

The rest of the convoy reached the Kazar outskirts mid-afternoon. It had been, Viv thought, a harrowing ten minutes of battle followed by a more harrowing three hours of extremely intensive triage. Neriad nurses had fortunately come with the support wagons to heal and stabilize the wounded. It had been an interesting moment for the medic.

Viv was no doctor. She also had no particular interest in the welfare of her fellow men and women. It just so happened that she was rather academically smart and, at the time, there had been a dearth of medics in her branch of the armed forces. She still felt a rush when managing to save lives and today had been no exception. The existence of healers and magic added a new dimension to the art of keeping someone alive.

The medical profession back on earth had developed a slurry of instruments to keep death at bay: hemostatics, transfusions, antibiotics to name a few. There had even been talks of using biomaterials, but that was still under development. By comparison, Nyil only had a handful of tools, but by the local gods did they pack a oomph. Just the basic life spell, when performed by hundreds of people, could knit wounds closed in a matter of hours.

Of course, some people might still die in the meantime.

And so Viv had labored to introduce the proper tourniquet, which beat 'applying pressure on the wound' by a lot when arteries had been nicked. The nurses appreciated the gesture and, in return, taught her on the spot how to use magic and observations to heal gut wounds. They also knew how to set bones with the best of them. Viv could not deny that they were impressively effective. She still thought that it was bullshit that they could not regrow stuff.

It turned out that limbs could be reattached if stuck back within a short time frame. Even that was a hit or miss with nerves not always reconnecting properly. Lost stuff could not be regrown, that was just how it was. The more advanced healing spells would quickly form a healthy stump and stop. Conversely, they could close, like, fifteen stab wounds at once.

Another thing that shocked Viv. She saw some guys asking for booze holding wounds that had her go "how the fuck are you still alive, not to mention conscious?" It all depended on their "endurance" stat, which was just a representation of how magic-soaked their bodies were when it came to resilience.

All in all, it had been a learning experience. She had apparently garnered a lot of respect and sympathy from the rank-and-file by working tirelessly, and giving out all of her health potions. They were worth their weight in silver, and the temple could not afford to replace them, but Viv would not let people die if she had the means to save them around her belt. Not for some hypothetical future occasion. It would have been an absolute dick move. She did not do those without a good reason.

And so she had become instantly popular. Viv wondered exactly how much was due to her prowess in battle, how much for her healing, and how much for reintroducing the Harrakan word for 'twit'.

Both Farran and Varska had begged off her company for the night's celebration as they had a lot to do on their own. They all asked her to be here and represent them, and so Viv was forced to pass by home quickly to get changed. She also used this opportunity to check her progress.

Willpower +1

Endurance +1

It was the first time that her mental stats had improved since leaving the desert. As expected, the progress would slow down now despite her training. She did not mind much. That was expected. Thinking that it had been a while, she brought up her status.

Current status:

- Mana channels (budding)
- Extreme compatibility
- Divine spark: luck

Mana distribution:

- Black 100%

Current attunement: 16.1%

Her attunement had grown again, but it was getting slower. Again, that was probably for the best since she would die when it reached 50%.

Physical		Mental	
Power	13	Focus	30
Finesse	18	Acuity	30
Endurance	21	Willpower	31

Not bad. Her physical abilities were lagging behind. Perhaps she should cram some physical training, just so that she could be up to par with the average teen.

General skills			
Polymath	Beginner 3	Athletics	Intermediate 2
Survival	Intermediate 1	Householding	Novice 8
Hand to hand combat	Advanced 6	Pain tolerance	Intermediate 8
Small blades	Beginner 7	Intimidation	Intermediate 2

That had not moved except for intimidation, and she thought she knew why. You needed to commit to something in order to make it progress. It was not enough to study to improve the polymath skill. You needed active, cross-discipline research. That was not urgent now, however. The next one was.

Class skills			
Meditative Trance	Intermediate 8	Mana manipulation	Intermediate 1
Mana sense	Beginner 6	Danger sense	Beginner 3
Mana absorption	Beginner 4		

Those lagged behind the average witch, as Solfis had told her. She simply had to keep doing what she was doing and they would improve. They had to be at least at intermediary before she could be considered a true, well-trained caster.

So much to do, so little time. At least progressing felt good. Beyond the world-generated grading system, just getting perceivably better at something made a difference. Back on earth, if you didn't make progress at something you were getting worse at it. That was just the way things worked. Here, progress was set in stone. Viv was sure that there was some leeway and someone out of practice for ten years might need a moment but his number was there and it showed an ability that was not dependent on just muscle fiber or brain patterns, but on magical bullshit. And that was cool.

Of course, there were the monsters. Nothing was perfect.

As the last of the convoy members sprawled on the meadow, Viv noticed that tents and supports had been built nearby, on a square of grass left fallow. She looked at the nearest

pavillion and saw the same elements that defined Kazar's clothes. The fabric was undyed, yet someone had painstakingly woven little flowers on the surface to make it nice. She did not get to see what was inside before Corel strutted by with two men at his sides. He slowed when he spotted her and gave them brief orders, which they scurried off to execute. He made his way to her, only for a certain Kark bodyguard to interpose herself with a 'wachu gonna do' expression. She had heard about their previous encounter. This made Corel stop at a respectable distance with no signs of annoyance.

The leader of the guard had replaced his previously bloodstained tabard with a fresh white one sometimes between the end of the battle and now. He still wore his sword and plate armor. Now that she was no longer uncomfortable, tired, and impatient, she took the time to inspect him.

Corel was a man with a honest, somewhat boorish face except for a pair of keen brown eyes that measured Viv. She got the feeling that he was indulging her by being respectful, somehow, but didn't find the strength to care. Respect was all about appearances. It did not matter to Viv that the man was doing it out of necessity. They were not buddies.

"Thank you for joining us in battle, Lady Bob, and you Marruk. Thanks to your efforts, we saved lives that would have been lost today. I appreciate it."

A peace offering. Viv could work with that.

"Of course, captain, we are all together in the fight against the wild."

Except for the squeaking one at her side, but that went without saying.

Captain Corel took the overture with a light smile and continued.

"The arrival of the convoy was meant to be the occasion for a joyous celebration. Unfortunately. The circumstances have changed, but mayor Ganimatalo deemed it preferable to go ahead with the festivities. If you are willing, we have set up a high table and your presence would be appreciated."

Viv and Marruk exchanged a glance. It sounded suspicious. Corel did not leave them the time to do much else, as he was already on the way out.

"The offer stays open if you have pressing business. Enjoy your night, you have earned it."

Viv pondered her options.

"I will head back with Solfis. You should probably spend time with the other humans. It's, errr, good for you. I think," Marruk informed her with middling confidence. Viv knew that Marruk had it right. It was an important moment for Kazar and, like it or not, she was part of the community now. Might as well try to blend in a little bit.

“I will return when I am done. Do not walk to the house alone. Those filthy flea-ridden mercenaries are still around,” the Kark woman finished.

“Fair enough,” Viv admitted, “be careful.”

“I am with Solfis,” Marruk simply said.

//Indeed.

Yeah. She was not in any danger, Viv considered as the powerful Kark left with their baggage and arms in tow. Viv still wore her armor, which someone had washed and dried for her and now smelled faintly of flowers.

As far as Viv understood, Marruk was a fearsome fighter, possibly on par with the temple guard’s stronger members, but not the officers like Corel, Lorn, and a handful of others like that Amazon woman. Those were in a class of their own. The gap between Marruk and the rank and file was immense, however, the contribution of this world’s magic obvious. Viv was not exactly certain how it worked, only that it did.

She moved deeper into the tent village. The biggest one protected a dais on which a high table had been set, with plenty of lower tables before it. Men and women already crowded it. Several of the soldiers lifted their glasses when she passed by and Viv answered with a nod and wave. Only the mayor sat at the high table, deep in conversation with one of her aides. Viv joined her.

The mayor finished her instructions and addressed her as she climbed.

“Good evening, witch Bob. Would you care to join me please?” the politely asked, a far cry from their previous meeting.

Once again, a vindictive woman would have taken the offer and metaphorically backhanded the cheeky politician, but Viv was a pragmatic at heart. She saw an opportunity to repair her relationship with the local head honcho and seized it in the same moment.

“It would be my pleasure,” she replied with the smarmy smile of the consummate politician.

Viv sat next to the mayor, and realized that she was significantly taller than her. Corel was tall as well. Viv turned and grabbed a seat for Arthur to climb on. The small dragon immediately busied herself with pushing stuff around with her snout and smelling everything.

The mayor did not show any signs of concern as she poured Viv a cup. They raised their glasses together.

“To the fallen.”

“To the fallen.”

It was some sort of fruity wine with a spicy aftertaste and like most stuff here, it was fresh and surprisingly tasty.

“I wanted to apologize for the way we treated you earlier. We clearly operated on wrong assumptions. I hope you can forget about our mistake and start our relationship anew,” Ganimatalo offered.

Viv was not willing to let it go that easily. The woman had offered no compensation. She had to milk the situation a bit.

“Did you not receive reports on me?” she asked with a hint of reproach.

“Yes, but the reports mentioned your, sorry to say, erratic behavior. We feared that you might not be entirely stable.”

That was a pile of bullshit. You don't invite someone unstable for a private meeting in the town hall.

“I had just spent weeks actively fighting undead and seen half a garrison cut to ribbons by higher undead. Don't tell me that you've never had people return from the field with a frayed temper.”

The mayor realized her mistake, as Viv expected. However, she made no concession.

“Known knights coming back are a thing, unknown caster are another. Please understand, I have been looking after Kazar my whole life, trying to develop it into the nexus of the west, the frontier heart of the reconquest. I have so many things on my mind that I sometimes make mistakes. No matter how far in the path I am, there are still so many hours in a single day. Once more, I apologize.”

Time to be more heavy-handed.

“Shall we say that you owe me one?” Viv dared.

“My door is always opened to those who help Kazar, and you have done so today,” Ganimatalo replied noncommittally. It was still an indication that Viv would be listened to, and the caster decided that it would have to do for now.

“You know, I budgeted this convoy two years ago,” she added, probably eager to change the subject. It worked. Viv was interested.

“You have to pay to get a convoy here?” she asked with some surprise.

“Not so much pay as jump-start. Many traders are scared to do business with us, but things become suddenly better if we pay a third in advance. I had to offer preferential treatment to the local branch of the Manipeleso bank to make sure that we were not fleeced by our associates. Are you familiar with Morny metal weave?”

“I am not.”

“Every piece is added on something, and the next on the previous, etc. Building this city block by block has been the labor of my life. We built barracks and amenities to attract soldiers, then used the soldiers and their spendings to attract trades, then trades to attract the bank. Every new threshold of prosperity, in turns, brings more. If carefully handled.”

There was a brittleness to Ganimatalo’s speech. She smiled, but the edge of her eyes had that forced contraction that Viv had learnt to detect. The other woman was suffering inside, and quite a lot.

“I sense a but coming.”

Viv could see the hesitation, just as she could see when she was dismissed. That would not do.

“Has the attack hurt your bottom line? We recovered most of the goods,” she said.

That got the mayor’s attention and she gave Viv a measuring smile, probably reconsidering her. It was a good thing to be underestimated by your enemies, but not by your allies, and the mayor was turning into one. Hopefully.

“Have you identified the creature that drags the carriages?”

“Hmm. No?”

“Ah. You see, they are called centennial cornadons. They are a particularly stout kind of animals, and they are incredibly difficult to raise. The convoy lost two.”

“They will not return?”

“Not without extreme insurance on our part, but that is not all. Please keep it to yourself for now, since I will make an official announcement tomorrow. The soldiers should be passing the information already. The reason why the convoy has insufficient guard, is that most men have been dragged away to a more urgent fight. War is upon Enoria once more.”

A cold chill crept up Viv’s spine.

“The civil war, you mean?”

"I see that you have kept yourself apprised of the current events. Good. Yes, the old conflict is flaring again. It appears that the rebel nobles and our dear esteemed king, who is technically our sovereign, have decided that the blood had dried enough to apply a brand new scarlet layer."

"A disaster never comes alone," Viv commented.

"An apt sentence. War means refugees but without convoys, refugees mean monster food. Those few who make it will discover a saturation of our arable land. It will be a mess, and it will be up to me to fix it. Again."

"I see. Any chance of available land further west, by the sea?"

"Of course, prime shares in fact. And those who settle there might as well stand with their ass out in front of a scale-beast lair and scream: eat me, eat me!"

"Ah."

"I did not mean to sound so bitter. With any luck, the profit from the convoy will be enough to clear out entire sections of forest in the winter. Perhaps there is a chance to turn this into a boon, yet. Would you mind doing me a service?"

Viv raised a brow at the non sequitur.

"Depend what it is?"

"I need to make the rounds, show people that I care, but the dais must not be empty. Could you stay there while I do so?"

"You want me to look all important while drinking free wine and eating free food?"

"Are you up to that daunting task?" the dark-skinned woman asked, ringed braids clinking behind her.

"I think I can manage."

"Wonderful! Corel and I will be around. Feel free to leave whenever, but do give us a few minutes first, if you please."

"Can do," Viv said, refocusing on the table.

There were assortments of stuff already there by her plate. She saw pitchers of juice, fruits, breads and pastries aplenty and a few slices of what looked like cured ham. She helped herself to a little bit of everything and turned to Arthur.

“Arthur. Food.”

“Squee!”

“I’ll feed you. Say aaaaaa.”

“Eeeeeeee.”

Magical status modification: draconic surrogate mother.

The meat disappeared in Arthur’s maw. She chew it thoughtfully, then gave a strangely human nod. Her serpentine head swivelled on her flexible neck.

“Hmmm what was that...” Viv mumbled to herself. The new thing had added itself to her magical thingies list, right below the divine spark note. She inspected it.

Draconic surrogate mother: many have tried to tame dragons and failed. The richest and most insane madmen have kept some as pets. You, however, have raised a dragon like a child. No one had tried that before.

Your soul has received a mark for the attempt through the grace of Maradoc, god of travelers. It will serve you well.

Okayyyy?

Somehow, the inspect skill was behaving differently. Normally, it was like magically inferring things from observation. You looked and sort of learned and deduced things. This time, it felt more like someone had puposedly left a message for her. It was most unusual.

At least, it didn’t hurt.

Viv considered it as she mechanically placed another slice into Arthur’s waiting maw, uncaring as the serrated, lethal fangs closed a hair away from her fingertips. Arthur already ate like a proper gourmet by savoring her food. That was all that mattered.

Someone dropped grilled meat on the other side, a young peasant woman who gawked at Arthur before blushing and hurrying away. Viv realized that she was ravenous, and went to town on the banquet.

It was a nice banquet.

She eventually looked up from her plate after the worst of her hunger had faded.

The scenery before her had a funeral party mood to it. There were the locals, who had lost three guards, and had many more wounded. Even such a one-sided battle had had casualties. Three dead did not feel like much in the grand scheme of things, but in such a tight-knit community as Kazar, it mattered. Everyone either knew the fallen or someone who knew the fallen. Then, there were the convoy members who looked a bit shell-shocked but were still kicking. Those were drinking hard.

Finally, there were bereaved.

Viv saw a woman with two children being led to a seat at the edge, her eyes sometimes looking for a third kid that she would never find again. She was immediately surrounded by local women who did their best to give her some comfort, while their kids greeted the newcomers. She saw a spirit of help and cooperation there that she knew would hold until food grew scarce, if it ever did. Shortly after, members of the spotted feathers arrived and added their social skills to the struggle. Drunk soldiers were dragged out of their funk by shrewd conversationalists, others were lured away to private, distant tents to celebrate survival through the ancient custom of lovemaking. The integration and grief handling was a smooth process in which Viv saw the touch of someone who knew when to order and when to delegate.

At some point, a few musicians grabbed flutes and a lute-like instrument to play traditional songs. Viv found the performance absolutely fucking atrocious and decided to take her leave, joining Corel to tell him. He gave her thanks for holding the line of the food front and she headed towards the exit after stockpiling a few things in a basket. Viv found Marruk near the entrance of the camp as she was fending off a horde of curious kids with a lost air, and rescued the poor door/shieldmaiden from her cruel fate. They made their way back together.

Twenty minutes earlier, Viv and Marruk's home.

Marruk kneeled by the backdoor and considered her findings with a contemplative gaze.

The Kark did not eat much meat as a general rule. They could only digest a moderate amount every day, any more disturbed their stomachs. What they did eat mostly came from small plain creatures they caught in their many traps.

There were the monsters, of course, but you did not always want to eat that kind of meat.

No, the Kark were trap-setters when it came to finding sources of food, and Marruk had a nice field to practice in. And a skill to make it better.

There was a small lawn on the front, narrow bands of grass on the sides, and a modest courtyard at the back. Those were surrounded by a small fence with all the dissuasive power of a wet hankie. Every time they left, Marruk secured their house with an assortment of patiently made pits and snares, expecting to catch some disgusting, filthy rodents come to snoop around. And it had worked! This one had even left a bloody shoe behind.

She took it and checked. No toes. A shame.

Marruk rearmed the trap (because why not? City rodents were stupid and did not share information between themselves). She cleaned her hand on her armor and walked back out with a whistle. She had a caster to get and perhaps, on the way, there would be more rodents. She couldn't wait.

Five minutes earlier, the city of the gods.

In the hall of secrets, where a thousand achways led to many a place, a tall man with dark hair strode to his pulpit. He glanced at the text before him, and judged the contents acceptable.

With a last flourish, the god of travelers and many other things besides sent a note to Nous. The dead one was not as defunct as the others believed, and he still had a sense of humor. Maradoc's request was accepted.

Yes, indeed, taming dragons had always had catastrophic results for several reasons. The first, and most obvious, was that dragons could not be tamed. It was impossible. It could not be done.

The second reason, as Vivane would discover at some point in the future, was that the other dragons took exception at the attempt. Great exception, in fact. And if you could count on the dragons for one thing, it was to make their displeasure known in unambiguous terms.

Maradoc anticipated their puzzlement when their assessment spells would return the tiny human's signature as 'mommy'. He could not wait.

Viv walked back into her main room and placed the basket on their eating table. She removed a covered plate and went to Irao's door, where she knocked.

"Yes?" a voice said behind her.

"OH SH— err sorry didn't see you there."

"I know."

"I came to give you this. I case you haven't, eaten yet."

The assassin stared at the plate for one long moment. Viv wondered if he was not, you know, on the spectrum or something. Not that she minded, it was just that it would help dealing with him if she understood what made him tick.

After a while, Irao took the offered food in his leathery-covered hand.

"Farren said I had to respect boundaries and personal space."

"Okay?"

"But he said shaking hands was a way to convey respect."

"If you want to tell me that you are thankful for the offering, I think you just did. You don't have to shake my hand if you don't want to."

"Good, because I don't like shaking hands."

"I understand. Would you prefer eating alone?"

"Yes."

"I will leave you to it then. Don't wait too long or it will get cold."

"Yes. I know how food works. Thank you, Viviane. I like food. Goodbye."

The door opened and closed. That's how she perceived it.

Viv decided that things had gone very well.

She turned around and walked back to her room. Marruk was outside checking stuff out, or so she said. Arthur had gone to grab the bestiary.

//You certainly have a way with borderline personalities.

“Pot, meet kettle.”