

It was evening and Viv invited Denerim and Orkan to have dinner in her brand new tower to discuss the spell. It was hers now, well, hers and Gogen's since the taciturn cleaner had moved in with one of her brood. Viv merely had to pay her and budget for food. With the grains and other things coming in, they had delicious fresh bread with nuts, eggs, green vegetables and tubers in abundance as well as grilled monster skewers. Spice was a bit lacking now but the fresh, magical ingredients made up for it.

"You know, I almost expected you to leave quickly now that the city is back in our hands and we have kept atrocities to a reasonable level," Viv said.

"I would have if my god or my hierarchy had called me back. As it is, we have a little project that interests me greatly and is worth staying in Kazar," Denerim added.

"And at the Spotted Feather!" Orkan added, eyes dreamy and brain filled with tits.

"Ahem."

"Sorry mentor, what I mean to say is that inquisitors must sometimes remain for extended periods of time in the same location because not only does it allow us to settle down and get back in touch with the realities of the common folk, it also let people get used to our sight so that we do not remain symbols of impending doom."

The Hallurian nodded to himself, tattoos mostly dark in this peaceful setting. His handsome angular face had gained a smug expression that suited him strangely. Denerim, of course, was not amused.

"Orkan, what did I say?"

"Be sensitive?"

"No. Well, I said that too. I meant, do not share confidential information with strangers."

"The incredible secret that men can be horny is safe with me," Viv said, "I assure you. I will never spread this most sensitive piece of information."

"Mentor, should we also hide the fact that the man we're supposed to report to is a massive twat?" Orkan asked again.

Denerim sighed deeply. The time had come for Viv to rescue the conversation.

"So anyway I wanted to talk about the healing spell."

"Yes," Denerim grumbled, "that would be best. Have you acquired the change concept yet?"

"I have, but just barely. I need to practice more, but I have found a few things. First, black mana does not create flesh which means that it will have to come from somewhere. Does life mana create tissue out of nowhere?"

“Tissue? Like a hanky?”

“Shut up, Orkan. To answer your question, not really. People who recover from grievous wound are often weakened for a little while and must eat a lot to recover. Could we use... something else’s flesh?”

Denerime looked worried and Viv thought that it was a stupid idea.

“No but we might be able to convert a nutrient soup by, hmmm, liquefying something else’s flesh.”

“What’s a nutrient?”

“Orkan, if you spent more time studying the healing scroll I gave you than scratching your back with your curved sword, you would know. Where was I? Ah yes. If we have the... meat used to rebuild the limb, I suppose, and changed black mana, what else would we need?”

“Are there healing spells? Not just applying life mana to heal but actual spells.”

“I don’t use one because Neriad guides me, but... perhaps? Glyphs could do it.”

“I need to extract information from cells but I have no idea how to do it.”

Denerim considers that for a moment.

“I have no idea why you would need to break someone out of jail,” Orkan said, “but if you want to rebuild a leg, why don’t you take the other leg and mirror it?”

Viv thought that ... it was not too bad an idea, actually.

“We wouldn’t be able to heal double amputees though.”

“Healing some is better than healing none. Besides, once you have the hang of it, maybe you will figure out how to do it? And with that you only need a diagnostics spell. We had those in Halluria.”

“You did?” Denerim asked, surprised.

“Yes. We warborn were hurt a lot. Every day.”

His good mood melted like snow under a flamethrower.

“When we were kids, half of the cohort was seriously wounded between every meal. To save mana, the healers had this construct to detect where the wound was and focus their mana there instead of healing every bruise. I couldn’t recreate it but I remember that there were only four glyphs so it can’t be too hard.”

Viv considered the question. Find, flesh, wound, show? No, it wouldn't work for them because she was trying to copy a limb, not heal it. Find, limb, copy, mirror, show? She would have to experiment. At least, this spell would be harmless.

"Alright so, to summarize, I need a spell to extract the image of the limb and reverse it to prevent people from ending with two left arms, then I need another spell to change the flesh goop into said limb, and then we need Denerim's healing spell to combine with the change spell to heal and reattach the limb. It sounds... complicated and messy."

"We have to start somewhere. It is a grand endeavor."

"I wish I could just toss the entire project at some experienced healers," she lamented.

"And those experienced healers would laugh at you. At this stage, no one believes that limbs can be safely regrown. You would be dismissed and ridiculed. I fear that we must at least prove that the possibility exists or be dismissed."

"Healers would not even consider us?" Viv exclaimed.

Denerim put his hands together and took a deep breath.

"I am willing to bet that you have the same in your home world. Let me try to do it. Ahem. Greetings, ladies and gentlemen healers who have been saving lives for over twenty years. We, an obscure witch and a sword wielder, have totally figured out how to do something that the healing profession has failed to achieve for the past millennium because we are that smart. And you have never heard about us or our work because we were too busy being geniuses."

"Alright alright. I got it. We would look like charlatans. I mean, would we? Are you not a priest of Neriad?"

"Being honest does not mean that we can't be fooled. Or that we can't be morons."

"Yeah. I guess."

"She does look a bit manipulative," Orkan considered as he inspected Viv up and down.

"Oj!"

"It's the eyes, they're a weird color. People will assume that you're using cosmetics to catch the eye."

Viv grumbled, but relented. No use shooting the messenger.

"Fine. I guess I have my work cut out for me."

Viv settled into yet another routine. She would practice fine-tuning the change meaning on a bunch of innocent trees most of the day, with late afternoon reserved for administrative questions. In reality, there wasn't much to do for her most of the time. She had delegated a lot of the mayor prerogatives to experts she trusted and only checked their reports. The role was now more about big decisions and projects than handling day-to-day affairs. She also set up a night school with the aid of Brenna, who thought that it was a good idea to teach people how to read. Some of the more determined laborers joined. They had to use clay tablets and styluses because they didn't have enough paper.

Meanwhile, the harvest was going well. Viv cleared new land and created timber to warm the entire city. The silverite focus helped her by channeling the power held in her nascent necrarch core with almost no efficiency loss. When the power ran out, she would just head to a war stone to recharge it. She was starting to stall on the change word, however, and that depressed her a bit.

One morning, Solfis interrupted her regimen to drag her to the deadlands, more specifically to one of the many ridges dotting the valley. Viv blinked as she approached and realized that the many stones were entirely covered with small, tiny script. She read the closest one.

“Joram approached the older fighter, sword at the ready. Barok barely held on his feet after so many fights, yet despair needled him forward. Joram saw the determination in his bloodshot eyes, despite the sweat covering his taut muscles and the blood dripping down a powerful leg. They were evenly matched during spars. This was no spar, and both men knew it.”

“What the... is this in Old Imperial?”

//Indeed, Your Grace.

//It has come to my attention that you may be stretching your willpower stat.

The strange idiom resonated within her borrowed knowledge.

“I am burning out?”

//The past few months have been harrowing.

//Thankfully, you are not alone.

//Unfortunately, those who surround you cannot quite fulfill the same purpose as the departed mage.

//Imperial training books cover mental health, and yours is vulnerable.

//Since I cannot provide companionship by selecting an appropriate mortal...

“I told you, no kidnapping and no slavery.”

//Then I have decided to provide you with a relaxing hobby.

//One that you mentioned missing before.

//Reading.

“Wait...”

//Those are some of the books that I have in my database, transcribed on a cheap support.

//This side of the cliff contains treatises on magic.

//This side contains fiction and historical recounting.

//I grouped them since everything the meatbags recount is essentially fiction.

//On account of your faulty brains.

“What about that?” she said, pointing at the paragraph she had been reading.

//Gladiators of Harrak.

//You had voiced an interest in homoerotic fiction.

“Oh.”

//I could patrol while you masturbate.

“I would never do such a thing out in the open like some deviant.”

//You fleshy things will put a finger up your nose in public.

//Or in your mouth.

//Yet doing the same to genitalia and anus causes shock.

//I fail to see the logic.

“That’s because you lack all of those and besides only uncouth bastards do that in public. Enough about fingers in bums, thank you very much.”

Viv paused and stared at the cliff. It was the work of hours. Yes, the golem never ran out patience. It was still a thoughtful gift.

“Thank you, Solfis, I appreciate it. Really.”

//You should spend a few hours reading and drinking hot klod.

//We can train tomorrow.

//Those missing fleshy bits are not going anywhere.

Viv decided to spend the evening with Koro to cheer the tall woman up. She was still a bit inconsolable despite Yan taking some time to entertain her. She felt useless. Viv didn’t know what to say, this wasn’t her domain of competence, so she just listened and it felt like doing something valid. Later, as they were going home, Arthur grabbed her attention. The dragonette dragged her to a spot of dust in the street and formed characters.

Bank much gold.

“Oh, you finally got enough for one gold talent! Congratulations, your hard work is paying off!”

Looting enemies agreeable.

Viv was a bit surprised by the apparent change of topic, but that only lasted until the next series of characters.

Make bank enemies.

“We are not doing a heist, nor are we doing a robbery, Arthur!”

“Squeeee.”

“To start with, a good amount of the gold stored there belongs to me. Secondly, this is only one bank of many.”

The dragonette perked up, crimson eyes gaining a greedy, dangerous glint.

“Remember the rathclaw, dear. Do not bite more than you can chew.”

“Squeeeee.”

“Ok, think about it another way. The gold comes from the ground where miners gather ore, then it is smelted and turned into ingots. It’s a long and tiresome process. But humans do it anyway. If you destroy the bank, you will get a lot of talents but the humans will flee. Yes?”

“Squee?”

“Meaning that the source of gold will be gone.”

“Squee.”

“While instead we can use power and money to have humans work for us. Then every year we get gold talents... forever.”

“S... squee?!”

“That’s right.”

Arthur bounced. Then bounced again. She then proceeded to hop in a circle.

Viv sat down and watched the dragonling reboot her brain. Perhaps it was a terrible idea to unleash rabid draconic capitalism on Nyil but the place was a shithole anyway so fuck it. Better the tax services than fantasy napalm. Probably. In the short run anyway.

Another distraction offered itself a few days later, when Orkan knocked on Viv's door one bright morning as she was finishing her tea. He was alone, for once, and unusually nervous. She offered him a cup.

"You know," he said, "men don't really do that in Halluria. Sitting down for tea and plotting is something reserved for the fairer sex."

"We're not plotting yet, but if you prefer I can give you booze and you can bump your chest. Just don't stab a knife in the table to make a point. It's brand new."

The Hallurian just leaned down against his seat and chuckled. His red tattoos pulsed gently, and for the first time, Viv thought that she saw him relax. He really had that rocker look, complete with a devilish smile and dark hair that reached below a sharp jaw. His eyes twinkled.

"See that's exactly what we never got. Back talk. Hallurian women deflect and disarm, always with a smile. Even in private. Even, you know."

"Mid-coit?"

"You really don't take me seriously huh? I meant pillow talk. They never let their guard down, just like we never let our guard down."

Orkan unconsciously swished the tea in his cup like expensive liquor.

"It's going to sound weird because Hallurian women mostly obey men, but I found the treatment... demeaning. I could not engage in a meaningful conversation with a girl, it was all a contest of wit to try and dazzle me."

"There wasn't one of them you opened to?" Viv asked, surprised. "Come on. Stay together with someone long enough and they'll let you know what they think of you. Familiarity breeds contempt."

But Orkan shook his head. He finished his glass and placed it back on the table, whereupon Viv gave him a refill. The gruff warborn was sharing. It felt like a precious moment.

"You'd think that. It probably happens to lower-ranked people, but not for those destined to be warlords. Everything is political. Everything is a game. Everything is a battle. In that sort of environment, you can never let your guard down. Ever."

"It sounds... suffocating."

Orkan caressed his throat thoughtfully.

"Yes. That's a good comparison. Strangely, it didn't bother me so much at the time. Not sure why."

“Did you ever travel outside of Halluria?”

“Of course not, we are not welcome anywhere.”

“Then perhaps you just never knew anything different?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense. I never knew you could just sit and have tea and talk and just... not try to get something out of the conversation. I spent so much time of my life doing what was expected of me, what I thought I should expect of myself. I never stopped to ask what was really happening and why I was doing all those things. You know?”

“Wait, I understand that you left Halluria and joined the temple, right?”

“Yes.”

“I assumed that you had questioned your society and that’s why you defected.”

“No. Not that only happened later. I didn’t defect because I was fed up with my life. It was something else.”

“A woman?” Viv asked, wiggling her brows. She only realized after that it was probably a sad story, but Orkan laughed.

“Hah! Not even that. But enough about me, even though it is a fascinating topic. I actually came for a proposal. See, Denerim’s busy helping the fort garrisons and writing reports so I was thinking, it’s the perfect opportunity for some retraining. I thought you might want to join.”

Viv’s doubt must have shown her face, because the Hallurian stopped her with a shake of his head.

“Hold on, before you talk about paths and stats and the fact that I can probably kick your ass using two fingers. It’s mobility training.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hallurian is a land of jungle and deserts. You can’t fight on it unless you can move through it. If you do go against that Prince, you need to know how to move through forests without falling on every root. Also, it helps you with running away. Back home, a mage who doesn’t know how to hide and flee is a dead mage. You got to be able to reposition, and finally...”

“Finally?”

“You spend too much time standing around doing your weird forms and mauling trees. Can’t be good for the mind. A good walk among the greeneries will do you good.”

“We have to watch out for the monsters.”

“Oh yeah, maybe we can bag something delicious. With my quick wit and your magical brawn, nothing can stop us!”

Viv considered her options but only for a few seconds. They were a month into the harvest and it would take another two weeks to finish most of the work. She could use a few strolls, not to mention that Orkan was both deadly and tolerable.

“Yeah I’d love that.”

“Would you like to go now? We should get your golem as well.”

“Sure, why not?”

Marruk agreed to stay behind since running through forests was not exactly her jam. Viv had made zero progress in athletics since she had arrived but she was still a trained soldier and she had the magical body to back it up. They walked to the edge of the forest, now separated from the strip of fertile land by an expanse of destroyed plants, and dove under the boughs of older trees. The sun was soon blocked and the true forest gradually submerged them in its curious embrace. The heavy boughs and thick vegetation swallowed sounds in a curious, unnatural way that made Viv want to whisper. As if something was listening. For a moment, she wondered if the forest knew she was basically a one-woman logging company, but dismissed the idea as idiotic. She could sense the rich shades of mana moving around and they didn’t behave like they were guided. She was sure of it. There was still something mysterious and quiet about the endless expanse.

Orkan paid it little mind as he sometimes led her and sometimes followed her through beast trails and thickets of brambles. Viv had her scout armor and skinsuit on because the robes were too cumbersome. She feared no needle, and Orkan deliberately guided her through rough terrain.

“You can’t always choose where you have to go through. If you can walk even the most treacherous paths, then you are much harder to corner.”

His wisdom went against what she had been taught, yet she accepted it anyway. She was on Nyil now. Stats made all the difference.

Besides moving, Orkan also showed her several useful plants, including one that could be used to soothe and clean wounds. Many were edible. She had a try. She remembered that edible and palatable were not the same thing.

During the whole exercise, Solfis remained at the periphery. Every time they took a break, Viv would search the foliage for the golem’s familiar form, and he would lean from some nook and let her spot his yellow glare. The knowledge comforted her. Solfis was the best fairy godmother and guardian angel she could have hoped for.

They stopped at a clearing at noon and ate a bit. Viv decided to prod her companion a bit. He seemed willing, nay, eager to talk. Like someone who had never been heard before. She

had to admit that she was curious as well, and not just because Orkan had a sort of roguish charm he didn't act on.

"Can I ask why you left, or is it too personal?" Viv asked.

Orkan looked down from his inspection. The open ground they stood was a slightly elevated rock with dry golden grass and plenty of places to sit. She didn't perceive anything magical around and Orkan had checked for snakes. She handed him a meat roll.

"Thank you. It's not personal, no."

"Too many people have asked you the question?"

"There is that. I don't mind telling you though. Those who interrogated me were temple officials. They didn't give a shit about me, only wanted to check if I was lying. You care, though, I mean, I think."

"Yeah. You don't have that zealot faith of the newly converted. You know, those who reject where they came from with violence."

"So you're wondering while I left luxury and free sex behind huh? It was weird, to be honest. I was a really, really good duelist for my clan. One fine morning, I went to train a fresh troop of warborns. I did it sometimes to improve morale. They were all standing there with their stupid faces full of worship, expecting me to dispense some grand revelation on how to kill the best. I was a bit tired that day so I had us play a team-based tag game. It's valid training. They had so much fun. They were so young."

He was staring at the meat roll in his hand, still untouched.

"It occurred to me that those fifteen used to be twenty, that only twelve would graduate and only six would survive their first real battle. On average, you know? I kept looking at them, trying to wonder which six it would be. I couldn't. I kept seeing them in my mind after the training was done. I had them on my mind for days and days. Then I had to participate in a sanctioned duel against some rising star from out in the boonies, near Sahnfor. We went there by caravan. He was just a kid."

Orkan went back to inspecting the edge of the forest. He showed no regret for the past, only a sort of detached weariness Viv could understand. She had felt the same way back home, after the glamour of power had faded from the parties she went to and all she could see was bellies and trophies and makeup-covered wrinkles.

"I killed him, of course, then I left my room in the middle of the night. Sahnfor stands at the edge of the desert and the sky just seems to go on forever. It's so high. I'm still not sure why I dressed up and picked up my swords. I just know that I walked straight through the desert to Baran, just like that. No fanfare, no desperate battle. It only... wait, did you hear that?"

They both stood up. At first, they saw nothing, then a strange shape crested the plain of green canopies several hundred meters away. Viv blinked and frowned, but the thing was still there. It looked like a horizontal, flat disc of dark material striated with white veins. Four

black legs kept it far above the tallest tree as they went up and down with slow, ponderous motions. Then the thing blurred and she heard an impact from where she was. The creature lifted the carcass of something large and furry and froze. There was a shrill cry. The creature flung the carcass away as if it weighed nothing and resumed its pace.

“What the fuck is that?” Viv muttered.

//That is an aberrant.

//And we are going to kill it.