

“We cannot let the rule of law apply subjectively. The people must fear it, or they will stop respecting it. The more exceptions you create and the more fragile justice will become until judges believe they can get away with helping their ‘friends’. I have seen it happen.”

Lady Azar glared at Viv, testing her resolve and her values. Viv glared back.

It was a mess.

Being seen as a place of second chance meant that a lot of people came to Harrak. The problem was that those who needed a second chance had wasted their first shot. Sometimes, it was due to external factors. Sometimes it was because they were idiots. In a few cases, it was because they were irredeemable assholes. The end of week was hanging day in Kazar now.

The person in question was not an asshole.

Abe reclined in his seat. Contrary to Lady Azar, he had accepted Viv’s invitation to sit. He was still wearing his judge robes.

“I already had a discussion with Kerra. She bitterly regrets her actions and I believe her when she insists she wasn’t aware of the temple’s assistance program. She was starving, Viviane. She is still scarred by her treatment at the hands of her husband. Executing him meant she had no income. We cannot flog people for stealing food when the alternative—”

**//That statement is untrue.**

“When the perceived alternative is starvation for her and her two children. The purpose of justice is to make the world a better place. Sometimes, mercy is the best answer.”

“Mercy is extremely subjective, Viviane, and you do not want a slider on the sword of justice.”

**//I agree with the Lady Azar.**

**//What is good for that starving woman is not good for society.**

**//Let her atone for her sins.**

**//Then the temple can help, if it wishes.**

Viv traced her chesplate’s engravings with the tip of her finger. Intense arguments seldom happened. When they did, they referred to philosophical arguments on the nature of good and justice that she could not answer. There was also the question of jurisprudence or ‘case law’, laws set on precedents. She could create a precedent that stealing while starving could not be punished but, honestly, she wasn’t sure how it would all work.

Viv wasn’t a lawyer, or a philosopher, but she was a politician.

“Abe will condemn this woman according to the law but with the lightest possible punishment, then I will pardon her at the end of the coronation ceremony along with a couple of other prisoners with, let’s just say, strong attenuating circumstances. The temple can take it from there.”

The three considered the result. The law would publically prevail then the sovereign would show mercy in her day of ascension, thus preventing a starving mother from being flogged which wasn’t anything anyone with two brain cells and a heart actually wanted to see.

“That sounds like a good compromise,” Lady Azar begrudgingly agreed. “and it would cement your reputation of a ruler of the people.”

**//I approve of the manipulation of fleshbag scruples.**

“Thank you, Viviane. Kerra will repay this kindness in her every day life.”

“Excellent, now, where were we?”

Abe excused himself as the servant of Enttiku still had much work to do. Lady Azar stayed.

“Abenezigel has become a pillar of the community. Commoners flock to him for advice. His fame grows. Are you sure he will not become a threat to you in the future?” she asked.

Viv didn’t have to consider the question.

“Abe is too dedicated to peace and recovery to pursue power, even if it were offered to him on a silver platter. I doubt his goddess would tolerate a coup.”

“If you say so. I still believe he is too kind for a judge.”

“He hangs people, Azar.”

“He cries when he has to do it.”

“Tears don’t heal broken neck bones. Now, what about the coronation?”

“The Temple insists that you should spend the night before the ceremony in prayer.”

“Fine.”

The prim Baranese countess blinked, one of her stronger reactions.

“I expected resistance. You are not... the most religious person.”

“Neriad is not just our patron god, he’s a force of good. Being religious has nothing to do with it.”

“Wait... He spoke to you?”

“Yes. Great personality. Didn’t let his power get to his head. I’d fight by his side without hesitation.”

“I... I... the gods do not simply talk to people!”

“Hmm. I am not people. Don’t mean to brag, of course. And if Neriad has never spoken to you...”

“He has not.”

“Have you considered waging righteous war?”

Viv enjoyed her short gotcha moment while Lady Azar simmered in her seat. Outside, the view was clear of revenants. She’d cleared all she could in preparation for the coronation when thousands of people would gather below the cliffs to celebrate. That much vitality in a single spot would attract any undead in the vicinity if she kept any alive. They were all set. She was almost there.

She was going to become royalty.

That was admittedly pretty fucking cool.

The French in her conjured the image of a guillotine. She was not an absolute sovereign so it would be fine, right? Also, no one needed a guillotine when the average headsman had strength in the thirties. Maybe she should introduce it just for the clout.

\*\*\*

The in between. Viv found herself facing the golden orb that was Neriad’s massive presence. He sort of shone around, bathing his surroundings in benevolent radiance. She started feeding him mana as part of her prayer.

VERY FEW ARCHMAGES EVER PRAYED TO ME.

“You’re more of a sword guy, right?”

THERE IS THAT. SARDANAL AND NOUS WERE OUR CASTERS, BACK WHEN WE TOOK OVER.

“Could you be a little less loud?”

SIGH

“Oh, very well, mortal. But I cannot stay for long. My attention can only divide so much. Normally, we would have a long conversation on the future of your kingdom. However, I

believe we are already... mostly aligned on our values and for what we are not aligned with, such as assassinating my other servants..."

"I made myself very clear."

"I realize that I will not change your mind. Next time, pray to me first, please?"

"So you can warn him?"

"Viv. Please stop testing me. I am a god."

"Yes, yes, sorry."

"And speaking of gods, I believe it's time for the temptation part. Ugh. Good luck."

"I... wait, what?"

Something slimy grabbed Viv's soul and pulled it back.

\*\*\*

A cavern of obsidian surrounded Viv on all sides, jagged and raw as if carved with stone and anger. She stood over a smooth expanse of nothingness that the dim light failed to penetrate. A god in black plate armor sat atop a throne of darkness, inky hair falling over a roguishly handsome face.

Efestar's smile possessed a self-deprecating quality that didn't fit the God of Scorn.

"Ah," Viv said.

"Indeed. Please excuse the hijack. After all, this is tradition."

"Wait, really?"

"There must be a certain balance in the threads of fate, young outlander. The light gods are more than happy to let me try my luck because otherwise, the others might get a word in. Can you guess why?"

"Because you used to be pals?"

"No. Try again. After all, we have all night and time here flows rather leisurely."

"Hmm. Oh. People on the verge of coronation do not harbor much scorn in their heart?"

"Wrong again, though you are getting closer. I am not sought to experience scorn. I am sought to remedy it."

"Kings have power."

“In theory, yes. Someone who expects to gain power seldom feels like bargaining their lives for a little more. They prefer to take possession, first. So here we are, at the summit of your might, on the verge of your triumph, and I am supposed to try and convince you to give it all up while the list of people you do scorn tends to remain remarkably short.”

“I do try to wipe those names off.”

“So I have gathered.”

The God of Scorn sat back in his throne and folded one leg over the other. He had greaves with tiny skulls on the knee. It was kind of tacky, if she had to be honest.

“Hmmm. We could discuss something else if you want?”

Efestar’s dark eyes widened in surprise, then he laughed out loud.

“What? No threats? No defiant statement of belief on truth and justice? You want to talk instead?”

“Why not? I bet Octas isn’t a great conversationalist.”

“Viviane. Last time, you called me a cunt. What would we even talk about?”

“How about you? I’m sure you would find the topic interesting.”

Viv sat on her haunches. It was a symbolic gesture since she was pretty sure she was still just a soul. In the in between, symbols mattered.

“Why don’t you tell me about your adventures? Before you split from the group.”

“You mean, before they reneged on their agreement and cast me away?”

“Sure.”

Efestar looked, really looked at Viv. Having the full focus of the dark god on her felt like being flung off a mountain into the gaping maw of a titanic creature, the oppressive weight gathering around her for a ravenous, crushing bite.

“Woah woah woah. Please calm down.”

“You are genuinely asking? If this is another trick...”

“Yes I am genuinely asking.”

“Viviane the Outlander, you hate the dark gods. I do not believe for a single second that you would genuinely care about poor little me.”

“First, you’re not like the other dark gods because you come from the newer generation. And second, I’m just curious what turned you into such a rabid asshole.”

The pressure intensified until Viv felt her consciousness unraveling. Any second now, Efestar would flick her forehead, sending her back to her body with a splitting headache.

He didn’t.

His cruel face morphed into a rictus, then a jarring laugh that scared Viv more than the threats had.

“I can see why the others like you. It has been so long since I have felt like a person. Sole worship can become a trap that forces us into patterns, you see? Very well. A tale. A long time ago, a man decided that he wanted to be more than a tribe chief, more than a hero. That man wanted to become the greatest hunter who ever lived. He wanted to become... a legend. And that man was...”

“You?”

“No. It was Emeric.”

“Ah.”

“Emeric had something that all other hunters lacked. You see, no matter how cunning the traps or how sharp the spear, at some point, a hunter will be caught off guard or make a single mistake. Except for Emeric.”

“He never ran out of luck.”

“So it was,” Efestar said as he reclined in his seat.

The God of Scorn’s voice took in a strange intonation, as if he were a poet declaiming stanzas and this despite the fact they were not actually talking with their voices. The uncanny sensation did little to distract her from the tale. An image superimposed itself on the sitting god, speaking from his lonely throne.

Emeric was handsome, cocksure, and genuinely competent. He wore a leather cape made from the skins of a hundred beasts, going from tribe to tribe to search for more prey to pursue and more women to ravish. As his skills and power grew, so did his legend until bears and triffids and giant turtles were no longer enough. He needed to hunt the genuine tyrants of the plains and forests, those the tribes feared and avoid like natural disasters. No human could do so, at least not alone, so Emeric listened to the offers of the gods... and he liked none of them.

The gods were jealous things who reveled in sacrifices. Only those who pledged themselves to them would receive their costly blessings. What saved Emeric was his incredible arrogance.

Because Emeric, the blessed, the one of many kills, the one of many amorous conquests, the man whose luck never ran out, wanted to become a legend on his own merit.

And so, with the magic of the world behind him, he set out to gain power. He found allies. Neriad was the first, a famous warchief himself who rushed into battle using a shell as shield. The twins were next. Maranor used a short spear to devastating effects while Maradoc scouted with great talent, a whisper of a shadow under the boughs. Sardanal was found on a drifting ship off the northern coast. Nous was an isolated hermit dedicated to the development of the magical arts, especially runes. Efestar was an assassin, settling blood debts with the poison of his darts. There were many more but most died during the journey and their names faded into obscurity.

As Emeric's people slew more beasts, their fame rose until it rivaled the gods themselves. Nyil's magic fed them and gave them unnaturally long lifespans so they cleared more land and the tribes thrived in their wake. The hunters were cunning and deadly, patient and implacable. They could seemingly not be stopped. It was not enough. Emeric knew they could do better if only they had better tools.

"Tools?" Viv interrupted.

For a moment, the image faded and Viv was back to being a small soul in the in-between. Efestar was a dark shape covered with hypnotic shiny dots of light. Behind that distracting shape was a terrible stinger of stellar proportions.

The vision reappeared. It centered on a fierce contest. Emeric's band fought against a shelled creature with unusual wolfish features. Their javelins and bolas smacked against the beast's flanks to no effect until they finally managed to overwhelm its defenses by hitting the eyes. Emeric cried over the corpse of a long-haired amazon of a woman, her quiver empty of silex arrows.

Tools. They needed better weapons. And Nous knew where to find it.

Someone had made a sword out of meteoritic iron.

His name was lost to the fog of history but his work remained. Now, Emeric had tools the likes of which this world had never seen and the knowledge on how to make them spread across the tribes like wildfire. Bronze. Iron. Enchantments. Nous taught his spells to every shaman willing to listen. Safe grazing grounds and fields grew in number over decades until the influence of the priests waned and, in the bowels of the lone mountain, they plotted their revenge. One fateful night, killers came after the heroes during a feast.

It was a slaughter.

The heroes might have been disarmed but they had followers and skill aplenty. The families of those slain that day paved a path of death and vengeance that created the first, the very first, true human war. Not skirmishes. Not raids. War.

Years of merciless battle followed.

Those who worshiped the gods who had protected humanity for eons fought against Emeric's band, the legends who wanted to usher mankind into a new era. Those who feared they might lose everything faced those who wanted more. Their enmity could not be reconciled. The fights were to the death. Roving warriors wiped entire tribes to the last child. Hatred and resentment built until only one side would remain and, slowly, that resentment united the survivors behind Emeric, for the servants of the god burned with fanaticism, and they stopped at nothing to succeed.

Slowly, the balance of power tipped in favor of Emeric.

The heroes fought with their own power, using mighty tools while the gods fought through their servants. After countless trials, Emeric's army finally reached the fortress sanctuary of Lone Mountain for one decisive battle. They stormed the complex and slaughtered the priests, defiling the altars and casting down the holy statues. They broke the power of the gods that day. There was a great celebration for mankind was wary and weakened, and the tribes longed for peace. Emeric would not have it. He knew it could only end one way. He knew the gods would fight back from the bogs and deep forests, whispering tender lies in the ears of the unfortunate. So he devised a plan.

Maranor would slay the gods with her meteoritic iron sword turned artifact: the Slayer. A weapon to slay the unkillable. In her hands, it could pierce through any defenses.

Emeric decided they would not scale the mountains where, it was said, the gods resided. Instead, he called them one by one upon the land where legend said they were born. There, Maranor slew her first immortal. The Old King was next, though it is said part of him could have survived. After that, Octas and Gomogog forfeited their thrones and left in exile, condemned to skulk at the edges of mankind for all of eternity. Only Enttiku remained. The cowed one brokered a deal for only the peace of death was of concern to them. And the band accepted.

All except for one.

With a void needed to be filled, Emeric became the king, the God of Luck whose name was on every lip and whose temples were gambling dens, dueling fields, the tip of the arrow aimed at a hunter's quarry. Neriad picked up the sword of righteous war. Maranor took on the mantle of power. Sardanal favored the growth of crops, of families, of relationships. Maradoc veiled the secrets and knowledge of the world, as well as those who would seek it. Nous sacrificed himself to grant choice to humanity. Only Efestar was without a path, for his mantle was death and that mantle remained firmly upon Enttiku's shoulders. In desperation, Efestar pulled the only thing he had left, the emotion that had carried him through the death of his family and the slaughter of his tribe.

Efestar became the god of scorn.

His old companions had turned their back on him for the sake of peace, the same companions who had sworn vengeance by his side on the funeral pyres of his sons.



Because they feared Enttiku and the destruction that one may wrought.

The impressions faded, slowly, until Viv was left panting in front of the throne. Efestar was like a statue. He appeared bored but Viv wasn't duped. It was a facade, a fragile one.

He had not lied. That tale was the truth. One could not truly lie here, not when exposing their heart as he had.

"Well?" the armored monster said, "no quip? No barbs?"

A memory surged in Viv's mind, that of a tiny body engulfed in flames while Neriad's hand gripped his shoulder. That had been the low point of Efestar's life. The lowest point. He wanted to die, then, but Neriad had stopped him. They had promised. They had all promised and then...

"Shit, I'm sorry."

"What?"

"I'm really sorry. It was horrible."

"You mean it."

An immense pressure washed over Viv's soul in a tidal wave until she was an egg in the fist of a cruel child. Efestar could mangle her soul now. Perhaps the rules of this place forbade him to kill her, yet it didn't matter. They both knew there were fates worse than death.

"YOU PITY A DARK GOD? YOU PITY ME?"

"Yes, yes, damn you. Stop that. Please?"

The pressure lessened though Viv was not yet off the hook.

"Look... I don't look down upon you, far from it. I just think... you were dealt a low blow. By people you trusted. I feel that."

"Are you going to be like Neriad, tell me that I am only spreading more pain with every life I twist and that it will not bring me my Caeno back? My Irkal? Will you tell me I have to let go?"

"Did they make amends?"

The pressure lessened and Viv fell on her knees.

"Amends?"

"Yeah... Did they... did they apologize? Did they offer... weregild? Another seat?"

Silence spread over the abyssal throne room. It did so for a very long time.

“No. They didn’t.”

“What? That’s so unexpected. Especially from Neriad.”

The dark god’s throne room shuddered. The double image of the obsidian cave and the planetary scorpion shape of Efestar’s soul superimposed, then Viv was pushed away.

The blast felt like it should have shattered her in a million fragments. Souls were impressively resilient, apparently.

WHAT HAPPENED?

The nearby sun that was Neriad pulsed strangely.

“I think he’s flustered.”

DARK GODS ARE MEANT TO INSTILL DOUBT IN MORTAL MINDS.

NOT THE OPPOSITE.

WHAT DID YOU SAY TO HIM?

“Did you really make an oath to Efestar to avenge his children by killing the gods... and then you didn’t?”

IT... IS COMPLICATED.

“How is it complicated? Did you break your oath or not?”

Neriad sighed a large solar eruption, blanketing Viv’s soul with images of benevolent light. The ghost memories of suffering families flooded her mind.

“I swore to avenge them, to avenge him. And I did. And I still do every time I combat the old gods. Enttiku had nothing to do with it. Emeric said... he said that the future of mankind was more important than any oath, than any of us. He said that if we fought Enttiku, we might die and fail, and then there would be no one left to guide and defend humanity. By the time we found Efestar again, he was long gone. You have not suffered from his viciousness yet so you cannot know. You cannot understand the evil he has dealt upon us and upon the people of Nyil. Entire villages fell because a man sacrificed his daughter to kill his neighbor. I see this and... I wish I had killed him. Right as we ascended.”

“You think he’s too far gone?”

IT NO LONGER MATTERS.

“Ow ow ow.”

“Apologies, Viviane. He has done the unforgivable a hundred times over. He has become a monster, worse even than those he sought to destroy because he knows better and he still spreads misery. You cannot bridge the gap between us.”

“Ok I admit that I am not one of his victims so it’s easy for me to take a calm look at this. And it’s a little hypocritical because I was the first to slay Lancer instead of, for example, ransoming him, however...”

Viv pondered her next words because it was a very, very risky thing to do and she was on thin ice.

“Would you not say...”

BE CAREFUL.

“Would you not say that the future of mankind is more important than the grudge you hold?”

ME DAMMIT.

The sun blasted Viv’s soul. The uncontrolled burst didn’t scorch her but it was a close thing.

YOU DO NOT KNOW WHAT YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT.

I SHARED THE PAIN OF THOUSANDS OF VICTIMS WHO LOST EVERYTHING IN THE NAME OF PETTY VENGEANCE.

HE HAS BECOME EVERYTHING I HAVE FOUGHT TO DESTROY.

“But can he change?”

VIVIANE.

YOU...

INFURIATING LITTLE HUMMINGBIRD.

CONSIDER THE NIGHT OF DOUBT AND REFLECTION OVER.

YOU WON.

NOW PISS OFF.

Viv was flung back into her body by a gentle backhand. She collapsed forward onto the marble of Neriad’s temple and threw up everything her stomach contained, then some bile, then she dry wretched for another solid ten minutes. She wished she had an axe to smash her brain open so it wouldn’t hurt so much.

“You... you debate team sorest fucking losers.”

In his hall, Neriad stopped his blade dance and planted his sword in the sand. He bent his head. For one moment, the mantle shifted, letting old memories resurface. Memories of a time before ascension when victory was but a distant dream and the band was held together by little more than Emeric's unflinching belief. It had been a simpler time. Despite everything, it had also been a much darker time.

The memories of funeral pyres holding the bodies of children invaded his mind like an unwelcome guest.

"Fuck."

\*\*\*

It was the day of the coronation. Viv thanked her lucky star (just this time) that physical stats helped against the equivalent of a divine hangover. The nation's best tailors adjusted her black, white, and gold dress then Gogen herself did her hair in a nice part-flowing part-braided style. They also used a colorful makeup made of crushed stone for her eyes to accentuate their 'unique charm'. She looked great and resolved to do it more often. After that, she was off at dawn to join her knight escort.

As nobles, the knights claimed the head of the formation and Viv saw no need to alter that tradition. They would accompany Viv to the Sinur's Gate's temple where she would be crowned. Viv reached the brand new knight's compound, finding Rollo alone in a garden of blue roses and young trees covered in dew. The armored knight was a striking sight in this colorful landmark, the black of his armor offering a contrast to the enchanting decor. It was only when Viv watched the many stellae standing around the garden that her heart stopped.

She recognized them.

They were Solfis' gift.

"Ah, here you are, Your Grace. Soon to be Your Majesty."

Viv walked to the tall man as he inspected a particularly moving chapter of the 'Gladiators of Harrak', the Old Empire foremost work of homoerotic romance saved from annihilation by horny golem engineers.

"I wanted to thank you for this gift you gave us," Rollo said, pointing at the stellae. His square jaw trembled with emotion.

"For most of my life, I had to hide and live a life of lies. Those days, my dearest wish was to be accepted, to be tolerated. You showed me that my dream was a small one."

It was an important moment and Viv nodded solemnly, deciding to bury forever that Solfis had written the story so Viv could have private moments of 'intellectual stimulation' at the 'thought-provoking contents'. Some details were best forgotten.

“The Gladiators of Harrak is a powerful reminder that the love I feel can be not just tolerated, but also celebrated as a true, pure emotion worthy of recognition. We loving, consenting adults deserve more than tolerance, we deserve acceptance, first and foremost acceptance of the self, by the self. That you managed to save this opus magnum of literature from the ashes of the catastrophe speaks in your favor Viviane the outlander. You reminded me that survival is a necessity but art is what truly makes us humans. From the hands of the ancients, we receive those powerful tales with eternal gratitude, and we shall perpetuate that tradition with our own efforts until the plains bloom with a thousand flowers and a thousand poems set in stone for those who would follow.”

Rollo was now crying manly tears though not a sob shook his handsome face, still as solemn as a tomb effigy. Viv gripped his shoulder in silence because she couldn't trust herself not to say something stupid. He returned her gesture, crushing her trapezius muscles in a death grip.

The remaining thirty knights joined them at this moment in an effusion of manly hugs until Viv herself felt touched. Rollo's paramour then presented Viv with a rolled battle standard.

“A new dawn is upon us. We want to forge a new knight order from the hope of the old and for this, we ask your blessing, Viviane. We ask that you recognize the Order of the Blue Roses as the Harrakan body of knights, and in return, we will serve you faithfully until death. And before you ask, yes, the straight members agreed on the name,” he finished with a chuckle.

“I want thorns on my pauldrons,” the knight whose children were recently healed by Viv said.

Viv unfolded the pennant. It showed a trio of blue roses blooming on a black field, a good representation of the knights who themselves wore black armor decorated with colorful clothes to show their status. It was pretty nice.

“Very well. Kneel.”

The knights, as one, took a knee with their swords in their hands, tips on the garden's soil.

“Do you swear to defend Harrak and its people, to protect the innocent, to punish the guilty and to uphold the law?”

Various affirmations came in enthusiastic disorder.

“Then I name you all Knights of the Blue Rose. May you fight without fear, triumph without arrogance and die without regret.”

Viv manifested a massive Excalibur and saluted which was symbolic enough for the knights. The ride to the city was made quickly and soon, they were in sight of Sinur's Gate.

Hundreds of people were there laying tables and erecting tents, and thousands more were expected throughout the day. It would be a grand celebration. The fires of cooking pits already filled the air with the scent of fresh bread and roasting meat. Cooks diced vegetables

and tubers by the dozens with great speed. Many folks stopped and turned when she passed but they didn't salute, not yet. There was an electrifying sense of anticipation in the air as they knew they were on the verge of a historical event.

Viv rode up the slope at a good trot, then past the monumental gate and through the narrow streets of Sinur's Gate. Flowers adorned every bridge, fell from every window in a floral storm that overcame even the dry smell of the nearby deadlands. It had been less than a year since the city had returned to the hands of the breathing, yet the scars of the devastation were now patched over and only showed the wear and tear of a town well lived in, old and cozy but with a temper. Moss grew on the cracks while old fountain statues gurgled fresh water over white lilies. The blue roses of Harrak bloomed everywhere as a display of hope and defiance. Burly smiths, patient woodworkers, musicians, rich merchants and artisans glutted their street on the way to the temple building which was on one side of the palace. Viv stopped and dismounted near the gates then she found her seat on the high benches at the edge of the main room. Most of her friends and companions were already seated. Lady Azar nodded after a brief inspection of her clothes. Sidjin stood, proud as hell.

"You look gorgeous."

"Why thank you, consort. You're not so bad yourself."

"Squee!"

"You look absolutely great. I love your ribbons."

They waited a few minutes for people to come in. They ran out of seats very soon so Viv had her One Hundred get people to stand on the sides, leaving only a single lane to exit. They began on time.

Viv watched Farren lead his congregation in prayer. It felt weird to be crowned by the clergy when her own nation had enshrined the separation of Church and State in 1905 and staunchly defended it ever since. She told herself she was on a first name basis with the god in question so... it was probably okay. She just hoped the statue would not cry blood during her vows as a vengeance for her little transgression. Thankfully, no such a thing happened. Viv fed a massive dose of mana into the god with a whispered 'hope you're okay friendo' and received an exasperated sigh in reply. Business as usual. The ceremony culminated with the coronation itself.

Viv walked down the aisle with Sidjin and Solfis by her side. The back of the temple held an altar. Lorn was there in the regalia of a temple guard, sword on display. He seemed flushed. Farren also wore official robes. Viv felt vertigo. Those were people she knew, people she'd met as a transient witchling recovering from her deadland stints. They'd known her since she was a nobody and now, they were the vanguard of humanity's effort to reclaim the land. They stood there as not just old allies but symbols of a new nation. Farren was on the verge of tears, his voice breaking over the vows.

"Do you... swear to uphold the rule of law, to show mercy towards the defenseless, and not to compromise with evil?"

“I do.”

“With the power granted to me by the state, and with Neriad’s blessing, I name you, Viviane Saint-Lys, the traveler... Empress of Harrak. May you make the world a better place.”

He removed the crown from its pillow. It was a sober thing of bone and silver, a warrior’s crow with horns like Arthur’s designed to be inserted in a helmet. It only bore basic enchantments because Viv intended to build a better one in the future. For now, it was more a promise than the symbol of a powerful state. It bore no jewels, for Viv didn’t need any. She didn’t need the mantle of wealth or august majesty to rule. She was Empress because of actions, hers and that of the ones sharing her dream, and they followed her because of them.

When she turned, she was met with a sea of gazes. There were at least two hundred people crammed in the small temple. They watched her with bated breath, waiting for her word. They believed. They looked like they believed so hard that Viv started to believe as well.

She moved her hand, taking control of a nearby sound enchantment. Her leadership skill bolstered her voice into one that inspired trust.

“I am now, by mandate of the people, your empress. We all know this is only the beginning and that we are not an empire just yet. I will not talk about all that is left to do. You know the dream as well as I do, the dream of a green Harrak. Instead, I will turn to the past. We are all here because we walked the path of courage. Perhaps you were there in the beginning, tilling fields in view of revenants. Perhaps you lived in the mountains in the hope of one day reclaiming your homeland. Perhaps you braved everything to cross the forest. Perhaps you had nothing to lose or perhaps you sacrificed everything. Perhaps you lost loved ones, for there were many who died to bring us where we are. Perhaps you came here because you wanted a new life, or because you wanted to fight, or to love, or perhaps you wanted a safe haven for your family. Perhaps you came here to heal yourself or a spouse or a child. What matters is that we all stand, today, as one people.

“As we take the final step to define ourselves as a nation, I want to tell you all, well done. This is your day as much as it is mine. This crown I wear represents the pinnacle of all the efforts and pain we have been through. I will ask you a favor. Leave the dream for tomorrow. Today, we celebrate the present, this precious moment of triumph we have grabbed with our bloody hands. Rejoice. Feast. Drink. Love, Dance, and be merry. Come and greet your friends. Raise a glass to my health. Above all, be happy. That is my wish of you for the coronation.”

The cheers confirmed that it was a plan the Harrakans could approve of.

Your leadership has massively improved.

Leadership has reached Intermediate 1

You have gained a new title: Empress of Harrak

Viv smiled as she took her first step as genuine, god-approved royalty. The people touched her when she walked out, greeting them as she went. Outside, the entire town's population roared their approval at being part of something they were building with their own two hands. Their fervor made Viv's ears ring. Exhilaration and terror warred in her heart. They were her responsibility now. They were also here for her as she was there for them.

Viv walked down the alleys of Sinur's Gate, enjoying the purified air. The city was ablaze with colors and with life. All the people she knew were here as Arthur took to the sky, roaring her approval to the delight of the children. The march down the path was a long one because she stopped to greet people, shaking their hand and holding their children to cement the alliance they had all made. When she looked beyond the cliff, she could see the green land they had cleared and the ten thousand people waiting there.

In dense groups, like a shifting sea, they moved around to search for food or for company, or approached the landing, or they toiled on the feast. It was a lot, ten thousand souls seen from above until they merged into a pulsating, living whole, a crowd whose members had all decided to come here. Viv wondered if famous rock stars back on earth felt that pressure of so much attention. The difference was that here, they believed in her to do more than make them dream. They counted on her to make that dream a reality or they would most likely die.

"There are so many of them," Viv wondered.

**//Not yet.**

**//But there will be.**

"It feels so intimidating."

**//And there are no assassins.**

**//So far.**

**//A pleasant surprise.**

"Aw nobody hates me."

**//We will have to remedy that.**

The descent continued onto a central square where they finally stopped. Viv stood on an elevated platform while the different groups of the army marched, swearing fealty to the crown and Harrak. Viv greeted them all while the crowd celebrated the warriors holding the line against the constant undead threat. Once more, her round shield was borrowed to add new plates onto the already overloaded tool. It was probably more than three times heavier than it used to be anyway. Following that, Viv headed a nice banquet while Arthur went from table to table to demand offerings claiming that it tasted better if it was 'requisitioned'. People



drank and made merry for the whole day. Viv greeted everyone who came as a line formed. She spoke until her voice threatened to give out. There were still people coming when night fell.

They had a good time.

As usual, there were clouds on the horizon but for now, they were at peace, enjoying the triumph while it lasted.