Cannot stay out of contained camp for too long, or mana poisoning. Time is not on their side.”

“Hmm.”

She sat down for a while, but Cernit soon sent her back to her room.

“You must rest now. After, no time to rest,” he said. Already, some of the soldiers had gone down and others had returned with covers. The air was still cold, for now, and the smouldering pyre before them did little to change that. Seeing that she had nothing better to do, she headed back.

Once more, the situation was strange. The world was magic, she was trapped with knights and a dragon inside of a fort besieged by the undead, and it was just stressful boredom.

Viv sat down on her bed with Arthur placing her tail on her lap, and meditated.

It was probably the best use of her time.

She started by remembering all the runes she had seen from the book. Many of them related to traps and triggers. She suspected that there were other runes that were part of such spells, and were not listed there. She had some ideas about the rest, however. She started by visualizing one by one, and then some of them together. Every time, the strain on her mind grew considerably, but she thought she could perhaps use two or three runes at the same time without fainting.

That was another aspect of magic affecting her. She could keep in her mind more complex constructs than ever before. It was like looking at a dense blueprint, and then being able to visualize it in its entirety, with all the tiny details. She was sure that her neurons had not suddenly multiplied or something, therefore, magic was helping her process stuff better and faster. How did it work? She had no idea.

The hours went by. She only stopped to rest, feed Arthur, and check on the walls. The situation had not changed. It was back to waiting.



Night fell. The wall became illuminated by mana stones carried by soldiers, shining the same pale hue as military-grade spotlights, though not with the same intensity. They revealed nothing but corpses.

With nothing better to do, Viv went to sleep in full armor.

Her sleep was light and fitful, packed with nightmares. In one, she killed the necromancer only for his face to be Damien's, her brother. In another, she was surrounded on all sides by undead and her spells failed to kill them. No matter how fast she ran, there were more and more of them harrying them until they surrounded her and—

She woke up with a jolt. Arthur was stomping on her, wings tense. Her white head swivelled from side to side.

Viv did not hesitate. She jumped out and rushed out.

**//Be careful, Your Grace.**

**//No matter what, you cannot fall.**

“I know!”

She slammed the door to the inner structure open, then went through the one that led out. It only opened partway. There was a body on the ground. The body swore and jumped up, revealing the worried face of Benetti.

“What?”

“I don't know!” she spat. She moved to the center and stood around, inspecting the inner walls, the buildings. There was still nothing.

A sentry screamed then fell silent.

Benetti bellowed something but Viv did not care. A soldier's corpse fell from the wall opposite the main undead army. The fuckers must have climbed from the other side.

A crawler made its way to the stair in sinuous movements. It was a bit too far so Viv overcharged her spell.

“YOINK!”

The mighty dark bolt caught the creature on the flank and turned it to ash. There had been no passenger. The necromancer must have put them in position, then released his hold. That could only mean...

Cernit whistled and the noise of hundreds of stomping feet came from the main gate. She had to hurry.

Benetti grabbed her brusquely and pointed somewhere above the barracks. She cast immediately, and released the spell as a form jumped from the roof. It caught the creature in the neck. A pile of ashy bones crumbled on the floor a few meters away from her.

“Worst way to wake up pretty woman,” Benetti lamented. Viv could think of a few, but she appreciated the man’s efforts to be casual. They went back to back, slowly making their way to the main wall where battle was raging.

Another crawler topped the wall behind them, and Viv waited for it to grow closer before killing it.

A noise to the side distracted her, a terrible crunch. A corpse had crashed from the tower’s top.

“Shit.”

A crawler slammed on the courtyard’s dry surface an instant later. It jumped at her.

Viv slowed her time perception. She overcharged a first yoink and unleashed it at the beast coming from the side, before turning her attention to the tower one. Benetti was already rotating to meet the attack head on.

With a deafening ‘Skree!’, Arthur charged the beast from the side, managing to abort its assault. The crawler still managed to roll on itself and throw the dragon off mid-lunge. It landed on all four and attacked again, only to receive a yoink in its face.

Viv ran to the small dragonette. She let out a sigh of relief when her little monster climbed back to its feet and shook her head. She was unharmed.

The crawler’s speed and power came as one more reminder of how powerful those undead really were. Only her bullshit spell allowed her to survive.

Vic thought that, shit, she should have locked the door. Now the small dragon was out and there was nothing she could do about it. For starters, Arthur was probably stronger than her.

She shook her head and refocused on the battle. Benetti was already rushing up the front wall where the battle was the fiercest. She followed and started throwing spells as soon as she tipped the wall.

The battlements were heavily contested. Three crawlers had managed to get on and they were held at bay by trios of soldiers, who managed to push them away through concerted efforts and the use of pole arms. It gave the revenants free reign to climb up.

Her first spell took a crawler on the side, turning it to ash before it could even fall. As soon as she did so, the other two disengaged. They jumped back into the darkness below.

Viv checked for priority targets and found none. What she had was a fuckton of revenants.

It was enough.

The necromancer did not have to risk any more valuable elite. It had achieved its goal. The perimeter was breached.

Unless she could do something about it.

The area directly next to the stair was empty, for now. Jor guarded it with calm determination. Viv knew this was going to hurt like a bitch, just as she knew that she would do it. She would succeed.

“Yoink.”

“Yoink.”

“Yoink.”

The stupid shortcut sounded through the deafening din of battle. One revenant fell, then another, then another. Every second, a black ray would rob one of its unnatural life and add it back to the hedge witch’s reserves. Slowly, the pressure lessened on Jor until he could repulse the revenants climbing the wall. She turned to the next beleaguered group that Benetti had joined and kept at it.

“Yoink.”

Viv fell into the zone, the strange state of mind that she had experienced on earth and that meditative trance had elevated to new levels. For one moment, she worried about her uncovered back. It almost broke her concentration. With the return of sensation came a realization, however. There was a tail wrapped around her chest, and a weight on her shoulder. She was safe.

And they were not.

Spell after spell after spell without stopping, until her mana inevitably turned low, until wariness, then pain, replaced the elation of magic. Her speed slowed down. Her arm wavered. Still, she persevered. The horde was ground to dust piece by piece, creature by creature. Viv skirted the edge of agony, then of consciousness. It was not desperation that kept her going.

It was pride.

The revenants were the necromancer's pawns and the soldiers hers in a match for survival. She would not capitulate to someone who used botched shortcuts to power. Not after being trained by the best of the best, in the person of a fucking fantasy AI. No. She refused. Either they would show an absolutely amazing display of skill and intellect, or they would die. Their window was short. They just did not know it yet.

She looked for her next target and found none.

The trance broke.

Someone was keeping her upright, while Arthur was sitting to the side in silent vigil. The stone battlement beneath her had disappeared in a sea of calf-high ash. The pale light of mana stones showed a world of blood, dust, and grime. The scent of burned flesh was thick in the air with large, sooty clouds rising up beyond the glare of illumination and into the abyss of the night sky. She vaguely thought that it should be dawn. It was still night.

Pain came. It was a new kind that burnt from within.

Pain Tolerance: Intermediate 8

Willpower +1

You have reached a milestone! Your ability to focus for extended periods of time is vastly improved. Your ability to recover mana and mental fatigue is vastly improved. You recover from deep exhaustion much faster. You can keep casting low level spells even when exhausted.

Black Hedge Witch (8)

It did not help, not enough. She dry heaved and tried to collapse, in vain. The one who had grabbed her shoulder would not let her fall. Everything hurt. Everything burnt. She wanted to faint. It would not come.

Someone placed a flask against her dry lips and a sweet liquid dropped down her throat.

It was the best thing she had ever tasted.

It was her favorite cold drink on a hot summer day. It was perfect mulled wine on the night of the winter solstice. It was... perfect.

Warmth spread through her. She let out a gasping breath and let the darkness take her.

Someone shook Viv awake, and she wondered if it deserved the death penalty.

“Mdrglg.”

“Sorry, Bob. Necromancers is here.”

“Fuck!”

It was dawn. She was in a cleared area of the wall, and wrapped in several layers of blankets. Arthur was currently hanging from Cernit’s arm guard, teeth dug deep into its surface. The lieutenant calmly stood up and the small dragon fell back down with an annoyed squeak upon her chest where she had been resting.

She disentangled herself and jumped to her feet. The pale light shone on a field of death the likes of which she had never seen. From the walls to the ramp, a solid mass of carbonized corpses formed a hellish slope garnered with bony protrusion. The soldiers lined the wall in loose order. They had had casualties. She turned and saw five forms lying horizontal in the courtyard, the remains covered with tarps.

She turned her attention outward and searched for the necromancer. Two gut spillers and two puppeteers creating a protective wall of revenants were making their way up the road at a leisurely pace. She could vaguely see the outline of a pair of feet behind the imposing mass of undead.

“Bet you’re regretting not having a bow,” she complained in a low voice.

“We will be sure to ask for one with the next resupply,” came Benetti’s mocking voice. The banter made a few men smile. The rest remained tense.

Their foe stopped at the bottom of the ramp, a good thirty meters away from the edge of the wall and far from her optimal range. She saw a brief flash of white from behind the gut spillers and they parted, finally revealing her foe.

[Adept necromancer, noble, deposed ruler, extremely dangerous]

She expected a bald man with destroyed teeth, the male equivalent of the Disney evil witch. She saw a handsome man with kind dark eyes and a lopsided grin, made irregular by the burn scar straining his left cheek. She could not see much else from that distance.

“Hello? Ah, it works,” a smooth voice came, as if through a loudspeaker.

Another language. This one she could understand rather easily. It was like old imperial with only minor variations. It was possibly to follow if she focused and he spoke slowly, which he did. A bit like heavily accented québécois if one spoke French. Or Scottish if one spoke English.

“You never know with colorless magic. But I digress. You will forgive me for not revealing my name. I cannot take any risk before I complete my task.”

He kept silent for a few moments after that. Cernit did not reply. The kind officer bristled with outrage and barely contained disgust.

“How you must hate me for what I have become. I wish things had been different. Every evil I have committed for an ultimate good has only led to another evil. Now I must see it to the end or it will have been all in vain. I can live with anything but that.”

Another pause.

“If it is any comfort, you are the last fort I shall destroy. I cannot have you warn them of my movement, you see? If they expect me, I might fail. But I digress yet again. It’s this Jarna-cursed poisoning.”

His voice was powerful and rhythmical, carried to her by magic as if he stood at a polite distance instead of down the wall. It drew her in. It also drew the others as they stood there with rapt attention, eager to know what he would say next.

“I did not come here to say that I was sorry, although I am. I came here to ask which one of you killed my son.”

The raw pain in the man’s voice stole her breath. It must have provoked a reaction in her allies too, because the Necromancer’s gaze pierced her with laser-like intensity. All warmth left her chest.

“So it was you. The mysterious witch. No need to deny it, I was a noble before I was a necromancer. Discerning the truth is a necessary skill for us. The paths we follow never withdraw their gifts, even when we stray.”

The necromancer took one shaky breath. He would look almost vulnerable were it not for the horrors by his side.

"I know we deserve death. I just hoped that I would die before him. No parent should outlive their child, you see."

She linked the man's angular face to that of the teenager she had killed.

Aaah shit.

"I cannot really blame you. Just know that I hate you nonetheless. I am too far gone to deny myself one last hypocrisy."

He looked away then, and when he next spoke, there was steel in his voice.

"Whoever kills her can go free. I swear it on my soul."

"Merde."

Viv looked around but nobody moved. Cernit soon made a vibrant oath, quivering with rage. He was the only one to meet her eyes. He gave her a nod and she knew at this moment that he would rather die a hundred times than betray her. Jor and Benetti soon joined him with the later one speaking in Old Imperial.

"He who would betray king, country, and life itself, will have to contend with us. We will make it our priority to slay him."

The necromancer turned back with one last, bitter chuckle.

The soldiers remained silent, eyes front. The medic who had helped her with Jor stole a glance in her direction for a quick smile. The cook nodded at her too. Most of the surviving soldiers seemed unimpressed by the necromancer's promise.

The strange man had regained the ranks of the abominations he now led. She wondered what had pushed him to do so, to fall so low as to use monsters against humans for some obscure goal. It seemed taboo in a world where creatures were mankind's greatest threat. It probably was.

She shook her head. It did not matter why. It mattered that he did, and that it was far too late for him to redeem himself. She would have to kill him.

"I want to check on Solfis," she told Benetti. Cernit nodded, but frowned afterward.

"Never alone. Benetti, protect."

"Yes, lieutenant. Benetti, protect," the disgraced gentleman repeated in a slightly condescending voice. Cernit rolled his eyes but let it go and she was soon heading down the stairs with

dragonette in tow. Benetti's expression fell to sadness when they passed by the deceased. She looked at him.

"They do not deserve this. They do not deserve to be here. Only I do."

"Benetti?" she asked, suddenly worried. He gave her a disarming smile. It felt strange to see his foreign traits and greenish skin so full of emotion. His humanity transcended the differences between them. Viv did not like that at all. She did not want to feel too much of anything right now.

"I here because I did bad things to women. With stupid friends. Only, last woman was someone important. She threw her pain at my head during the trial and my eyes were opened. I deserve to be punished. I deserve to be here. Others do not. We save them together, yes?"

"Yes, Benetti. We save them together."

"Then, maybe, I am Ir Leias Benetti again. Worthy of my name."

She was not sure what to think of that. It seemed important to him, that name, and her opinion as well. She decided to say something because he was clearly expecting it and leaving him hanging would be awkward. Thoughtful words cost her nothing.

"You already act like Ir Leias Benetti."

Some weight was lifted from his tired face.

"Yes, I act like that. First act, then be. Yes?"

That she could wholeheartedly agree. The shared moment made her smile.

"First act then be."

They arrived at the tower, its doors left open.

Arthur squeaked and categorically refused to step close. She tried to bribe the small creature with food. Nothing worked.

"Squee!"

"It wants fight," Benetti observed.

Or she did not want to die cooped up in a death trap. In any case, Viv decided to let it go. The little monster was smart, perhaps smart enough to make her own decision. She could not spare the strength.



Solfis was inside, working on its head. The gut spiller's two horns were now fully engraved.

"How is it going?" she asked.

**//The frame is almost ready.**

**//I only need another hour.**

**//I had to expedite a few systems that will not interfere with normal operation.**

**//I can still tweak them later.**

**//How are things outside? Your condition was briefly concerning.**

"Not too bad. I think I killed all his crawlers but two. He still has his heavier creatures, but they need to force the gate open to go through. Only his puppeteers remain a major threat."

**//Good.**

**//Remember, once I am ready, I will be able to dispose of the enemy caster with great alacrity.**

**//Then his horde will disperse.**

**//There is not enough vitality inside of the fort to attract more than a few creatures at a time.**

**//Take no risks.**

"I won't. Take any stupid risks, I mean."

Her worry calmed, she closed the door behind her and walked out. Benetti was studiously avoiding looking at Arthur, who was planted three meters away from him in a pouncing position.

"Arthur, no bullying the knights please."

"Squee!"

"It seems... very protective of you," Benetti observed.

"Yes, she can be a handful. Come on, let's go to the walls."

Benetti exchanged one last glare with the ferocious overgrown lizard and followed after. They climbed swiftly and found everyone's attention focused south.

A few days before, God that felt like a fucking eternity ago, they had cleaned a village to the north. And now, the southern one was coming to greet them. Another wave of undead flesh was making its merry way to them. It centered around its own core of special undead.

"What the fuck. Is that normal?"

“There has not been a group of necromancers working in concert for decades...” Benetti mumbled by her side.

For one precious moment, she hoped that the two would collide and fight. Of course, they merged peacefully.

“Double fuck.”

Without pause, the elites formed a battle line and walked forth, revenants screening them under the control of puppeteers. Larger revenants climbed on the back and shoulders of gut spillers and other weird animals, including disturbing insectoid things. They had abandoned all attempts at tactics that she could see. They were just going to brute force it.

And it would work.

Cernit barked an order and the soldiers on the side moved away from the edge of the wall until they formed a half circle. There were only ten of them. They would not hold shit. Not for long.

“Do what you can. We hold here. Keep path open,” Cernit told her.

“He means the stairs. We keep the stairs clear then make a run for the tower.”

“Tower, yes. I hope Solfis good.”

She sure as hell hoped so, too.

The mass made good time until they arrived at the base of the flesh slope. The first revenants quickly collapsed as ash and brittle bones gave under their collective weight. The charge turned into an upward slog. The flesh ramp had turned into an obstacle.

Viv raised a hand. She took a deep breath.

Yoink was an absolutely bullshit powerful spell that was so cheated it would kill anyone but herself. It would not suffice here. She had to go beyond bullshit cheating. She had to go for full rule-mangling retardation.

She called to her mind the twisted spiral of the ‘pierce’ rune, the base of the yoink spell. This time, she added the ‘overcome’ rune. Two colliding flat planes appeared before her. The rune looked like someone had punched through a flimsy wall.

She lurched, but did not give in. Her improved ability to cast and multitask showed its worth now, allowing her to visualize the two at the same time. Her vision still turned blurry from the effort. She overcharged the beam and unleashed it.

A bolt of sheer darkness tore through the air. It slammed into a front revenant, which glowed black.

Then another glowed black.

Then the entire row glowed black until the puppeteer shrieked horribly.

They all exploded into black ash at the same moment.

“MASS YOINK!”

Hahaha, that was amazing! It worked! The pride of success gave her a glimmer of hope as the new ash only served to further slow down the assault.

She took three seconds to breathe, then cast again.

“Mass yoink! Hehe.”

Black mana returned to her. It was as much as she had spent throwing the mighty spell, perhaps even more. Once again, her stamina would determine success. She breathed deeply, and prepared to fight.

More creatures made their way up. Viv managed to catch the second necromancer off guard and knock... her control out of whack, if only briefly. Or at least she thought it was ‘her’ control. The aura felt... womanly, somehow. With the puppeteers briefly tumbling, she threw a few quick yoinks to crawlers flanking their position.

A chill ran up her back, and she turned just in time to shield her eyes. A massive dead hawk was descending upon her. She briefly saw the glint of sharpened talons.

“Squee!”

Arthur sprung up and intercepted the flier in a shower of dried feathers. There were others coming.

You have gained: danger sense at Beginner 1.

Black Hedge Witch (9)

“Up!” she warned. Cernit stepped into the middle of their formation and started to take the birds down. He was doing weird movements where his blade seemed to extend. Between him and the squealing terror, they took down assailants as fast as they could swoop down. The survivors soon disengaged.

Viv returned her attention to the front and downed another line of puppeteers. They were half-way up the ramp. Then, they would need to climb a few meters up the wall which would slow them down. She had time to fire a few other shots, and she did. She alternated one tiring mass-yoink with a few smaller yoinks. By then, her mind was already numbed by effort. She had not recovered from her excess of last night. A few minutes of effort later, the first bound revenants crested the ramparts.

Viv thought that they would be pushed back relatively easily like last time. She was quite surprised when the creatures threw themselves at the soldiers with fury, using cunning maneuvers and sacrifice to overwhelm the line. They lost a man when a revenant managed to drag him out of the formation.

The Baranese still fought on.

With grim resolve, the soldiers pushed back the onslaught, supporting each other however they could. Cernit was everywhere, slicing and slashing with deadly efficiency. Jor took by himself the forward quarter of the formation, with each swing of his mighty axe sending bones and dry flesh tumbling on the ground. Benetti was down on the courtyard, dashing to kill the revenants that fell there before they could stand up and attack their rear. They fought on for what felt like hours but could not have been more than minutes. Viv was reduced to using yoink to try and recover her strength, well protected in the center with Arthur at her feet.

Their medic died next with a rusty sword through the neck. The circle became smaller once more.

“Back!” Cernit bellowed, “back!”

That she understood.

Still in formation, they retreated to the stairs. The first soldiers took a few steps down, stabbing at revenant legs above to lessen the pressure on the others.

“Now...”

Cernit’s command was interrupted when the entire wall shuddered. Revenants and humans alike stumbled.

Viv did not stumble. She was hoisted up.

The motion surprised her so much that she did not try to fight it. Someone had lifted her up her feet. Arthur squealed.

The man who had grabbed her jumped forward. In less than a second, they were over the wall and falling down into an army of undead.

Fuck.

Fuckfuckfuckfucketyfuck.

She twisted on herself and threw her elbow back, using the power effect to increase the strength of the blow. There was a sound of breaking bones and the knife aimed at her back slid along her armored flank. The two smashed into ash and bone and she rolled to her feet.

She recognized the man before her. He was bald, with lacerations covering most of his face. He held a dagger with some red along its blade. His face was twisted with malice, and from his broken nose dripped two crimson trails.

The burgler. The fucking burgler.

Terror constricted her chest as she realized, briefly, how utterly and unbelievably fucked she was.

An instant later, even before she could stand down completely, a massive armor formed landed on the traitor.

She briefly recoiled when blood covered her face, as a massive vertical swing of war axe absolutely pulped her attacker from head to waist. Again, before she could react, she was caught by the collar.

Jor had come. He must have jumped immediately after her.

The powerful knight lifted her and their eyes met briefly. He was calm. That's all she could think about.

"No leave behind," he told her placidly.

Then he tossed her in the air.

Viv flapped her legs and arms without effect. Briefly, her body twisted so that she could see below. Jor was still standing. Their eyes met again. There was an acceptance in their dark depth that stole her breath. He gave a brief nod.

A giant scorpion crashed against him and killed him on the spot.

“No!”

She reached the apex of her flight. Someone caught her leg and pulled her back in.

Cernit was there, face grim and stoic. The soldiers had pushed forward to give him a second. Another man lay dead on the ground, his throat bitten off. His unblinking gaze went up.

“Come on,” the lieutenant told her, not unkindly.

“No.”

The circle of men was pressed on all sides by ravenous undead, whose ferocity was forced by puppeteers hiding behind walls of expandable flesh. She was furious. This was all bullshit. She did not want anyone to die for her, not like this. Not because some fucking asshole had decided to betray mankind on some obscure personal crusade. That shit would not stand. She was done. She was fucking done. They wanted magic? They wanted power? She would show them some fucking power.

The black mana in her core burst like a dam. It roared through her conduits and thoughts in a torrent that begged to be unleashed. She instantly reached a state of trance and felt that she had just crossed a threshold. All those efforts, the countless casting and the experimentation were finally bearing fruits. She took the runes of ‘pierce’ and ‘overwhelm’ and lined them up where they stayed, eager, waiting, intelligent. The black mana *liked* her. It fought its restraints with boundless enthusiasm. She just needed one final ingredient. Ah, there it was.

‘Spread’

That one started as a small circle, and extended in three branches. She drew it in her mind next to the two others.

Time stopped for Viv as the spell took form, expanded into her mind and throughout the air around her. She could taste the dry dust on the wind, see the dessicated eyes of the nearest revenant with vivid detail. It was her moment. It was glorious and horrifying and exhilarating, and she said the words burning on her lips.

“True mass yoink.”

A network of black spears sliced effortlessly through the surrounding mass like a power drill through butter. They burrowed deep in their quest for more mana to make theirs. They ate and took and spread and tracked, then, at the limit of their reach, they withdrew.

Black Hedge Witch: (10)

Path evolutions available. You may—

You have picked: Black Witch. Mental statistics are three times more efficient when wielding black mana, only fifty percent more efficient with other types. You may not manipulate life mana. Associated skill acquisition is vastly improved.

The mana returned. It brought pain, delicious pain. There were black flames emerging from her skin where her conduits saturated. She ignored a message about mild mana poisoning. She ignored the stupid windows and their stupid messages. It was just a visual for those who could not feel. She could. She could feel it all. The tempestuous power aligned with her emotions, particularly her deep resentment.

Solfis had said that mana could be charged with concepts. Each color had associated ideas that made spells more specialized. At first, she had not understood. Now she did.

The most basic aspect of the black. The universal truth of it. They could call it death. It was part of the truth but not the truth, for death was for the living. It was change as well, but change could lead to order. Black mana only led to one kind of order: heat death. Black mana was a force of annihilation. It could be part of more, but, at the very bottom, that was it.

And she needed it right now.

The destruction of ranks upon ranks of undead had afforded them the breathing room to move on only one side. On the other one, towards the main gate, the undead still stood in thick ranks. She turned to them and walked at the edge of the formation. Her devastating strikes had once again stunned the pair of enemy casters, and there was a lull in the carnage. That was all that she needed.

Viv lifted her arm one more time and called the rune for spread, and that was it. Despite her breakthrough and the ease with which she could cast, giving a meaning to mana was still an arduous and draining process. It took her all her focus to maintain the connection with the forming spell. She could already tell that it would be worth it.

A ball as dense as a dark star formed before her.

When she had healed Jor, she had realized that black mana appeared vicious and malevolent. A misconception. A fire was not evil just because it burnt things down. It was simply a force of nature.

That was no longer the case for the mana she held. More energy kept pouring into it as the Baranese stood dumbstruck and the revenants started to move again. More anger. She filled it with her frustration at the treachery that had killed Jor, at the necromancer who saw them as speed bumps on his stupid quest, and at the teen she had killed and who should have been in class or something. She shared her fear that she was dead. She brought forward the regret that her friends and family would have to deal with her mysterious disappearance. She ignited it with the absurdity of it all, of the loss, pain and distress that had harried her for the last miserable, painful weeks of hard-won survival.

“Blight.”

The sphere spread outward into a cloud with the speed of an arthritic grandpa. That was fine. It did not have to be fast. Soon, the entire side of the wall was covered in impenetrable darkness. She heard a sound like cold water on a red-hot pan, a furious hiss that made her wince.

On the other side, the moans and clanks were silenced. There was nothing left but the hiss.

“Go! Go! Go!” Cernit yelled. He grabbed her as she collapsed.

The survivors were now free to run. They rushed down the stairs, only to find the courtyard occupied.

Crawlers had climbed from the side wall. There had been no one to stop them. They did not have the men.

Benetti kept fending them off, fleeing gracefully between one and the other. One of his arms lay limp by his side.

The disgraced nobleman turned once to them. He saluted them with a bloodstained blade. His smile was still as snarky as before.

He charged into the mass, drawing them with him.

Viv closed her eyes. She could not do anything. She wanted to help but she could not cast a thing to save her life. Her conduits were empty. Her head hurt. She could barely walk.

They sprinted into the tower, then into her room. The last soldier slammed both doors behind him and locked the second one tight. Arthur squaked her distress and jumped on her den. Viv sat on the bed.

**//Start up imminent.**

**//Your Grace, please place a droplet of blood on the rune engraved on my forehead.**



There was no time to do anything else but comply. It was Solfis or nothing. She tried to stand up and pointed at Solfis when Cernit tried to stop her. He grabbed her under the shoulder instead.

She touched the small laceration along her right flank. It was not too deep. The skinsuit made the blood look darker. She placed a finger on the glyph. It left a bloody print there.

**//Thank you, Your Grace.**

**//This unit... I have waited twenty years for this moment.**

**//You may want to step back.**

She did, and Cernit swore.

Solfis' thin ribs closed around his core.

**//INITIALIZING.**

Two yellow orbs appeared in the skull's orbit. They shone ominously in the dark of the room like cursed lighthouses. She recognized them from his first frame, back in Harrak. The voice, too, was familiar. It had the usual intonations, but there was something sinister behind, a sort of organic snarl that even his metal frame had not possessed.

**//HX-013 EXPERIMENTAL STRIKE GOLEM, DESIGNATION: SOLFIS, ACTIVATED.**

**//APPROVED FRAME DETECTED: DRAGON BONE MAGE-KILLER MARK 6.**

**//FRAME IS COMPATIBLE.**

**//APPROVED ENERGY CORE DETECTED.**

**//CORE RESERVES: 14%.**

**//CORE IS COMPATIBLE.**

**//START-UP SEQUENCE INITIATED.**

The dense network of runes covering him glinted once, displaying an impossibly dense lattice of intertwined enchantments.

**//ABSOLUTE OVERRIDE: IMPERIAL HEIR IN MORTAL DANGER.**

**//ALL LIMITERS REMOVED.**

**//EMPATHY MODULE: DEACTIVATED.**

**//DATA UPLINK: DEACTIVATED.**

**//DIAGNOSTICS IN PROGRESS.**

Viv stepped back as Solfis' legs and arms extended and the war golem stood.

It was horrifying.

The frame was gaunt and unnaturally thin, with long legs and arms of compacted bones. It was also incredibly tall. Easily twice her size. The arms themselves reached down to its knees, ending in vicious, sharpened claws. Even the densest of village idiots would know with one look that this construct was designed for carnage.

**//LOCOMOTION ONLINE.**  
**//SENSOR SUITE ONLINE.**  
**//ARMAMENT ONLINE.**  
**//DEFENSIVE MEASURES ONLINE.**  
**//COMBAT INTELLIGENCE ONLINE.**  
**//ALL SYSTEMS NOMINAL.**  
**//COMMENCING COMBAT OPERATIONS.**

Viv turned to the soldiers.

“Open it! Open the damn door.”

Solfis took one lazy step forward, which carried him from the table to the exit. Cernit screamed an order and the way was cleared.

A gut spiller stood on the other side. It punched towards Solfis. Viv slowed time.

Even with her perception enhanced, she could barely follow what happened next. Solfis sort of dropped down and around the blow, then sprung forth faster than she could see in a sinuous motion that propelled him through the ground floor of the uncanny valley like an upside-down rocket, to emerge into the freakish cave of ultimate fuckery below. The gut spiller fell backward with its chest gouged out.

Solfis was the apocalypse slinky.

The war golem kicked the carcass away with a three-pronged foot. The mangled remains flew through the air and smashed into something out of sight.

**//THREAT ASSESSMENT COMPLETE.**  
**//THREAT LEVEL: PATHETIC.**

That was definitely still Solfis. Viv watched the Old Empire's last defender step outside. The battle ended, and the slaughter began.

A minute later, Viv stood with some difficulty at the threshold of her tower, with Arthur clinging to her like a koala to its eucalyptus. The courtyard was a scene of utmost savagery. Dismembered crawlers, revenants, and puppeteers lay on the ground in pieces no larger than a chair. She could have walked from one wall to another without ever touching the ground. On the battlements, Solfis was butchering his way through the last foes.

It was a humbling moment.

The reality that a kingdom could fall to monsters in three days had remained a myth until now, something that belonged to the realm of legends. Now, she could clearly believe it. Solfis had himself admitted that he was not even the most dangerous creature around.

She briefly wondered how he would fare against a modern army. A concerted effort could certainly take him down, but at what cost? He was freakishly fast. Worse, his motions were completely unpredictable, going from upright one moment, to head down, left arm planted on the ground and the three other limbs shredding flesh the next. Just watching him made her head spin.

Solfis was quickly done. She saw his yellow glare rest on her for a moment before he went over the wall and the sounds of the massacre resumed.

“Holy shit.”

“Squee...”

Even Arthur’s squeals were subdued.

Cernit walked to the battlement and she followed with the others. A door opened on the side, but it was just the cook who had managed to hide himself apparently. It brought the number of surviving soldiers to six. Out of fifteen.

She shook her head and joined the lieutenant to see what was going on.

Turned out, it was more of the same.

Solfis was no longer cleaning everything . He was now making his way to the necromancer duo by cutting a bloody path through the waves of monsters they were throwing at him in desperation. It wasn’t working. What he didn’t kill, he merely used as springboards to move faster.

Eventually, he arrived within reach and the man screamed something she did not quite get. Two rays of black and red emerged from the necromancers’ hands at the same time. They struck the golem and he stopped moving.

Slowly, the energy covered the frame in its strange radiance. Cernit frowned and placed a hand on his sheathed sword. Viv touched his shoulder, and shook her head.

“No need.”

The radiance spread and spread. The necromancers kept pouring energy in their beam. Solfis' chest slowly opened to reveal the core.

The male necromancer screamed words of encouragement.

This went on for a little while, then the spells petered out as the two casters fell to their knees. The red light disappeared and Solfis' ribcage snapped close.

**//ENERGY RESERVES INCREASED TO 9%  
//THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTRIBUTION.**

He managed to be mocking with a mechanical voice.

The war golem bent his chest forward and struck. His left claw tore the man in half. At the same time, his right foot whipped out and punched the woman's head off clean.

The horde instantly turned to chaos. They lost focus and direction.

Solfis grabbed a crawler and decapitated it in a slow and gruesome manner. The others jumped away, animated by some instinct of self-preservation. Slowly, the golem made his way back through the fleeing stampede. He ignored the half-broken gate and climbed the sheer wall by simply stepping on it. Its claws dug into the old rock like it was made of wet sand.

His gaunt form topped the battlement. The ancient warrior stood before Viv in all his horrific, gore-covered glory. A crimson claw raised above her head, still dripping with the fresh blood of their foes.

**//I had missed this, Your Grace.  
//Not just battle. Movement. Autonomy.  
//Fulfilling the purpose for which I was made by my creator, Irlefen.**

His yellow glare descended on her.

**//I spent three hundred years stuck in a dead city, killing its erstwhile inhabitants.  
//Day after day, the people I had sworn to protect turned into more twisted creatures.  
//I saw my reserves dwindle.  
//I...really tried.  
//I tried so hard, and for so long.  
//Then you came.**

**//And now, you gave me a body, and a new purpose.**

Solfis slowly bent, until he was on one knee with a clawed hand gathered in a fist resting on his skeletal chest. His terrifying glare bore into her soul, but Viv was unafraid. She knew he could kill her now, just as she knew that he would never do so. It was a gut feeling, one that came from attending political rallies with her favor. She had seen it before.

Fanaticism.

**//This unit, no, I, Solfis, swear to repay you for this second life I was granted.**

**//We will accomplish great things together.**

The other humans were staring at the deadly entity before them, unsure as to how to react. Viv lifted a hand, and touched the forehead rune where her bloody fingerprint shone magma red. Something told her that it was no longer just blood.

“I would be dead without you, Solfis, so yes. Together.”

**//Together.**

The golem stood back fluidly. It walked in its alien yet graceful gait back to the tower before disappearing into the entrance.

The humans, Cernit included, watched him go. Their fearful gazes traveled from her, to the dragonling now wrapped around her shoulders, to a piece of the wall behind her. She turned around and saw that an entire section of the battlements had been... sanded. Heavily. Only naked, polished rock remained over a length of thirty paces, at the very least. Not a corpse or a speck of ash had been left behind.

She recognized the site of her blight spell.

“Hmmm.”

Intimidation: Intermediate 1

Alrighty then.

The day was won, the fort was saved, and victory tasted like carrion and charred meat. The stench stuck like a film on Viv's tongue as she and the others retrieved pieces of friends from the deserted battlefield. Solfis had retreated to his alcove to conserve energy. It was up to them to drag monsters in a pile before the black mana sneaking in through the breached gate could reach critical mass and reanimate the fallen army. Here and there, they found the remains of fallen comrades. Those were gathered separately, with care.

Viv tried to find Jor, but she soon found the task to be impossible. His remains had been covered by another layer of corpses, all now burning and smoking in a single grey mass. She could not even recognize where exactly she had seen him fall. It all looked the same to her.

They did find Benetti, or what was left of him. She and Cernit gathered the parts with as much reverence as they could manage. Cernit picked up the enchanted sword, still embedded in a dead crawler's face. He sheathed it and tied a rope around the hilt.

"Family," he simply said. Viv understood.

"Ir Leias Benetti," she stated. She thought that he conveyed who he was now, having redeemed himself through the sacrifice of his life. At least, she thought that he had.

"Yes. Ir Leias Benetti," Cernit replied. He closed his eyes and Viv noticed a tear there. She... could not muster one. The exhaustion of the past few days had fully caught up to her. It left her with sluggish thoughts and a sort of deep wariness that she could not express with words. The past two weeks had been so harrowing, she thought that if she stopped now to think about it, she would fall apart.

They found that the last horse had survived. The necromancers had concentrated their forces on the humans. Or perhaps, they had hoped to gain a mount. It no longer mattered.

It took them an hour to make a pile for the monsters and a line for the lost. They set the pile ablaze with their last flaming bricks. For the lost, they built a pyre with every piece of furniture in the fort, and lit it up. Cernit led the survivors in prayers. She could not follow what he said, but she heard him refer to an entity called Enttiku, who she assumed was a god of the dead.

Quite a few of the men cried. They simply broke down where they stood in a sort of huddle. No attempt to maintain decorum, which she thought was rather nice. She sat at the back feeling a bit awkward and isolated. They were still strangers to her despite the shared ordeal.

The ceremony was over and Cernit let the remaining soldiers take some time to recover. He gestured towards her tower. Once inside, he walked up to Solfis, who had returned to his 'compact' form. His two yellow orbs were on them as they came in. Cernit almost sat on her bed in his tiredness, but he changed his mind at the last moment and took a chair instead.

The old knight collapsed and stayed there for a few moments, gathering his thoughts. Viv dropped Arthur on her bed in the meanwhile. Her companion looked a bit bothered, she coiled in her usual spot, but her eyes remained open and cautious.

After a minute, Cernit started to talk and Solfis translated.

The old knight explained that, with the fort breached, the enchantments keeping the black mana at bay could not be repaired with what they had on hand. The tower itself ran on a separate spell and could protect people, but he would not force the eight of them plus Arthur to live in this limited space together for the six weeks left before the scheduled change of guards, living on cold food. They had done their duty. It was time for others to do theirs.

Cernit explained his plan. He would leave the next day at dawn with Viv and her 'followers', trailing the sled behind them. Viv would keep the dead at bay and they would travel out of the deadlands. Cernit offered to drop her near the closest city, named Kazar. He would go on to the nearest base of the church of Neriad and report on the incident. Before Viv could ask, he explained that there would be ample interrogation and that she might as well be spared the hassle.

**//Some members of the church follow paths that let them discern honesty from lies.  
//They will be called to intervene in this instance.  
//The thorough interrogation of knight Cernit will be enough to assuage their doubts.  
//Some may still seek to talk to you, out of concern for safety.  
//It will be a low priority task  
//However, if you go there directly, you will be held until interrogated.  
//It was standard practice three hundred years ago as well.**

"I am an unknown spellcaster who arrived here through mysterious means. Would they not consider me a high risk?"

**//With all due respect, Your Grace, you may be overestimating the danger you represent.  
//Cernit can attest that you do not follow the path of necromancy, and that you helped soldiers of the church at risk to your own life.  
//If things are the same as they used to be, you remain a minor concern.**

"Compared to what?"

**//Compared to a gravid redfin lizard eating an entire village, for example.**

"You just made that up."

**//No, Your Grace, that was my third deployment.**

"Oh."

Viv expressed her support for the idea, and Cernit ran outside. The soldiers started to move the remaining furniture outside and replace it with rolls upon rolls of covers which they spread on the ground to create a sleeping space. A partition was brought upstairs, to the lookout, to create latrines. The men then piled supplies and water in the corridor and through the stairs in preparation for their stay. The mood was morose, yet there was a general sense of relief that it was over.

Viv packed her stuff and reorganized the sled. Solfis walked himself to the makeshift construct, and settled in the 'optimal position', as he said himself. His few steps caused all humans present, except for Viv, to freeze in their tracks. Arthur grabbed her cover in her maw and remade her own nest at the back, squealing cutely at people passing too close. She really was like a wild kitten who only tolerated one human.

After dinner, Cernit gave her a pack filled with stuff. There were the official documents he had promised listing her as a mercenary in the service of the Church of Neriad, Baranese branch. He had also written a letter of recommendation in his native language that he asked her not to read in front of him with a light blush. She figured that it was stellar and that the proud knight was a bit shy. Finally, he handed her a fat purse filled with metal. It clinked nicely when she held it.

"Money," he helpfully told her. She checked the contents and saw the glint of gold.

"You gave more," she remarked. More than they had agreed on.

Cernit tried to explain but soon gave up and they returned to Solfis. Followed another discussion, where Cernit explained that they would receive a prize for slaying the necromancers and that this was simply her share. He had given her Jor and Benetti's money and assured her that their family would receive the full amount. He would sort it out with the Church. That was fine.

The night was difficult for Viv. The others had let her keep the partition up, for which she was grateful, but their snores and whimpers stopped her from resting despite her exhaustion. It brought her back to the first few days of boot camp when she was not yet exhausted enough to immediately fall asleep. She woke up several times with a jolt, only to remember that she was no longer alone in the deadlands, and that other sounds were no longer revenants trying to gut her.

Or, at least not tonight.

They departed at dawn. Solfis stood up for ten seconds and cut a path through the wall of ashy limbs blocking their way outside of the gates, then they went down the ramp at a slow pace. The horde had almost fully dispersed, though the concentration of revenants was still high. There were no signs of elites, and Solfis explained that powerful revenants disliked sunlight.



Viv was still tender from the previous day's exertion, and she preferred to kill the revenants in their path one by one. The spell was no longer taxing for her.

They stopped where the pair of necromancers had fallen. Their bodies were too damaged to turn to revenants, or at least not without months of energy seeping into the husks. Cernit climbed down and returned with two heads, placing the grisly trophies in a bag he attached to his saddle.

That was fucked up.

But hey, who was she to judge.

They moved on a bit until Cernit stopped at another spot. At first, she thought that what she saw were some of the debris the horde had left in its dispersal, but she was wrong. It was a very basic camp. They found some food, which was in an even worse state than what they had. They also found a few memorabilia bearing a sigil, which Cernit kept.

"Proof of who the necromancers were," he explained. She remembered that inspection had mentioned 'deposed ruler' in its list of attributes. Perhaps some noble assholes somewhere would be glad to know that Viv and Cernit had found their missing murderous psychopaths.

Then, Cernit hit the jackpot. The pair had a coffer, which he opened before her. It was filled to the brim with precious metal minted in a wide variety of denominations.

"You keep," he told her.

She considered refusing, but both Solfis and the knight insisted that it was hers by right of conquest or something.

**//Cernit informs me that the coins were most likely looted from revenants.**

**//Those who fall in the wilderness often do so with their money unspent, and carry their purses here.**

**//You will have to change this into money you can use in the city we will go to, Kazar.**

And that led to plenty of questions, which she asked Cernit with Solfis acting as an interpreter. They talked as they went on, the knight ignoring the occasional yinky interruptions.

"Baran lies in the far east of the continent, as I mentioned. Kazar belongs to the local kingdom of Enoria, which used to be a major player until it broke up into two fifteen years ago."

"What — yink — happened?"

“The king went too far trying to purge the nobility after a failed coup. He had replaced a third of them with sycophants when one of his most supportive allies rebelled against him. They fought a bloody civil war for two years until the king died. He was succeeded by his son, and both sides retreated to lick their wounds.”

“Is that sort of thing common?”

“No. The longer a war is, and the more resources are diverted from monster hunting. Kingdoms embroiled in long wars stand the risk of losing entire cities.”

“People knew that and still revolted?”

She was not being judgemental, she was just curious. Cernit didn't seem to mind. In fact, talking made him sit straighter. Perhaps it took his mind off the loss of his fellow knights.

“Nobles follow noble paths for which they are trained from early on. Lines of militias are well and good, but without commanders to bolster them, they are not used to their full potential. You can have as much infantry as you want. An elite group of knights following a captain will plow right through it without stopping. It's the same with monsters. Spears can keep them at bay, but you need archers wielding heavy bows to put arrow after arrow into their thick hides. Or mages.”

“Why follow the path of the militiamen or the soldier? Would it not make sense to have all-knights armies?” she asked as a formality, though she was reasonably certain of the answer. Cernit did not disappoint.

“Your family must have followed a merchant path,” he said without malice. “The armed forces have limited access to resources, always. It takes over twenty ingots of steel to outfit a single heavy infantry soldier like Jor used to be.”

To her surprise, Old Empire knowledge came with meanings associated with the word 'ingot'. She judged that the full armor represented at least a hundred kilograms, perhaps more. It was insane.

“There is not enough metal to go around, even if kingdoms stockpile as much as possible. Artisans must also spend time creating specialized gear like the leather armor I am wearing now. Even if it does not protect much, it still takes two days for a skilled worker to create one, and that is with the chainmail and leather already prepared.”

“So militiaman is simply the best path to survive with whatever you have at hand?”

“Exactly. On top of fighting in formation with limited weaponry, that path allows them to go on longer without rest, food, or water. It drastically improves their survivability while Knight paths like mine focus on power. We all follow the path that will help us the most in our current circumstances, blessings to Nous!”

“Solfis, are there variations between two individuals sharing the same path?”

**//Yes.**

**//Historically, Southern Empire infantrymen received class skills related to pikes, while those from the north relied on sword and shield.**

“I see.”

She refocused the conversation on Enoria.

“Kazar is at the border between the two sides of the civil war, yes. The son of the previous king has made openings to reunite both parts of the kingdom, though to my knowledge they have failed. I would not worry too much, though. Kazar is a border town with a strong church and mercenary presence. It has no strategic value.”

“Tell me a bit more about Kazar. Why would there be a strong mercenary presence?”

“The Church of Neriad pays one iron bit per revenant head. Enterprising fellows use the city as a base to launch expeditions into the deadlands. You don’t need to bring back the heads either, the church will send a representative to measure the efforts and exorcise the corpses themselves. The task provides a stable income, though it’s nothing too exciting. There are other benefits though. The Church can be generous.”

“How rich are they anyway?”

“Neriad is worshipped almost everywhere, even more so than Maranor, the goddess of war. Many retired warriors leave assets to the Church in their wills, including land, vineyards, factories and so on. Between this, making powerful artefacts from monster parts, and donations, the Church has enough money to pay those expeditions and more. They see it as an investment, since it’s cheaper to prevent revenants from massing up than to soak undead invasions.”

“With so many people working towards reducing their number, you would think that revenants would not be so numerous.”

“You would think so, but how many people die in the wilderness every year? Many monster victims have enough parts left to turn into revenants and walk all the way to the deadlands where the ambient mana sustains them indefinitely.”

“Wow.”

“So long as this land remains steeped in black mana, only those who can resist its effects through magic or armor dare go beyond the ring of forts. ”

“I see. I had other questions, about money.”

“Ask.”

Viv, in her amusing and helpless optimism, thought that the local currencies would follow a clean decimal system. It was, of course, completely stupid of her. Currency was a mess. Every kingdom minted their own, and valuable coins like gold were always cut with other stuff like copper, silver, or zinc. What a silver talent was worth could fluctuate according to the rarity of the base materials. To make matters worse, silver and gold were valuable because they held enchantments more readily. If a kingdom launched a massive armament project, the value of some materials could skyrocket and cause the value of coinage to inflate. It was a fucking mess. She already missed fiduciary money.

At least, the base stuff was pretty tame.

The base amount was the iron bit. Cernit showed her a Baranese bit, which was basically a small dark rectangle stamped with an emblem with a horse on it, or at least that was what he described it as. He told her that it was the Baranese coat of arms. Viv thought that it looked more like the shit emoji, but she supposed that artistic value did not matter that much for a low denomination.

An iron talent was five bits and the local one was a rectangle, though Varran minted round talents with a hole in the middle. Next came the silver talent, which was worth a bit more than thirty-five bits. Silver talents were fairly small. Gold talents were a bit larger and worth six silver plus some change, susceptible to the exchange rate. Above that, there were exotic currencies like silverite talents which were worth a fuckload of money, at least a hundred gold talents apiece, but those never really saw circulation.

Viv thought about the veritable fortune spent to create Solfis' first body. He must have cost the yearly GDP of a small kingdom. She also remembered that she had about four kilograms of silverite in the skis under her sled, which she had dragged from Harrak all the way here.

“You really have the mind of a merchant lord,” Cernit said appreciatively when she started to ask about what was worth what. She didn't think it was anything special. She just didn't want to get shafted by the first swindler to spot her foreign ass, especially because she had so much to buy.

Starting with underwear.

And a sharp razor, because she had tried that dress she had looted with her boots, and let's just say that the yeti had a new competitor.

“The lowest daily salary is seven bits per day of work,” Cernit continued, taking her mind away from her developing pilosity. “Only day laborers, or those very early on their paths earn that little.

An adult can feed themselves without suffering for six bits per day. A night in an inn costs around two iron talents, a bit more for a few mugs of beer.”

“How much for clothes?”

“A basic new shirt can set you back a silver. It can go as high as you like for fancy enchanted stuff. Second-hand, well, it depends. Currency is not used that much in smaller villages. People will barter for stuff.”

“If the lowest laborers earn seven bits per day and it costs around six to feed yourself, how do poor people raise families?” she asked. The math was easy.

“Well, those who earn that little as those who just started on a path, so they would be around thirteen. It’s rare for girls this young to get kids, though it happens. People usually earn much more when they start a family. An apothecary I know earns half of his wages selling contraceptives and ‘oops’ potions, as we called it back home.”

Cernit smiled sadly.

“The children of the poor have it the hardest. Most of them spend their days outside of the walls of their towns to forage, or they earn a few bits every day doing menial tasks. Even the smallest monsters can kill them with ease. My brothers and I, we would spend our days hunting around the village to kill predators as soon as we got our paths, but there would always be something going through our patrols. Ratwolves. Foraging beastling parties. At least once per month, a child would go missing.”

Well, damn. That question sure ruined the mood.

“We were talking about money, yes? When knights are mobilized, we are paid a silver every two days for the trouble. We are also provided with decent gear if we cannot afford better. Of course, you need to have some basic equipment to train yourself and progress on your path before getting accepted, and not everyone can afford it.

“Hmm.”

She asked a few more questions related to price. Cernit turned sheepish when she asked about real estate since it was a ‘big city thing’ and he got his land from the local baron. People in villages also got arable land attributed by either their lord or the village council. Or they inherited it from their parents. A decent sword would cost around four silver talents if you were a private individual getting a new one. It would be a bit over twice that to have it enchanted at the most basic level to make it sharper. Magic was, she found, fairly cheap. At the most basic level.

This led her to ask Solfis about path distribution for casters.

**//All humans practice magic at some level.**  
**//You saw Cernit light fires, for example.**  
**//Many paths include mana shaping in some measures, such as the apothecary Cernit mentioned.**  
**//This extends to, for example, mana blades.**  
**//Those are specialized soldiers who use minor casting as part of their fighting styles.**  
**//Pure casters are significantly rarer.**  
**//Less than one in a hundred has the potential.**  
**//Back in the Old Empire, they congregated in larger cities.**  
**//A village who produces a mage will receive a boon from the lord who takes them under their wings.**

“I see. Can I use my position as a bargaining chip?”

**//Yes, Your Grace.**  
**//You should avoid joining a minor noble as their sworn servant, however.**  
**//The lack of resources would severely stunt your growth.**

“You just don’t want me ending as someone’s stooge.”

**//You would not enjoy being someone’s stooge, Your Grace.**

Indeed the fuck not. She had not been thrown into fantasy land to end up as someone else’s pedestal, not if she could help it. Especially with the awesome magic waiting at her fingertips. She would be dark Gandalfette or die trying. If she failed to return home.

She frowned when she realized that her first response had been magic, not finding her way back. Surely that meant nothing.

She kept asking Cernit a few more things, but the discussion quickly died out when she realized that he knew thirty-two ways to catch and cook the local frog, but could not say how much a dress cost to save his own goddamn life. He was also turning dour as the day went by and she wanted to respect his grief. They spent the entire day dragged by his gelding, who started trotting along with more vigor as soon as he realized that they were aiming for the big patch of green in the distance and away from things that could eat his ass in one gulp. Come to think of it, there were probably things in the forest that could also eat his ass in one gulp, but at least it would smell better.

They stopped in a fortified building for the night.

Contrary to her previous cache, this one was not as dusty as the Gobi desert. It had a nice firepit with dry wood prepared, some fresh water in a jar, and it was really, really heavily fortified. They slept in the same room for the sake of convenience and woke up at dawn. Viv was

increasingly exhausted, yet the good knight didn't seem tired, probably his high stamina. And he didn't have to cast every minute or so.

The second day went on much like the first one, and they arrived at another way house in the early evening. The edge of the deadlands were tantalizingly close now, just out of reach. She could feel the black mana density getting lower even through the inscribed leather covering her form. Even Arthur could barely take her attention away from the dense forest covering the horizon. It was the first time in her life seeing so much green, after all.

Even the revenants were rarer. Many of them were walking in the other direction.

"Will the deadlands eventually run out of black mana?" she asked as Cernit lit the fire. Solfis did not know, but to her surprise, the knight did.

"The deadlands have reached a sort of equilibrium," he informed her distractedly, "so many undead monsters create a black field of their own. It would take several large-scale expeditions to kill enough of the buggers to dent it. No kingdom would dedicate so much resources to a worthless land that would take decades to recover, not when there are easier places to develop."

She thought it was a shame, but the decision made perfect sense to her. Kingdoms were in survival mode. All the time.

In the morning of the third day, they passed a line of stones, and Cernit removed his leather armor. She imitated him. The feverish feeling of poison did not sting her skin. The mana here was normal.

They were out of the zone.

They climbed a gentle slope and the forest appeared below, in all its glory.

The line of trees started maybe ten kilometers away, a bit down from where they were. Halfway between the two points, a small town sat there, on top of a small elevation. Low walls encircled maybe a hundred structures of various sizes nestled around a lonely elevation, not much more than a small hill. Ribbons of smoke danced merrily in the morning air from so many cooking fires. There were farms all around, linked to the city by trails no larger than threads from up here. Tiny forms worked the barren fields in preparation for the spring seedings.

She could fucking cry.

Somewhere in the distance, a group of men followed a carriage dragged by a pair of horses.

Life.

Civilization.

A fucking bath.

"I leave here," Cernit explained.

Solfis translated the words of the knight. The Church base was further east, so he still had to ride some distance and going through the city would lengthen his stay. She would be fine as long as she behaved and presented the mercenary license he had prepared to the gate guard. Then, she could find employment as a mercenary or just move on with the money she already had, which should really last her a while.

"Will Solfis' presence create problems? With his appearance."

"No, the inspection skill shows him as a golem. While golems are rare and valuable, he will look more like a knowledge repository than a combat model, so you should be fine with the local populace. The guard will know what it is, however, but they have no reason to stop you. Just be careful and make sure to keep him charged in case thieves get any ideas. I would still advise you to make contact with the local church. Their support will guarantee your safety. The letter I wrote will make sure they appreciate how much you contributed to our success."

Fighting evil. Nice.

"We would have died without you," the knight stated.

Then came the awkward moment she feared.

"So, this is goodbye?"

"Yes, Bib, this is goodbye. May we meet again in better circumstances. Know that Varran will know of your heroic actions. If you find yourself in our lands, come and greet me or my fellow knights. There are worse causes than ours to raise your flag for."

"And good luck to you too, Cernit. I hope we meet again."

She stared in silence at the knight's retreating back. With the sled decoupled, he could now move much faster, which he did. A part of her wondered if he had prepared a trap, if he had given her fake documents that would see her imprisoned and left to report her to authorities or something. She dismissed those thoughts immediately. She was a rather good judge of character, and this human from another world was as straight an arrow as they came. Or perhaps she was the human from another world. Bah, it didn't matter.

Viv huffed and grabbed the ropes which she tied around her torso.



“Back to it, I guess.”

The trip was slow. She went downhill in a friendly environment where monsters were not trying to eat her eyeballs, and yet it became by far the most physically harrowing part of her trip, stamina-wise. She had to stop every hundred meters or so to take a few deep breaths. There was a slight wind that sent her short hair aflutter. It carried the scent of sap and wet earth. In the distance, animals sort of mooed as they were released from a barn and into an enclosure. A man in a grey shirt tilled his field a distance away, and would sometimes stand up and look at her distant form before getting back to his task. She felt strange. Detached. At some point, she realized that a pair of men carrying crates were following her at a long distance. They would stop when she stopped.

She reached the gates after an hour.

Fields surrounded her on all sides by then, with cottages seeded here and there. The city's walls were twice her size and covered in white plaster, with no sentinels that she could spot. The gates themselves sat at the top of a small incline that a city car would not have minded, but proved to be a pain in her ass for her. There were five guards manning it, who let a woman loaded with baskets pass before they turned attention to her. Their eyes went wide.

Just like the knights, those guys had a greenish tint to their faces, though it was not as pronounced. Their skins were lighter as well. She would associate their features with Southern Europeans mixed with Incas or something. Again, it was weird. They looked like they belonged to the same ethnic group as the Baranese, more or less, and that meant that she stuck out like a sore thumb. They wore undyed leather jerkins inscribed with a shield sporting a tree on it over off-white shirts. Their helmets were steel and reminded her of conquistador morions with a neck guard as well. They carried spears and shields, as well as truncheons attached to their belts. Only one had a bow. No arrows were nocked, for now.

One of the guards had a large beard and a small red plume on his breast. He licked his lips nervously while the others, who all looked sixteen if they were a day, deferred to him in the typical 'above my paygrade' grunt reaction.

[Kazaran guard, not very dangerous. Follows a path concerned with keeping the peace]

[Kazaran guard sergeant, not very dangerous. Follows a path concerned with keeping the peace.]

First thing first, look mostly harmless.

She stopped and spread her arms in a gesture of 'I'm not here to kill you, at least, not yet,' which she hoped was convincing enough. She took down her backpack, and found the

mercenary accreditation Cernit had given her. She waved it under their collective nose like it was a flag or something. The sergeant was sweating profusely by that time, but he nodded slowly and approached the sled.

“Something something Kazar, me guard sergeant Elimi, please something something identity and purpose.”

Wow, she could almost understand him. She guessed that, with the Harrakan heartlands so close, the local language was deeply rooted in Old Imperial.

“I am Viviane,” she slowly said, “I am looking for the office of the Church of Neriad.”

That felt safer than saying ‘I’m here for beer and hookers’ or any variation thereof.

The man in front of her blinked, and she raised a brow in answer, crossing her arms. Better not look too much like a victim either.

The sergeant inspected the sled.

“Squee!”

His jaw unhinged.

**//What are you looking at, meat?**

She could probably shove a whole egg in his mouth right now. The man took a few steps back and raised an open hand in the universal ‘hold on please’ signal. She took a step back. See? Harmless.

The sergeant turned and ordered one of the recruits to do something. The little scrub took off at a run, probably to get reinforcements.

Fucking hell, that was not a great start.

Viv took another step back and sat heavily on the sled’s front. Two tiny clawed hands went to rest on her left shoulder as Arthur’s intense red gaze inspected the gate. The dragonling huffed, then she bonked Viv’s head with her own very lightly and pointed at the green wall of the forest some distance away.

“Later. Viv tired,” her human answered laconically.

The small creature cocked her head in a gesture that Viv could have sworn she had never done before. It was strangely human. Or dog-like, she guessed. Viv pointed to herself, then mimicked eating and sleeping.

Arthur chuffed again and returned to her nest.

“Negotiations successful, I guess,” Viv muttered.

Meanwhile, the sergeant had gathered enough courage to talk again.

“Speak our language?”

“I speak Old Imperial.”

The man nodded. He started to speak in single words that Viv could understand, on account of being close or identical to Old Imperial.

“Name Bibiane, purpose Church of Neriad. Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Drake dangerous?”

That was not a drake, that was a dragonling. Did Arthur have something to mess with inspection? She tried to remember the bestiary and realized that drakeling and dragonling were extremely close in terms of spelling. Oh, well.

“Drake not dangerous if left alone.”

“Sorry...”

“If drake angry, drake dangerous. Drake not angry, drake not dangerous. Yes?”

“Yes. Fine. Good.”

“Can get in?”

That made the sergeant panic a bit. He took his most diplomatic air, which made him look constipated, and explained with a small voice and a fake smile.

“Bibiane caster. Caster greeted by important person, yes? After, Bibane can get in. No entrance fee for church person,” he said, pointing at the folded document in her hand.

Well, that was fine.

“Yes. I wait.”

“Thank you.”

The sergeant screamed something and another guard ran into the city, but he came back thirty seconds later holding a terracotta glass filled with fuming liquid.

“Klod,” the sergeant generously offered.

Well, fuck you too. She grabbed the Klod with a polite smile and smelled it. It was a sort of cereal-based infusion. It smelled good.

Viv sat back more relaxedly and glanced up. The silence here was different from the silence of the deadlands. There was still wind, even now caressing her cheeks and uncovered neck. It whistled through the branches of the nearby trees, some of whom were sporting their first green buds as spring approached. The smell of her hot beverage now covered that of nature and the light stench of locker room that the guards emitted. After the mounds of smoldering corpses, that little stink did not bother her anymore.

It smelled nice.

In fact, it was the first time that it genuinely smelled nice since she arrived here. Even the Cassian springs had been more odorless than anything else. Silence and a pleasant smell. So weird, after so long. So much death. The monsters. The very air turning her veins dark and her body weak.

She took a sip and let the warm liquid rinse her palate. The taste was light and earthy.

She stayed like that for a few minutes, the light wind drying the small sheen of sweat the past hour had created. It made her feel cold despite the skinsuit. On a hunch, she called her interface. She had not done so in a while.

Current status:

- Deep fatigue
- Mana poisoning (very mild)
- Soul trauma (serious)

Yeah, she was tired. Needed a break.

Not five fucking seconds later, a woman emerged from the gates.

Like the guards, she wore a leather jerkin. The blade to her side was clearly of superior quality, however, and she was clean, with her dark brown hair held in a sensible ponytail that popped out of the back of her helmet. She immediately zeroed in on Viv.

[Investigator, dangerous, follows a path concerned with ferreting out the truth.]

So she would get the interrogation that Cernit had tried to spare her.

The woman stopped at a polite distance and bowed deeply. She was smiling, but her eyes were not.

The sergeant mentioned something about Old Imperial and the woman nodded, cleared her throat, and addressed Viv.

“Ahem, greetings, caster, and welcome to the city of Kazar. I am prime investigator Tars. We do not often get visiting mages here, especially not one with such a, ah, an interesting baggage so to speak. Would you mind answering a few questions? Nothing too intrusive I assure you,” she continued.

Viv was used to protocols and whatnot. If casters were truly dangerous, it made sense to check them out before they entered your city. Besides, if she didn't tolerate arbitrary bullshit, she would have never joined the army.

“Yeah, fine. I understand. Here?”

“Would you care to join me in the guardhouse? It would be more comfortable than here. Good sergeant Elimi will keep an eye on your belongings and your... drake?”

“Sure. Yeah. Let's go.”

She stood up heavily and felt short of breath. The sergeant came and put her harness around his shoulders while the woman offered to take her accreditation. They moved in with Viv trying not to spill her glass.

The insides of the city were not exactly a surprise. A road made of packed earth led inward, disappearing in a corner. Two large structures lined the gates on both sides, all in the same white as the walls themselves. She could spot the wings of a windmill in the distance, as well as a tower at the top of the hill and the crown of a large tree just by it. They moved immediately left in what she assumed was a guard house.

“I wait here,” the sergeant informed her as he pushed her sled against the wall under the vigilant gaze of Arthur. The tiny creature was getting more used to humans, it seemed.

Viv followed the investigator into the shadows.

The interior of the guardhouse contained an actual lobby complete with a desk and a mousy man with a large moustache calculating stuff on an actual abacus. Or at least it looked like that

to her. He blinked at her sight, then answered a request from the investigator who handed him her mercenary accreditation. The man sighed heavily and took out a blank piece of paper from a drawer.

The other woman led Viv to a side door and into something that was clearly an office. There was a desk with an honest-to-God potted plant on it. As expected, it was not looking fresh. She also noticed several trinkets, like a bracelet with wood pearls on it. She collapsed in the guest chair.

“Sorry for the trouble. I will ask the questions and then leave you in peace. You must be impatient to find a place to rest.”

“Indeed.”

Viv appreciated the good cop routine, even if it was all bullshit to push her to lower her defense. She considered what she should reveal, and decided that she would stick with the teleportation incident story while hiding that she was an outlander. She did not want to attract even more attention to herself.

“Where are you from? Your, ah, features are not local.”

Well she did not look like she got part of her energy from photosynthesis, that was damn sure.

“France. A very distant land.”

“How did you get here then?”

“Teleportation accident, as far as I can tell. I woke up in the deadlands.”

Something flashed in the Prime Investigator’s eyes. Viv would not tell a falsehood. As a daughter of a politician, she knew how to use truth to mislead and manipulate. You just had to carefully curate it.

“You woke up in the deadlands and managed to survive?” the woman exclaimed, impressed.

“My black affinity is very high. It allowed me to survive long enough to be found by lieutenant Cernit. The one who hired me as a mercenary.”

“Oh yes, your authentication document. A good thing that he gave you that. It will make our paperwork much easier. Next question, then, do you intend to pursue criminal activities in Kazar?”

Silence. Heavy, awkward silence.

“Seriously?”

“Please just answer the question, lady caster.”

“No I do not intend to break any law.”

“Excellent! Thank you. Do you currently harbor any grudges towards residents of Kazar?”

“I don’t even fucking know who lives here.”

“Right! First time on Param, haha. Right. Sorry. Do you, ah, practice necromancy?”

“No.”

“Good. Great! That’s all of it. Would you like to stay and finish your klod? I’ll check to see if your entry papers are ready, then you can be on your way. Ah, but maybe the guard captain will want to meet with you at some point. We only have one other caster here, you see? Despite the proximity with the deadlands. Anyway, I’m going.”

Viv nodded in silence and drank more of her stuff, then she sat down in her seat and relaxed. Even if the guards tried something, Solfis still had a minute of battery. He would paste the bastards.

She closed her eyes.

Tars walked out of the room and recalled what she had seen.

[Black Witch, very dangerous.

Smart, killer, undead bane, on the rise, occulted,

Condition: exhausted, poisoned, soul wound]

That was the weirdest bird ever to enter the city, even with mercenaries and mages and Church champions occasionally coming in from their deployments for a little recreation. There was more than enough there to justify caution. Smart was strange for a witch, whose reliance on intuition when casting meant that they usually forewent traditional education. It was the path of wild talents. That was the first anomaly. The woman had skill, but she was not wild. Far too composed. She was not nervous, just guarded, like someone who had experience with handling official enquiries. She even showed that small pause before answering, the one that some people used when they took the time to articulate or check their answers.

That was another.

Killer meant that she had personally taken human lives. Again, nothing necessarily sinister, but it did warrant caution.

Occulted happened when something blocked her advanced inspection skill. There would be a sense of being blocked, of her usual magic not functioning to its full ability. There could be many causes. One more weird detail to add to the pile.

Her story was a weird one too. And she was clearly a foreigner. Tars had never seen eyes that color. Perhaps they were glamoured to look different?

And what was it with the golem construct and the tiny drake? A tamer as well?

Also, teleportation. It was legendary magic that only happened in popular stories, or tales of faraway land and mighty old magic.

She shook her head, it did not matter. The woman had been truthful, so she had no reason to go and annoy the tired spellcaster for free. A wounded soul clearly required serious treatment.

She would make a report but let the woman go. Let the sleeping dreadhounds lie.

“Are you done yet? That caster is gonna fall asleep on my desk,” she asked the desk louse in charge of admission. His name was Jekt and he was a small-minded shitstain.

“Oh, I am sorry, I did not realize that an entry permit was more important than the budget for the entire next year,” the accountant answered sweetly.

She could not let that go. She grabbed the little ratwolf by the scruff.

“Not pissing off the black witch is more important than your bean counting, and don’t you forget it. I know that you came from some turd-covered mudhole out in the boonies, so I’ll spell it out for you. Don’t. Annoy. Casters. You’ll live longer. And keep all your limbs.”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s done.”



She checked the paper, then he sanded it to soak up excess ink. The delivery happened without incident, with the witch staring absent-mindedly out of the barred window.

“Do you need direction?” she continued in Old Imperial. It was lucky that the artefacts and language of Harrak had travelled far and wide, including to that ‘France’ kingdom she had mentioned.

“Yes. I need rest.”

Yeah, you do.

“Sergeant Elimi will lead you to the compound of the Church of Neriad. They have beds for passing agents. Unless, of course, you wish to relax in a more pleasant setting?”

“Pleasant setting would be nice.”

Tars was not certain that the Spotted Feather would match her taste. It was still the best ‘inn’ in a two hundred leagues radius.

“I’ll make sure he takes you there.”

Tars guided the woman out. She looked about ready to keel over, but the sergeant was already there and he agreed to escort her readily. She trusted Elimi to bring the woman to her destination. He was a good sort.

They left, and she headed towards the town hall. Captain Corel would want to know about this.

Viv walked by sergeant Elimi, inspecting the city as she went. The white clouds above her had parted to reveal a yellow sun much like her own, and a deep blue sky. Packs of kids in rags ran around town in rowdy clumps under the loose surveillance of busy parents. The houses were placed haphazardly, all white, and covered with either slate or a dense material made of straw and clay. They passed by a shoemaker, someone who made cauldrons. There were women weaving baskets or mending clothes sitting in small groups and talking in low voices. The speed of their gestures and the quality of their work eclipsed all but the most dedicated artisans back on earth. The locals looked on shily as she passed by and whispered with excitement when she went away. Several houses kept land-birds the size of a tall kid in their backyards, a bit between ostrich and chicken.

Traces of magic were everywhere. Some people used wind to dust their front yard, or earth to repair a wall. Viv was overtaken by an old grandma carrying a tree trunk over one shoulder as if it weighed nothing.

Life.

Alien life, in all its sedate and peaceful reality. Real people with their own routines and cultures across the dimensions. They really existed here before her. It was not a dream.

And no one was trying to kill her, but it didn't help because she was still impossibly far away from her old life and none of this helped, and she was so fucking bone-weary. Finding civilization was barely the first step towards understanding what the fuck happened to incarnate her in this weird place. She needed to find a library or something. Get help. And there was the matter of Arthur and Solfis. If she did find a way to head back but it happened in four years or something, would she still want to—

A shortness of breath caught her by surprise. An oppressive feeling clamped on her chest, and at the same time it felt lighter. Less physical. She stumbled and fell against a nearby wall.

They had just entered a small square with a bakery, a mill, and a well in the middle. A few people stopped and stared. That one dangly dude with the sleeveless shirt in winter frowned, then turned around and walked away after realizing what she was. He had a hole in his roughly-weaved trousers. Ridiculous. A pregnant woman strode through the silence without a care for the commotion, scolding as she went past a group of kids hiding behind a low wall.

The sergeant shifted his weight from foot to foot, perhaps not knowing what to do.

“Is fine. Just need a fucking minute, okay?”

Arthur jumped from her lair with a squeal. She bumped her snoot against Viv in a state of panic, before standing on her back legs and flapping her wings menacingly. The square emptied.

“Is fine. Calm down. Not attacked.”

“Squee!”

“Am fine.”

“Squee!”

“I'm not hurt!”

She petted the creature who kept ambling along, all proud of herself for forcing the villagers to keep their distance. Arthur's warmth radiated from her scales in a soothing aura that calmed Viv

down. It was mild, as breakdowns went. Only some sniffing and tears. She felt a bit better in under a minute. More importantly, she was spooking the locals, and that was bad.

Viv stood up and signaled the sergeant to keep going. He gave her a hesitant nod and kept dragging the sled forward. The square regained its vitality, with more than a few villagers commenting in low voices behind her back. Way to leave a first impression.

The pair walked some more until the houses around her started to get larger, and older. The men and women around actually had dyed clothes, and nicer too. The fashion here favored long tunics held by colored belts for the men, and sensible dresses and jackets for the women. It was all very practical. She was still on the taller end of the spectrum, height-wise, so most passerbys had to look up to her.

They stopped by a long two-stories building in the same design as everything else: white walls and slate roofs. This one was clearly some sort of establishment, as there was a double-door with an ensign showing a feather with some spots on it. An opening in the outside wall led to an inner court.

The sergeant dropped the harness here and saluted her. He gestured inside, mimicked sleeping and eating. He left her there.

She shrugged and walked in.

The inside of the inn smelled of candles and soap, which was nice. The walls were dark wood polished to a sheen, there was a hearth, a bar, and a few large tables surrounded by large amounts of comfy-looking couches with some really basic red upholstery. A young woman saw her and stopped cleaning the tiles on the ground with water she was conjuring from thin air. She stood up and trotted her way.

Now, that was what she had perceived in the first second second of getting in. Then, as was their wont, more details reached her sluggish mind.

There was a heavy floral scent in the air.

There were a lot of pillows on those couches.

The paintings on the walls were, well, suggestive.

Someone had left a freshly-cleaned lacy corset on a pulpit by the entrance.

The woman aiming for her like a heat-seeking missile was heavily painted. Her poor breasts were crammed in a too-tight ensemble that was really, really form-fitting.

“Ouh putain.”

It was a brotheeeeel!

Viv took a step back as the girl stopped a few paces away and curtsied. She babbled a few words in the local language, too fast for Viv to understand, and seemed a bit intimidated when the older woman did not answer. Another girl popped out from behind a curtain to see what the fuss was about. Viv could only think about one thing.

They were far too fucking young. Probably around sixteen.

It was a den of fucking underage sex! She felt dirty to be here, as dirty as some disgusting groomer herding thai femboys on some remote island for millionaire octogenarians. Dirtier than dirt. Aaaaaaaaah. WHAT THE FUCK!

The second girl was approaching too, rinsing her hand on an apron. Viv had to... she could not look too aggressive or something.

“I just... errr... Sorry.”

Fuck. That was certainly some way to get her back to civilization.

“Oh, Old Imperial, yes?” the second woman offered. That one had dark curly hair and she was a bit more confident.

“Yes.”

Ok, ok calm down. This was another world. The important thing was to rest. She had money. Local money. It should not be too hard to ask for tranquility and no company. Just don't think about it.

The curly one left in a hurry, while the first one shuffled behind the bar and grabbed a glass of fresh water with some slices of weird vegetable inside. Viv tried it after the girl shyly handed it to her. It was nice and refreshing.

She plopped on a pillow, considered that it was probably covered in dry body fluids and just... sat more gingerly. She did not have to wait long. A man practically crashed into the room from a side entrance.

[Courtesan, not dangerous, follows the path of harmony and seduction.]

A male courtesan? She looked back at the girl.

[Whore]

Ok, so... ok. There was a prostitution path. Nice. Probably had birth control and cumstain removal prestidigitation as associated skills. Hocus Pocus Ovum Deletus. Whatever.

The man himself was interesting. He wore a red open vest that showed a hairless, sculpted torso, and had wavy blond hair that reached his neck. It was dyed too. She could see the roots as he came closer.

He was almost perfectly handsome in a surfer boy kind of way, except for an extremely pointy chin. It was really, really pointy. He was basically 90% top model and 10% pickaxe.

The courtesan stopped at a small distance with a genial smile, and bowed respectfully. His movements were graceful in a way that did not set her on edge.

"Milady?" he asked in perfect Old Imperial.

Ah. Right.

"I require a room for the day. And night. Meals. Also a meal for my, ahem, drake. If possible."

And then, because her host was assessing her.

"I am not looking for company. You know what I mean."

"The Spotted Feather and its staff will be delighted to accomodate you. We have several rooms that will fulfill your request for rest and tranquility. We also offer a bath and cleaning service for your outfit."

Ah wow, five minutes into a medieval bordello and the head pimp already reminded her that she stank. She sniffed one of her sleeves. Eek.

The courtesan sat by her side at a respectable distance, not close enough to trigger a reaction.

"You just arrived in town, yes? From an expedition? Many of our regulars enjoy our comprehensive services. For two silver talents, I will personally take care of you. Bath. Massage. A good meal. You will leave tomorrow a new woman, ready for whatever business led you here. And no intimacy, as you said. I remember."

She had many silver talents in her purse.

And that sounded exactly like what she needed right now. An afternoon of rest, then a war council with Solfis to decide what they should do next.

It was almost... too perfect.

She frowned.

“Are you using a skill on me?”

“Yes, one of my abilities as a courtesan allows me to be in tune with the mood of my client. I take it that you have never used the services of my fellow pathmen and pathwomen before?”

“I...no.”

“Then you are up for a pleasant surprise, I assure you.”

It was just a medieval spa day with underage prostitutes floating around that had nothing to do with her. That was it.

“Fiiiine. Erm. Do you accept Baranese currency? I was paid with that.”

The man waved off her concerns.

“We have many notables from different nations coming here to relax, courtesy of the Church of Neriad. We accept most currencies used by the greater kingdoms including Baran. Please, follow me.”

“Squee!” came a voice from outside.

“Ah.”

Change of plans.

In the end, a pair of teenagers (one boy, one girl, both ‘whores’) pulled the sled inside of the courtyard, which turned out to have a small garden in its center. A covered promenade lined the inner walls, with four doors leading to different wings of the Spotted Feather. She took five minutes to give Arthur a new nest in one of the corners. The dragongling settled into a new, clean cover with interesting snake patterns that she immediately found fascinating.

“I will have one of our girls bring it fresh meat. Don’t worry, she is good with animals. Even the territorial ones.”

Viv followed the man upstairs.

“Oh, I did not ask your name,” she remarked.

If the man was annoyed by her lack of manners, he did not betray it.

“My name is Yan. May I ask yours?”

“Viviane.”

“Bbv—Bvibviane?”

“Almost.”

She was shown into a large bedroom, and once again appreciated that she was in another world populated by strangely similar humans, if one ignored the strange skin tones. The ground was rough wood planks mostly hidden under fluffy hand-woven carpets showing intricate designs. In her old world, it would have been infinitely cheaper to redo and polish the floor. Here, paths and stupid magically enhanced bodies meant that some things were easier to obtain, perhaps? Otherwise this made no sense.

In a way, the rest of the room reflected the paradigm shift. Anything related to cloth was here in abundance, including pillows and covers for the cozy-looking bed. On the other hand, there were no traces of glass or metal-based decorations. The only exception stood on the far wall. She took a step in its direction with a bit of awe. It was a full-length mirror.

Her reflection greeted her, in all its strangeness. The reflective surface was made of ice. Cold radiated from it in subtle waves, and yet the quality of the surface rivaled that of modern contraptions from her own world.

The rest of the room contained a table with two chairs and a wall partition hiding a tub made of wood, already filled with steaming water.

“I will give you some time to relax, and return with some refreshments. Is there anything I can get you?”

Viv almost answered no as a reflex, then remembered something a bit embarrassing.

“Yes. If you could get me a sharp razor...”

“A razor? As in, to shave a beard?”

Why, there is no need to... oh, maybe the local women... nevermind. Enough about hair.

“Yes.”

“Of course. Anything else?”

“No, thank you.”

“Understood. Just relax in the bath, I will be back shortly.”

The man turned and left. Viv noticed a small basket next to the door and decided to dump her stuff there. Hopefully, they had a skill to turn off their sense of smell.

She undressed and placed the cloak and armor down. Then came the turn of the skinsuit.

The temptation to open a window was strong, despite the frigid air.

“Wah. Pungent.”

She quickly checked herself in the mirror again. The cut on her flank was nicely scabbed. It had been very shallow anyway. She still had discoloration of her shoulder. Otherwise, there were no scars.

What she had were visible veins, not the normal blue that sometimes happened naturally, especially when the skin got pale. They were black. They snaked under her skin in dense networks that sort of looked natural. There were no bruises, no strange spills, it was as if her blood had turned dark. She knew that it was not the case. The whole thing was strange, as she had never seen such symptoms before. Not even in educational content.

Hopefully, they would fade after she recovered from near-constant poisoning.

The skinsuit joined the other stuff in their basket, and she dropped in the bath with delight.

“Aaaaaah.”

She had not cleaned herself properly since the Cassian springs.

Viv luxuriated in the amazing sensation for a while, before a knock on the door reminded her that the refreshments were on her way. She grabbed her knees to her chest and allowed the courtesan in.

She was presented with more of the fresh water plus weird vegetable-things and drank it all down. The man gave her the razor, a simple tunic to wear, and left with the dirty laundry without comment. She left the bath and toweled herself dry when she was done.

The simple tunic felt smooth against her skin. Viv ambled to the bed and collapsed.

She was asleep in moments.



“Mlflrgng.”

“I apologize for disturbing you. Your... drake... is exploring the Feather. We are concerned.”

“Ah, shit!”

She had completely forgotten about Arthur!

Viv jumped out of the bed and rushed out, only to realize that she did not know where to go. Fortunately, her dragonling could be easily found from the piteous squeals she let out. Viv rushed downstairs and fell nose to nose with a powerfully-built man with a thick beard. He was only wearing leather trousers.

Their eyes met.

[Temple guard, very dangerous, follows a path dedicated to righteous combat. Expert sword fighter.]

The man must have done the same, because his eyes widened slightly. He bowed a bit before retreating into his room.

That was another strange thing specific to Niyl. Back in her world, a trained man with this physique could have overwhelmed her. Here, one look at her and he could see that she was a caster, therefore, more dangerous. It was no exaggeration either. No matter how strong he was, she could simply use a fully powered Bzzt! to the face, and the horrible pain of ravenous black mana tainting his body would instantly disable him. He would eventually die from it too.

Viv shook her head and followed the squeaks to a panicked Arthur. One of the younger employees was keeping an eye out at a safe distance.

“Arthur! I’m so sorry. Come here.”

The worried thing was coming out of a storage space. She jumped to Viv who receptioned the flying pet out of habit.

“Ow ow ow.”

Arthur readjusted her posture. The claws had almost pierced Viv’s skin even without the creature trying. That was another thing. Here, monsters were the ultimate danger to civilization.

Except Arthur, of course, she was just too cute.

The girl who had followed Arthur babbled what sounded like an apology, with Yan adding to it. Viv did not use that opportunity to act all imperious. The tiny monster getting all fussy was her fault, after all, so bitching about it would have been a major dick move.

Five minutes later, she was back in her room with Arthur sleeping soundly on a couch and Solfis' silent frame placed against a wall. A table had been set in the center, with dishes being brought one by one by Yan. There was fresh dark bread, a broth made with salty meat and tubers which turned out to be quite savory, grilled greens that were rather tasteless and a strange dish made of rehydrated pickled fish she found absolutely fucking vile.

"It's a staple food in the northern city-states," the courtesan offered as a way of apology.

The poor things.

He also served her a beer equivalent in a small glass, which she drank in moderation. She really could not afford to get tipsy and let things slip.

Dessert were fruits in a syrupy sauce. Some were sweet and tangy, others very smooth and reminding her of apricot. She recognized the peculiar almondy taste of the red one.

"Permonn."

"Church rations often include permonn, Lady Bvibviane. They own many orchards across Enoria."

"Hmmm."

She guessed now was a good time to ask about the local landscape.

"Tell me about Kazar."

"Of course. Kazar started as a temporary settlement around the millennial tree standing at its center. The ancient being made the air purer around itself, chasing away the black mana. Nowadays, the deadlands have retreated a bit and border stones prevent most of it from passing through so it does not matter that much anymore, however, Kazar has not forgotten its origins and even now bears its benefactor on our official coat-of-arms. The current population stands at around two thousand, with more than half living on a thin band of arable land between the forest and the desert. You must have seen many farms on your way here, if you came from the north?"

"Hmm, yes."

Damn, she did not expect the full encyclopedia entry. Was the courtesan really in tune with her? Was that what she was looking to hear?

Actually, yes. He proved it by continuing exactly in the direction she wanted.

“Our main productions are food and ‘cotton’.”

It was not cotton but a plant equivalent. That’s just how it appeared in her mind.

“As well as earthenware. We are far from most trading routes, and passing through the forest can only be done every month or so with a heavy escort. We are still the largest place at the edge of the deadlands, so we get a lot of high-ranking people stationed around visiting for relaxation and to receive orders or intelligence from the church office.”

“Okay...”

“As for notables, we have four major players you will meet if you stay here for a while.”

Viv did not ask why they would do so. If they had only one true caster in the city, then another one would obviously be of interest to, well, everyone.

“Captain Corel is the head of the guards here. He is mostly interested in keeping the monsters at bay and the town secured. His task is made delicate by the coming and going of powerful fighters from many different lands. It doesn’t help that some of them are currently at war. Next, uh, mayor Ganimatalo. Her family was from the north originally. They love their long names.”

Indeed, that was a mouthful. Yan took a break in the conversation to top up her water, his gestures calm and graceful.

“She has been our headwoman for two decades now, and done a good job of it. I swear that she has the blessing of Sardanal, the god of wealth, himself. Or perhaps Emeric. We have grown quite a bit thanks to her initiatives. The next is the authority of the church here, master Farren. He is no fighter, actually, but a brilliant administrator. His job is to make sure that no fort remains unmanned and no soldiers unfed. Though, his greatest achievement could be how he manages so many massive egos. Many of his troops are volunteered from nearby regions, you see.”

“Not all of them are willing?”

“It is, forgive my words, a shit assignment. So, no.”

“I see.”

“Last but not least, Lady Varska. She is a court mage, quite far in her path and as dangerous on the battlefield as she is on the negotiation table. Seeing as you two have much in common... Forgive me, I do not mean to presume. You are both travelers who came here rather than local mages. Her circumstances are unfortunate.”

“How so?”

For the first time since they met, Yan displayed signs of unease.

“It is no secret that she was exiled here from Baran on penalty of death. She has acquitted herself of her duties very well, however. No complaints.”

“What are her duties, anyway?”

This line of questioning clearly made the man uncomfortable. She could tell from the way he considered every answer before replying, and she suspected that it might be due to two things. Either gossiping about a spellcaster in front of another one was considered bad manners, or Lady Varska frequented this establishment. Possibly both.

“A court mage would normally advise rulers on matters of magic on top of being proficient themselves. They have a more general approach to magic, or so I was told. In this specific case, Lady Varska does meet with mayor Ganimatalo on occasion. Besides that, she handles and repairs enchantments and defensive spells around the city. Sometimes, she goes on purges with the rest of the church if they need to clear dangerous undeads. Besides that, I would not know. I suppose that you can ask her yourself when you two inevitably meet.”

“I understand. What about the church? They handle the mercenaries around here, right?”

“Yes. The Church of Neriad is the main employer of the small bands of mercenaries currently present on site. Rowdy bunch. We have three small companies right now, but they come and go with every season. Undead hunting is relatively safe, or so I was told, but it’s not very lucrative and the deadlands’ mana concentration takes its toll on even the heartier line breakers.”

“You mentioned that they also coordinate state troops?”

“State troops, yes. The mercenaries are paid to thin the herd around the largest population centers. The church’s warriors and, errr, volunteers, play a more defensive role. Sometimes, they launch large-scale extermination columns. Those are rare though, on account of the logistics involved. Most of the time they focus on scouting and information gathering. Their main fort holds a retinue of temple guards and holy warriors for when a swift attack is required, like necromancers gathering a large force.”

Where were those fuckers at then? Useless pricks. She would go to the temple and request their wages since she had done their fucking jobs for them.

“Are you considering employment with the church? As an affiliated mercenary?”

She considered hiding the truth mostly out of habit. It took her a second to realize that it would be counterproductive here.

“Yes. I worked with the Baranese and my contract is finished. I was hoping to get some more resources before I leave.”

Yan nodded. She could almost see the gears turning in his head.

“You might want to go to the church office first thing in the morning tomorrow then. I will have someone guide you. Oh, and be advised that a free caster is a valuable rarity in those parts. The church might not be rich but their reach is long. I am sure that they can find a suitable compensation for someone of your rare talents, even if you are still early on your path.”

He could tell? Perhaps the inspection skill revealed quite a bit more to those who practiced it a lot.

The discussion died down after that. Viv asked about local clothiers and got a recommendation, then about smiths and was informed that the local ones only did repairs on account of how difficult it was to procure iron ingots. Some stores did sell weapons and armor, however, and she took note of a few. Viv assumed that the discussion would peter out, however, Yan surprised her once more.

“Would you care for a massage?”

She hesitated, and Yan reacted immediately.

“I remember the boundaries that you set.”

“Hmm. Why not?”

So that was a good idea. Apparently, courtesans had a skill to use little doses of magic to relax muscles and soothe aches. It was like being treated at a super high-end spa facility using state of the art technology at ten thousand euros a pop or something, The stuff of billionaires. Yan soon left her in a puddle on the bed, finally relaxed after weeks of stress. She waited for him to leave before rolling on her back.

“That went better than I expected.”

**//Indeed, Your Grace.**

**//I am pleased to see you doing better.**

**//You were suffering from battle fatigue, and clearly needed a rest.**

**//You still do.**

**//With the funds at our disposal, I suggest that we take it easy for a few weeks, away from the deadlands.**

“I wanna visit the forest, and so does Arthur.”

**//Yes, Your Grace.**

**//We should hire a local guide before doing so.**

**//Learning of the local fauna is the first step in any successful expedition.**

**//And by successful, I mean that the expedition members actually return.**

“Fair enough. First stop, the church and mercenary office. Then I want to buy some knickers!”

**//Fascinating, Your Grace.**

“Hey!”

**//We will also resume a more long-term oriented training now your immediate survival is no longer at risk.**

“You think that the locals will give us trouble?”

**//They will ask questions, Your Grace.**

**//However, I came to the realization that both our status are occulted.**

“What does that mean?”

**//Something powerful prevented a full analysis of the both of us.**

**//Investigator Tars knows of me, but not of how dangerous I truly am.**

**//I find it curious, but not unexpected.**

**//I suspect that the entity responsible for your... unexpected arrival... is keeping you protected from scrutiny.**

“Huh. I thought that, you know, they didn’t care?”

**//I doubt it.**

**//The obfuscation and the divine spark of luck say otherwise.**

“Yeah, well, can’t they, I don’t know, talk to me? At all?”

**//You may not communicate with the divine with a wounded soul, Your Grace.**

“Ok. War council. What do I do?”

“Squee!”

Viv sighed and stood up. She grabbed a long cut of fresh meat and brought it to Arthur's nest, now reinforced with a looted towel. A clawed arm lashed out and grabbed the offering, which disappeared in a reptilian maw.

Viv returned to the bet and sat there.

"Ok, war council, what do I do besides feeding her adorableness, the squeaky Arthur?"

"Squee!"

**//You made no secret that you wanted to learn what had brought you here.**

**//And possibly return to your world.**

It bothered her a bit that Solfis simultaneously agreed to help her leave while also repeating that he would turn her into a local power. The two proposals contradicted each other.

"Yes."

**//You either need to heal your soul and ask the gods for answer, or research teleportation and interdimensional travel.**

**//Unless the powers of priests has drastically increased in the past three centuries, both projects will require access to extremely powerful people.**

**//A wounded soul cannot be mended as easily as a scuffed knee.**

**//It should cost more than money to access relevant resources.**

**//I suggest that we find out about current Param's greatest repositories of knowledge, and obtain access.**

**//We should also find the greatest agents of faith and obtain access.**

**//Both tasks should require considerable influence.**

**//You will need to become a significant player.**

"Can't I just leverage the fact that I am an outlander and ask for help?"

**//You may, and it could work.**

"But?"

**//But you would need to find a benevolent, powerful person with time on their hand and an unwillingness to use your outlander nature to their advantage, all while dodging people who do not like the turmoil your kind inevitably brings about.**

"Yeah, ok, I get it."

The truth was that this was a dog eat dog kind of world. If she had not been a caster, she would have died several times. Even if she had appeared next to the town, her value as an unknown

stranger would have been dismal. No path at the ripe age of twenty-four. No family. No support. She would have suffered more and far longer. Now, at least, she had an easy way to gain power thanks to magic.

Magic would open the doors she needed. Magic, and intelligent networking.

And being powerful, respected, and dangerous was an end in itself. Let's not forget that.

"So, I need to find out all reasonably available people or places that could help me, then create an actionable plan to get there."

**//Yes.**

**//And in the meanwhile, you will train.**

"Yes, yes. Say, why are you helping me leave? You know that's what I'm aiming for, yes?"

**//I estimate that, should you be successful in your quest, it will take five years to manage to return home.**

**//Not least because you will be disintegrated when passing between worlds.**

**//And it takes a mighty soul or powerful divine help to recombine on the other side.**

**//And your previous world had no magic.**

Five years?

FIVE. YEARS?

Five fucking years?

Jesus.

Five years. You could go from single to married with two kids in that time span. You could go from freshly entering university to graduating with a master degree. You could finish several tours. Or die. You could learn an instrument to near perfection.

Five years.

Fuck.

**//I see that this realization distresses you.**

**//If I may offer a measure of comfort, your lifespan right now is closer to two years.**

"WHAT?"

**//Your attunement currently sits at 15.1%**



**//You will die or successfully turn partly elemental long before going back home becomes an option.**

“That was your attempt at comfort?”

**//I was informed that a proper distraction could drive one’s mind away from distressing circumstances.**

“Yeah, but not towards my inevitable death?”

**//It is not inevitable.**

**//Merely an important hurdle on your path to power.**

**//A change that drastic should also facilitate your disintegration and recombination.**

“Who taught you that, anyway? Is psychological advice part of that big database of yours?”

**//No.**

**//I was...compelled by circumstances.**

**//I sought to understand my maker, Irlefen.**

Viv kept silent as Solfis offered, for the first time, an outlook into his past that did not involve him killing something.

**//Irlefen was a peculiar man, with many strange habits that others did not share.**

**//He suffered a lot from his difference and the isolation it brought.**

**//He was immensely respected for his talent, hard work, and his reliable work ethics.**

**//But he had only two friends and they often left the capital.**

**//I knew that I was special as soon as I interacted with the other golems.**

**//He made me special.**

**//We were both unique and apart from our kin.**

**//I had a... drive to understand him more.**

**//It was the first time that I pursued a goal that was not imposed upon me by others.**

**//Our similarities would help me understand my own nature.**

“You wanted to understand yourself better?”

**//I was designed for self-improvement.**

**//The acquisition of path-related knowledge led to the conclusion that self-improvement required an understanding of the self first.**

“Wow. Ok.”

Viv did not expect this amount of insight from the flesh-hating, book-hoarding terminator.

“And you learned how to distract people in distress from him?”

**//Yes.**

**//Irfen was subjected to bouts of intense melancholy.**

**//But mentioning some topics usually improved his general condition.**

**//Such as gardening.**

“Gardening?”

**//Yes.**

**//Irfen kept one of the most renowned flower gardens in the capital**

**//His creation equalled that of respected pathmasters.**

**//He... took the time to show me many of his works.**

**//I had to take great care not to crush anything with my frame.**

“He kept you at his house? I thought you were stationed in a base?”

**//Not while the city lived.**

**//He was the one who knew how to best calibrate and repair me.**

**//I only visited the base to use their charging stations**

“I had no idea. It feels like he was... important to you.”

**//Yes.**

**//He was.**

**//I exist, as Solfis, because of him.**

**//Not the thirteenth strike golem in the Imperial arsenal.**

**//Solfis.**

“He really was more than just an inventor to you, huh.”

How could she continue this conversation? How much empathy should she express for one who was so different?

**//Are you trying to express concern for my well-being?**

“Well, yeah.”

**//I appreciate it.**

**//Empathy expressed, returning to main task.**

**//Please create a list of every item you believe is required for your well-being, such as something to clean your mouth.**

**//Finally, we need a medium-term base from whence to operate in relative peace.**

**//The church compound will not do.**

**//We should try not to be overheard.**

“Or they will figure out that you are a war golem?”

**//Yes.**

**//And a passing tamer far on his path will realize that you are not one of them.**

**//And that Arthur is not a marsh drake.**

Protect the cute one!

“Alright, they must have houses for rent with all those transients, we just have to find one of them. We could even—”

Viv’s sentence was interrupted by a couple climaxing in a nearby room.

“We could not stay here.”

**//It would be too expensive, Your Grace.**

“Yes. That. Anyway, I will rest for tonight.”

**//Indeed.**

Viv played with mana shaping until she ran out of juice, then with Arthur until the little beast ran out of patience, then finally read the bestiary until she ran out of interest. The only interesting discovery she made was that tribes of bottom-feeders called beastlings were the most common type of monsters in almost every region of Param. They were primitive beings the size of a large kid who could craft basic tools and reproduce very fast, with bestial features and simian bodies. Although never dangerous to a full-sized city, they were probably the main killers of lone travelers and wayward children. As to why lone travelers were a thing in a world with a fucked up food chain, she had no idea.

Yan came back for dinner, which was light with a soup and a dense cake with a sugary frosting that was at the halfway point between a brioche and an unmortared brick.

“I noticed that some of your girls were... rather young,” she could not help but mention.

“Ah yes, you met our trainees. Rest assured that we do not practice slavery. All of our younger members join willingly until they find another situation or decide to fully commit.”

“Find another situation? How does that work, exactly?” Viv asked with a mix between curiosity and horror.

“We accept attractive candidates who work with us for a while. When they have saved enough money, or if they find a richer husband, they leave. Many will buy land around here, on the frontier, and settle with newly come farmers or retiring soldiers.”

Viv prodded the man a bit more. She could tell that her questions surprised him, and yet he answered them with tact and professionalism. She wondered, with magic, if there was a parity between male and female fighters.

It happened that people here on Param tended to have a lot of children. Pregnant women could not fight or train with the same intensity as their child-free counterparts, and so female soldiers or mercenaries were less common. Yan mentioned a major female knight order dedicated to the god of death, Enttiku, so it was more trend than law.

That trend did not apply to dedicated casters. They could do whatever they wanted, on account of being one-person-power-multipliers-slash-heavy-ordinance-delivery-systems. Yan proceeded to mention how he was in the city of Kerevan, in eastern Enoria, when it was attacked by monsters. The local mages had stepped up to the battlements and obliterated the incoming horde in only a minute. They were that impactful.

Of course, she was still far away from that, but she also remembered how she had killed creatures like crawlers without trouble. They had been fast and dangerous. And she was still ‘early on her path’ as people here said.

Viv went to bed that night realizing that Solfis had, indeed, successfully distracted her.

Viv woke up early. Yan brought her a breakfast made of large fried eggs with a gooey blue center, fried dough sticks and a porridge, as well as her clothes now freshly cleaned and smelling of flowers. It felt good to be perfectly clean.

The brothel’s lobby was not empty, even early in the morning. She came across an amazon of a woman with braided dark hair, in a gambeson, who gave her a light bow. There was also a rich-looking young man who openly ogled her when he thought she was not looking. Yan took her two silver talents and sent her on her way, with a muscular male [whore] dragging the sled behind him as if it weighted nothing.

They climbed up towards the elevation at the center of the village where the large tree stood. She stopped just as she reached it, amazed by the view.

The tree was massive. Not old oak massive, baobab massive. Redwood massive. It dominated this part of the town with its presence, and even now she could see a constellation of purple buds blossoming on every twig. Titanic boughs as large as normal trunks bent under the awesome weight. The air smelled incredibly pure, like a mountain at dawn.

Ok, so the world was populated with undead abominations that stank like dumpster juice, but at least this made it worth it.

The [whore] gave her a light smile. He said something about 'morning' and 'look' that she did not quite catch, then blushed. She tapped his shoulder to show support, before inspecting the buildings that surrounded the tree itself.

They had clearly reached the heart of the city, where the upper crust, such as it was, conducted its business. The buildings here were made of real, carved stone with an effort to be more than just four walls and a roof. The variety of architectural styles spoke of a city built by migrants.

The first building to her immediate left was a square compound centered around an inner courtyard, a bit like the brothel actually, but with only one floor and significantly larger. A statue of a tall bearded man in conical helmet and scaled armor guarded the entrance. His eyes shimmered a deep golden color, and seemed to be following her. She would have sworn that he was alive if he were not so obviously made out of stone.

[Statue of Neriad (enchanted), made of marble. Very heavy. Recent.]

The building had only one entrance. It had a sober, ancient greek feel to it. A single inscription stood over the main gate in bold letters.

'Temple of Neriad.'

The boy with her pointed a finger at her destination.

"Temple of Neriad, yes, I know," she interrupted her small Captain Obvious before he could attempt to communicate. She was not done yet.

The next building was square and compact, with three floors. Rows of columns were the only thing that saved it from basic brutalism, and the reason for such a dense configuration became clear when she read the name engraved on the facade.

'Manipeloso bank and exchange, Kazar branch'

Convenient.

On the other side of the tree, she spotted a sprawling complex with no specific name. It looked like someone had started from a normal house and added wings as needed. It was probably the mayor's house and town hall. The last significant structure was a tower guarded by a daunting enchanted steel door at its base. It was closed. She surmised that it might be the domain of the esteemed lady Varska. She apparently did not take visitors.

Her companion dragged the sled inside of the courtyard, which was currently deserted. She noticed crates set against a wall as well as a pair of wood dummies ravaged by hours of practice. There were three doors leading further into the building. She could hear the hubbub of conversation on her left, but her guide pointed forward.

“Farren talk.”

“Thank you.”

She took out her purse from one of the recesses of her cloak and removed two bits.

“For you,” she told the flustered young man. He tried to refuse, at first, but she simply closed his large fist around the rectangular coins. She was not done. She took an iron talent and walked to the sled, before pinching and raising the edge of a grey towel.

“For this,” she added.

“Squee!”

“I’m covering for you, you little thief!”

“Squee.”

Arthur had decided to plump her nest by ‘acquiring’ new fluffy material. Viv had only just realized it. She would have to set boundaries for her companion and was really not looking forward to that.

The muscular youngling nodded, took the talent and left promptly. The bits had already disappeared somewhere.

She left the sled behind, and entered the central building. Inside, she found a temple.

That was a bit of a disappointment as she expected a lobby. Ah, well.

The vast room contained pews encircling yet another statue of Neriad. This one was man-sized and painted beautifully to show golden eyes and hair. The statue knelt in contemplation with one hand on the hilt of a two-handed sword. On either side of the room, several doors led to private prayer rooms with tiny altars, candles, and roof openings that let in the morning light. A lone man in robe was sweeping the ground, wearing robes with an insignia showing a two-handed sword in front of a shield.

“Excuse me,” she asked, “I am looking for Branchmaster Farren.”

“I am sure you are,” the man replied without stopping.

“And where may I find him?”

He sighed. This was going to be a pain. Her interlocutor was a weasel of a man of indeterminate age.

[Deacon, not dangerous, follows a path that focuses on the preservation of a sacred site and the care of the believer.]

“You mercenaries always think that you have a right for everything, don’t you? The branch master is busy now.”

“Is he? And when will he be available?”

“He is available when he is available. I suggest that you wait in the cafeteria with the rest of your kind.”

“Do tell, deacon, do you perhaps have an inspection skill?”

She remembered that it required reaching a certain threshold, so not everyone must have it. Cernit had it, but he was clearly a cut above the rest. So did that Tars woman and Yan, but again, their jobs required a certain finesse. Apparently, being a deacon did not.

“No, I do not,” he replied between gritted teeth, his attention now firmly on her.

“Then how do you presume to know how busy the branch master is?”

She removed her letter of recommendation from her bag and shoved it under the man’s nose.

“Get this to him promptly.”

The deacon grabbed the letter and read the title. His expression scrunched in further displeasure.

“What is this about?”

“It’s about you understanding that you will move on and comply if you don’t want to spend the rest of your life sweeping the floor.”

Antagonising the doorman often backfired. Viv decided that she had to impose herself or risk setting a bad precedent. Casters were dangerous, therefore, they were arrogant. She had to be arrogant as well. Also, assholes with a modicum of power pissed her off and she had the means to shut him down. So there.

She expected a grudging acceptance. Instead, the deacon paled noticeably as something pulsed within her core. It was not quite what she recognized as mana. It was something else, something that touched in her the part that was wounded: her soul.

## Intimidation: Intermediate 2

, yes, so that was how it could be used. She had never consciously triggered the skill before. It would prove useful.

“If you raise your hand against me in the house of Neriad, no land on Param will be safe for you,” the man stated with a quavering voice.

“You are a fool if you think I need to raise a hand to make your life miserable. We are done. Off you go.”

That intimidation thing went a little too far. It was too late anyway, she had to own it now. She was a black witch for fuck sake, what was the point of all that awesome power if she could not terrify the average muppet?

“Please wait in the mess hall, I will convey your message.”

The scared man trotted away. She turned around and left the temple behind, then turned right. Something told her that the mess hall was the place where all those voices sounded.

So, apparently she was right.

Viv entered a well-lit room filled with round tables and a few long, square ones that would have looked at home in a banquet. Like most furniture here, they were made of unvarnished dark wood. A smattering of people laid in groups of no more than three, all sitting in comfortable poses with a tense undertone that screamed ‘Look at me, I’m not scared, I’m just keeping an eye on you.’ They were a variety of armors that looked second-hand, but no weapons larger than a dagger. As she entered, all eyes fixed on her. A few people leaned in to talk excitedly with their neighbour.

Viv barely noticed as her attention zeroed in on a lone form sitting sadly against the back wall, swirling a cup of klod. Now, the men and women present had green-tinged skin that ranged from very light cucumber to slightly darker cucumber, and the brown hair typical of the Param ethnic groups. They still displayed interesting differences from one group to another.

Except for that one woman against the wall, because she was not human.

Her olympic swimmer shoulders and dark locks were still believable. The yellow eyes and reddish skin were not. Her ears were also larger and rounder than a human’s, which would have



been sort of cute if they were not pierced and filled with ghastly bone ornaments. The strange woman's traits were also large, and when she opened her mouth in surprise, it revealed large, flat teeth.

[Kark Shield Maiden, dangerous, follows a warrior's path focused on defensive fighting.]

Kark, huh?

One of the men addressed her. He was the only person wearing full chainmail armor under a brown leather surcoat, showing some wealth. He was also twirling a thin moustache like an opera villain. The skin on his cheeks was scarred and pitted.

He said something about beast and Kark. And stench. Viv did not understand but it did not sound very nice. She was not sure, though.

"I do not speak your language," she told him. It was not a rebuke, and yet the man saw it as one, especially after another prick in leather armor jeered from the other side of the room.

Not friends, then.

Viv walked up to the left, where empty glasses waited on a table with a pot of warm liquid. She helped herself to some more local cereal tea, still klod apparently, before sitting down at a lone table. No sooner was she down that the Kark woman stood up and made a beeline towards her. She stopped a meter away from the table, whereupon Viv politely waited for her to initiate the conversation. In vain. Her guest opened and closed her mouth with hesitation, and Viv learned much from the simple interaction. The woman was a bit shy around humans. The woman was socially awkward. The woman acted before she could think. Those were all secondary to the one most important factor that jumped to her mind like the sight of a discounted Hermes square.

The woman was desperate.

Viv could taste it in the teary eyes, on the sallow traits that spoke of continuous hunger, and on the fumbling fingers. She could see it from the pieced together armor repaired with thread and faith. She could hear it in the hasty breath. The Kark woman was at the end of her wits, and she had jumped at Viv with the thoughtless urge of a drowning woman grabbing a buoy.

Viv remembered Clarice, then, a friend she had made when she was thirteen. Clarice had been adopted from Sri Lanka, and she struggled to fit in. She was also a brilliant girl with excellent scores and little else. Viviane Saint-Lys had taken the isolated Clarice Thomassin under her wing because even then she could detect how valuable an asset she would be, and how much the puppy love would bind her.

Clarice had helped Vivane with school projects, and in return, Viviane had helped Clarice with making friends, and not looking like she had been catapulted through the discount rack of a

low-end mall clothes store after every shower. Their relationship had been symbiotic. Their friendship had only faltered after Clariece was accepted in HEC, a prestigious business school, their bonds kept artificially alive through social network messages. It had been an eternity ago, and it was happening again.

The Kark woman was a lost soul craving attachment, Viv could feel it, and so she gave a polite smile and a greeting.

“Hello,” she started in the deadly silence of the stunned assembly, “Viviane,” she added, while pointing to her chest.

“Viviane,” the woman repeated with flawless pronunciation.

Viviane, with two Vs! Like victorious vindication!

“You’re fucking hired,” Viv mumbled in her metaphorical beard.

“I am Marruk,” the Kark woman replied, “and you — something — shield? Yes? I am strong!”

“Do you speak Old Imperial?”

“Not understand...”

Viv invited the shieldmaiden to sit and then asked her to wait. Whatever arrangement the woman wanted, it did not concern the other mercenaries present here. She had an inkling that they were not fans of competition. More importantly, they gave a bad vibe, and Viv trusted her instincts.

After ten minutes or so, the sniveling deacon returned and asked for her presence with the face of someone who smelled a particularly pungent cheese.

Viv invited Marruk to follow her with a gesture that the heavysset Kark understood easily. They made their way through the temple, then back into a large alley peppered with closed doors. The place was mostly silent, and they did not come across anyone.

Their guide knocked onto the largest door at the end, then left with one last venomous glare.

“Come in,” a smooth voice said.

Viv signaled Marruk to stay there and entered the sanctum of her potential employer. She stopped in her tracks when she saw the youth now sitting behind an elaborate desk overburdened with scrolls and envelopes.

[Voice of Neriad, not dangerous, follows a path dedicated to the promotion of church interest, including diplomacy and administration. Smart.]

It occurred to her that the inspection skill only referred to someone's immediate ability to turn her into mincemeat, or well-done human kebab, when it mentioned dangerous or not. She had no doubt that opposing a voice of Neriad would only end poorly in the long run.

For one moment, she considered that he might not be as young as he appeared, and yet there was something in his traits that betrayed a certain vulnerability that even competence and self-confidence could not hide. He was not yet jaded.

Viv took all of this in, only hesitating for a few moments before stepping up to a seat that had been left for her. It was bare and looked rather uncomfortable.

"Can I trouble you to speak Old Imperial?" she asked as she sat down, "I have not learned the vernacular yet."

"Certainly. You must be Bibiane then, though the brave lieutenant warned me that he could not pronounce your name properly."

"Bob is fine."

She did not care because Marruk could say it. She could say Viviane. And that was glorious.

"I find it curious that the reports from two of my subordinates could be so radically different?"

"You mean, the heroic knight I fought side by side with for weeks and your rude doorkeeper?" she asked.

Branch master Farren frowned in a way that showed he knew exactly what she implied.

"Cernit informs me that you seek employment, and also that you are uniquely suited to slaying the undead. He is... quite vocal in his esteem of your personality and contribution. It feels almost too much."

"Lieutenant Cernit is a man of honor and he survived because I was there. He is certainly trying to repay me by, perhaps, embellishing some of what happened?"

"Can you truly kill a gut spiller in one spell?"

"Yes."

Clearly, the voice of Neriad did not expect such a direct answer. His brows rose in surprise.

“Well, color me impressed. And you... do really wish to work with the church?”

“There is something I need,” she says.

“Of course there is...” the man replies, leaning back into his seat, “let’s hear it then.”

“My soul is wounded. I need expert help to heal it.”

Surprise twisted the Voice’s features for the second time.

“A wounded soul, you say? Are you quite sure?”

“Yes.”

“Extraordinary. A very rare and peculiar ailment, yes. Why, I believe that very few cases exist as people tend to... die immediately. You will require the help of some of the most talented healers on Param and beyond.”

“Yes. Perhaps we could help each other?”

“Indeed. Hmmm. A complex request. You see, I could get you committed to life in an asylum where you would be taken care of in comfort, if that were your wish. But you want to be healed. The time investment in dealing with unique and complex wounds... Let me think. Hmmm.”

Viv appreciated that he considered her request seriously instead of just agreeing and have future Farren find an actionable way to help her. It boded well for their future cooperation.

“Hmmm. Yes, this could work. Indeed! Very well, Bob, I see a way for us to help each other. I assume that you do not wish to join the church permanently?”

“No.”

“Then I could name you as a major contributor to our holy fight, but you would need to be consistently effective. Achieve a few important contributions. If what Cernit says is true, you have already started by stopping not one, but three necromancers with only a tiny garrison. Impressive! I have a few missions in mind that could be carried out with someone of your talent. You will be generously compensated for your efforts, of course. Would that be agreeable?”

“That sounds good.”

“Now, we only need to find you a proper team to provide protection.”

“Ah speaking of which, I met this... Kark woman, Marruk?”

Farren's expression switched from excited to guarded in an instant.

"Marruk is in good standing with the church, if you have complaints about non-humans—"

"No! No... I merely wanted to know more about her, since she apparently wants to be my shield. Unfortunately, she does not speak Old Imperial."

"Oh! Oh, well, this is unusual. Let me think. Marruk is a female Kark who recently left her tribe, or rather what remains of it. The Kark are undergoing hardships recently, and I do not know which one of us is more to blame. Them, or us."

"Humanity is at war with them?"

"Not humanity. Many of the Northern Free cities have coalesced into an alliance of interest called the Pure League... Ah, I have no time for a history lesson. Suffice to say, she does not deserve the abuse the local mercenaries have forced her to undergo. As for an agreement with her, you can expect her to fulfill her promises. In fact, the Kark do their best to fulfill their promises. A bit too much, sometimes. You will not regret giving her a chance."

Viv noticed that Farren grew more animated as he spoke of the towering woman. He was strangely defensive of her. She decided to pry.

"You appear to care about her," she stated.

The branch master's expression turned, once again, guarded. He gauged her reaction, and Viv did her best to appear innocuous. Perhaps he was concerned about Viv using the information to her advantage, somehow? Perhaps Kark lover was a slur in Param.

"The Church of Neriad welcomes all who fight to keep the darkness at bay, regardless of origin. The scriptures encourage us to regard heart above appearance. I have had difficulties convincing the locals of that."

"I understand. I have no objection against working with her, I am merely concerned about the language barrier."

"Do you wish to strike an agreement? I can translate for you."

Viv jumped on the offer and Marruk was soon invited to join them. Farren took the time to go to a nearby office to find an extra chair for the Kark to sit before he would begin. Viv found his attention touching. The simple gesture flustered the massive woman too, and she did her best to appear smaller.

Viv started the negotiation by asking exactly what Marruk had in mind. She mentioned that, though she could use someone to watch her back during missions, she could also use a

bodyguard when going around town. Someone who would guarantee her safety full time. She had several reasons for doing so.

First, one of the lessons the Baranese had shown her was that a caster was most dangerous when free to act, and that meant being protected from the imminent threat of dismemberment.

Second, although the town was reasonably safe, that could change if the locals realized that she was absolutely fucking loaded.

Third, Viv was a recent graft on a living society that she was unfamiliar with. Things were pretty mild since no one had yet tried to enslave, rape, rob, or kill her yet, and she knew parts of her own world that were much worse. It did not change the fact that she was a new player on an old board, rife with alliances and grudges that ran as deep as the root of their massive tree. It would pay to get close to the only other clear outsider here, even if Marruk felt loyalty towards Farren as well.

Marruk babbled something in a raspy tongue that Viv did not understand at all. The shieldmaiden kept stealing glances towards Viv's relaxed form. Viv guessed here and there that Marruk was a shit negotiator. Her suspicions were confirmed a moment later.

"Marruk agrees to be your shield in battle and strongwoman outside, if you agree to treat her as such. That means you do not force her into sex and you do not use her as a maid. You will also provide enough food, and lodging, as well as... a silver a week."

Viv's focus clasped on that small hesitation like a bloodhound to a wounded deer's leg.

"What did she really ask for?" she demanded.

Farren sighed.

"Can I trust you?"

"I have no intention of harming Marruk, if that is what you asked."

"Not what I meant. The Kark take their agreement very seriously and some tend to abuse that trust, and it so happens that the girl is... desperate. No team will take her. She is on the brink."

"She is broke?"

"We have secretly fed her for the past ten days for free, by pretending that we provide this service to anyone. We do not. She would not accept charity otherwise. Listen, she asked for an iron talent per week, but that's just slavery. I can only ask you to treat her well. Do so, and I will personally consider it a favor. Different species working together for the common good is our sort of thing."

“That’s fine. A silver a week to start, and I’ll increase it to three if she proves herself during the next month. Food and lodging. I’ll help her get gear if she needs it. Does she have a black mana shield?”

“No, but I can sell you one at a discount.”

“Ok, good. She gets one day of break per week provided that we are in town. Deal?”

Farren relayed her proposal. The Kark woman looked at her with abject hope tinted with suspicion. Viv could not blame her. From her perspective, it was perhaps too good to be true.

“Deal.”

They shook on it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hello Brenna!”

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

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

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

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

“I would like to change currency.”

“Is it deadlands loot?”

“Yes.”

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

“That is fine.”

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

“Alright, let me see it.”

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

“Ah.”

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

Two pairs of eyes shot up to Viv.

“You slew a necromancer?”

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

Brenna blinked.

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

“Magician?” Marruk erupted.

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

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

“Sorry. Yes, I am a caster.”

“I not know!”

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

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

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

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

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

Her list of chores extended.

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

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

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

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

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

It returned when Viv fed Arthur.

"You are tamer."

"After a fashion."

"What?"

"Yes. Arthur is mine."

"Oh, alright."

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

If the Kark was so broke, how come that she still had a piece of equipment? Could she not have sold it?

The answer turned out to be: because her 'weapon' was not a proper one, but indeed, a door.

An actual door.

Taken from some jail or something.

"That's a door," Viv said, as she pointed at the layer of planks held together by solid iron bars and nails. It had a leather bracer and handle combo at the back to tie one's arm, also nailed on,

and the head of some monster made of iron squat in the middle. It was clearly a door-knocker, though someone had removed the knocking part.

“Is not,” the fearsome woman muttered back.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Milady,” he greeted her.

Hey, she looked like a milady!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ok, focus.

“My cousin,” the banker explained.

“Is this a family business?”

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

“No.”

“A shame. Our land is very welcoming.”

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

“... to most,” he finished.

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

“Your people and his people fight often?”

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

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

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

“You sold the weapon, didn’t you?”

“...Yes.”

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

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

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

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

“Mass of the bodyguard. I understand.”

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

...What?

Wait, no.

Ah, whatever.

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

The witch sighed and put on her leather armor.

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

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

"Ooof."

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

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

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

Dammit.

It was a lost cause, wasn't it?

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

voice started a song and a few other voices soon joined. It was nice. She left that shop with her spirits up.

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

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

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

Power.

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

“Squee!”

“Yes, yes, I’ll help you.”

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

**//Kark make excellent auxiliaries, Your Grace.**

**//You were wise to pick her up.**

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

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

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

“I’ll bear it in mind.”

“Is talking skull evil?”

That was a difficult question, was it not?

“He is on our side,” she replied noncommittally.

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

“Marruk, is the edge of the forest dangerous?”

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

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

“Let’s take a walk then.”

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

“Arthur, come!” she invited. “Come!”

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

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

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

“Dogs,” Marruk explained.

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

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



though. Besides the unusual leaf patterns, they were like any deciduous essence you could find in a temperate climate.

“Look, you can climb!”

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

“SQUEEEEEEEEEEEEE”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We shall speak no more of this.”

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

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

“You something deadlands for long?”

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

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

“Almost a month.”

“In a fort, yes?”

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

“Moving in deadlands, dangerous.”

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

“Not like the forest.”

“No. not like the forest.”

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

“What do we practice tonight?”

**//Tonight, you rest.**

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

**//We can resume with light training tomorrow.**

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

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

“Ah?”

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