

Viv waited, breaths slow and deep. Not a sound could be heard as she raised her weapon high, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. Her prey had fallen into an ambush just as she expected. She focused on the monster's extended limb as she made ready to slow her time perception. Soon, it would be the moment to strike.

Very soon.

There was a click.

Viv moved. She activated her acuity power and struck with enhanced strength, the roll of fabric descending upon the guilty white claw grabbing for the meat drawer.

Thwack!

"SQUEEEEEEE!" the culprit yelped, running back to her lair with her tail between her legs.

"QUE JE T'Y REPRENNE, SALE BÊTE!" Viv bellowed in her native tongue. Sheer anger could do that sometimes.

Marruk took a quick peek inside. A glance at Viv's outraged posture told her all that she needed to know, and she resumed her vigil.

A pale snout emerged from the blanket mountain. The mighty beast of Kazar was testing the waters.

Viv cursed herself. She was so taken in with catching and scaring Arthur that she had forgotten the good habits that her mom had taught her when handling pets. Positive reinforcements and all of that. Her mom had been the one to keep the house together no matter how stressful things got with election and all of that, even if her own way of coping was... less that ideal. Among other things, she had raised their pets until the dogs and cats she had had throughout her life had been extremely well-behaved.

Her mom would not have raised her voice. She would have calmly told Arthur to get back to her spot, then rewarder her for obeying.

Artur was super smart and she would probably get smarter, so she should do her best to educate her well.

Viv sighed and retreated to the meat drawer. It was enchanted to be colder, which she had to recharge on occasion. Explaining that she could only use black mana had left Marruk perplexed at first, but the big woman had taken it in stride as one of Viv's quirkiness. The Kark woman could use a bit of wind and a bit of earth. That helped with the chores, which they had shared so far.

Viv took one long stripe of dried meat. It was a dark piece of jerky from some wood creature with a very strong musk. It tasted like ass to Viv but Arthur liked the stuff.

“Come here,”

The dragonling slunked forth with her head low and they had a moment, interrupted by Solfis.

**//It is time, Your Grace.**

**//We only have three days to train properly.**

“Ok.”

Enough fucking around. A message had come in the morning with a request from Farren. He wanted her to clean a cave two days away from Kazar with the purpose of turning it into a safe haven. The other mercenaries had all declined, citing high risks. Or so Farren said. She had said yes on account of wanting her soul fixed. She had three days to practice her magic.

Marruk took Solfis and started dragging the sled, casually, with only one hand. Viv went to walk by her side, with Arthur tailing them, sniffing things as she went. The area directly south of the city was rather deserted, except for the estates reserved for guests. The official road through the forest started east of there. It meant that things were calm, which Solfis had relied on. They stopped next to a random boulder at the edge of the tree line.

**//I will now assist you in acquiring the last of the basic mana skills.**

**//Manipulation focuses on using mana for your own use.**

**//Sense focuses on identifying, locating, and understanding mana.**

**//The last one is absorption.**

**//Absorption allows you to take mana from the environment and draw it into your core regardless of the mana's original color.**

**//Now, you can quickly and easily recharge your core and conduits with ambient mana that you are attuned with.**

**//That is due to the fact that turning mana you are attuned with into your own is a natural process.**

Viv thought about it. Her yoink spell relied on making an undead's black mana into her mana, and it felt instinctive.

**//Normally, mages will always manage to draw some amount of mana that they can use immediately.**

**//In your case, the ability to turn foreign mana into your own is paramount.**

**//That is due to the fact that most environments have a very limited amount of black mana.**

“So I am super strong in the deadlands but weaker everywhere else?”

**//The power of your spell is the same.**  
**//Your ability to cast continuously, however, will be hampered.**  
**//You already experienced this during your stay in Fort Stone.**

“When I had to get poisoned to recharge?”

**//Yes.**  
**//Your key spell, yoink, is also geared towards killing undead.**  
**//It will not work on anything else.**

“So I need to update my repertoire.”

**//Indeed.**  
**//We will focus on both over the next three days.**  
**//First, you can use your ‘bzzt’ spell with the pierce rune to overload the conduits of an enemy.**  
**//This will kill them in a horribly painful fashion.**  
**//It is a relatively mana-intensive spell.**  
**//Try it now.**

Marruk sat on the sled to watch while Arthur rolled around in the grass. Viv pointed at the boulder and summoned the twisted arrow of the spear rune in her mind. It was the first rune she had properly learned, and also the only used in the yoink spell. She was intimately familiar with its working now, and it came to her with perfect ease.

“Bzzt.”

A slightly frayed bolt as dark as the void jumped from her chest to the stone. She didn’t need to point at stuff, though it helped. Casting spells from different parts of her body worked just as well and didn’t warn anyone of her intent, so she did it whenever she could.

The bolt smashed against the boulder without effect.

**//Aim for a tree, your grace.**  
**//Boulders have no conduits to flood.**

“We’re not going to anger some forest spirit, or creature or something?”

**//No, Your Grace.**  
**//There would not be one so close to the city.**  
**//I assure you that this forest can afford to lose a tree or a hundred.**

Save tree, eat a witch? Probably not today.

“Bzzt.”

She immediately felt the difference when her power easily wiped out her target’s tiny conduits. The sickly leafy thing she had chosen withered in an instant as if blasted by a toxic bomb. They heard creaks, then the small trunk collapsed forward on the ground. It exploded into dust and ossified fragments.

**//Better.**

**//You will consume more mana the more complex your target’s conduits are.**

**//This will serve you well against lightly armored opponents.**

**//Now, I would like you to try the basic spell used by war mages everywhere.**

**//It consists of the basic... bzzt spell, infused with a destructive aspect.**

“You mean like what I did with my blight spell?”

**//Precisely.**

**//Giving a destructive meaning to your mana and sending it away is the mainstay of battle mages everywhere.**

**//Such a spell takes relatively little mana, but requires a higher understanding of magic itself, as well as mental fortitude.**

**//Try it now, on the boulder.**

Viv turned to the blasted piece of rock. It had ignored her previous attack.

The bitch.

Her laughable attempt at getting angry did not work, and yet the barest amount of resentment reminded her of her mindset when she had used the blight spell. The black mana had been charged with its most basic concept: annihilation.

Black mana was the end of things.

Viv latched on that truth and charged a spell with it, the mana coalescing in her hand. She would use it to remove from this world the things that she did not like. They would be... gone.

“Purge.”

The attack was silent except for the groan of shattering stone. The boulder now sported a deep groove two handspans deep from which gravelly grey sand spilt like blood from a wound.

**//You do not seem to have any difficulty casting those.**

**//Reassessing current priorities.**

**//We shall practice later to improve your speed and range.**

**//However, I would like to work on the mana absorption skill, for now.**

**//In order to facilitate its acquisition, you need to empty your conduits of most of its mana.**

**//You could use this opportunity to cast blight again.**

**//I would also like to watch its effects in person so that I can assess it, and its possible applications.**

Viv considered, and realized that she was probably good for another dozen bzzt mana-wise. Purge spells were mentally draining so she would definitely falter before that. Blight would drain her mana reserves in one go while her mind would only be mildly affected.

“Sounds good.”

This time, the wind up was slower and harder because she was not in the right mindset, and also because destroying the part of the forest she was now facing didn't excite her. It took her a good ten seconds to wind up the spell, adding the destruction meaning to the black mana and the spread rune on top. She felt like she had spent half an hour studying vocabulary lists.

“Blight.”

The cloud expanded at the pace of a walking man, unaffected by the wind. The horrible hiss of the vaporous mana touching matter upset the ear like cold water in a very hot pot.

The cloud kept expanding, impenetrable. A second later, she could see what it left behind.

The earth below her was stripped of all life, and it looked a bit vitrified, with solid veins of dark mana spreading over it like a fallen spiderweb. Blight kept going. It left nothing behind. Not a single stump or even a piece of root survived the onslaught.

When the spell finally abated after ten meters, it left behind an apocalyptic field of death. Where the trees used to be, now there were holes in the ground like the impact of mortar shells. An eerie silence replaced the terrifying scream.

Viv turned to the sled, where Solfis was resting. Her reserves were very low and she could feel the onset of a small headache.

On the sled, Marruk was staring in horror, mouth hanging open to reveal her big flat teeth. Her yellow eyes darted from Viv to the scene of deforestation the woman had left behind.

**//Excellent.**

**//Although slow, this spell has excellent potential in destroying packed formations in enclosed spaces.**

**//I foresee a great future purifying caves and breaking sieges.**

**//Now, let us focus on mana absorption.**

**//I will guide you through the steps.**

Solfis had Viv sit in a lotus position with both hands forming a cup just above her navel, below the core. She was supposed to open herself up or something, and focus on the sensation of her core recharging. It did not work very well.

“Would it not be better to try that in the deadlands?”

**//Perhaps.**

**//It might also be that you may not experience the feeling of non-compatible mana being kept out.**

**//Several experts argue that it is an important aspect of the acquisition of this skill.**

“Nevermind then.”

Viv tried her best to calm and dominate, but her mind would not focus easily. It wandered to the noise of the forest next to her, the wind blowing through the tall grass, the feeling of black mana in her spiritual self. There were so many sensations to experience and focusing on one so subtle as mana coming back was as arduous as finding a needle in a haystack. More than that, meditation annoyed her. She felt vulnerable. Her nascent trust in Marruk had nothing to do with it, she could no more fight it than one could fight stress before an exam. It was a visceral response. To what, she was not sure.

They tried for only twenty minutes and already, the attempt pissed her off. Solfis addressed her as she was adjusting her position for a new attempt.

**//Let us try something else.**

**//I shall demonstrate a series of postures.**

**//I would like you to repeat them.**

“Will it not drain your batteries?”

**//I will refrain from activating my defensive and offensive systems.**

**//The drain will be minimal.**

“Ok.”

Marruk yelped as Solfis unfolded, his shape as disturbing as ever. The tall golem stalked leisurely forward and adopted a position with an open hand near his chest, and another facing forward. What followed was weirdly reminiscent of a qigong routine, and Viv had to watch the rather basic sequence twice despite her enhanced mental abilities. Solfis could distract the most dedicated of students with his demonic appearance.

Solfis clicked back down and Viv tried again, and she soon realized what the golem was aiming for. As soon as she started to follow repetitive motions, her meditative trance hit and she could slow her mind down and focus in record time. The world receded until her consciousness

reached a state of zen conducive to introspection. The motions were the same. The pulse of her own mana became the same. It was a song as deep and primal as a heartbeat, and just as vital. The song called to her, relaxed her, confirmed that this new part was good and true. She had magic now. It was hers, and it was her.

Slowly, very slowly, the song gained in intensity as it pushed against the world and it pushed back. Mana was all around her, and some of it was making its way inside to fill an imbalance as it became a new part of the core.

She focused on the feeling and it eluded her. She did not force the issue. The trance kept going smoothly. It was calm here.

Something brought her back to the real world. Marruk was standing.

In the distance, two men were approaching them at a slow and careful pace. They had a dog on a leash.

Rather, they had a leash to a monster that Viv would qualify as a dog from now on. It had a stocky body, powerful hind legs and a bulldog maw with two protruding canines. Its coat was brown with black stripes. Its shoulders also reached the guards' waists.

"Arthur! Arthur, come."

The dragonling popped her head from a bush, munching on something with a fuzzy tail the size of a rat. She spotted the intruder and ran back to Viv, flapping her wings in preparation for the showdown.

"No fighting."

The pair of guards wore gambesons with a tree on it that signified that they were members of the city guard. Inspection revealed the same and she spotted none of the signs that she associated with corruption: no guarded look, no sneaky sneers. They were clean too.

The pair stopped ten paces away, hands on their weapons. They were wary but not yet alarmed.

"What are you doing there?"

Marruk angled herself towards Viv, possibly deferring to her.

"Training," Viv retorted.

"Training? Training what?"

In response, Viv, pointed at the largest tree around.

The two men watched, incomprehension plain on their faces.

“Bzzt.”

The tree cracked and crashed before the men’s incredulous eyes. The dog whined. Viv made a sweeping motion.

“Purge.”

The sharp black ray passed over three trees. They fell with thunderous cracks.

“This?” Viv finished. She felt a pulse of the intimidation thing. The guards paled.

“Well... Carry on then,” one of the guards finished. They made a point going on in the same direction they started, which Viv though was commendable. Their eyes went wide as saucers when they found the devastation that the blight spell had wreaked. The dog growled at Arthur who hissed back from her perch, Viv’s left shoulder. The little thing was getting heavier.

After both groups were done pretending to ignore each other in an awkward attempt to look cool, Viv returned to her meditative trance. She was getting a bit tired.

Power +1

Nice. Although her power currently sat at thirteen so she was still only slightly stronger than your average teenager.

The trance helped her through the motion and she found it again, the elusive feeling of something getting in. They paused for a lunch of cold meat, bread, and fruits. Viv lamented the lack of cheese and Marruk echoed it, adding that ‘cows’ were set to arrive with the next large convoy from the Enorian mainland, and through the forest. The difficulty was to keep so many prey safe from the forest’s denizens.

On the third try, Viv was finally rewarded for her efforts.

Mana Absorption: Beginner 1



Absorbing mana meant getting it through the membrane that separated herself from the world. She could only focus on the feeling so far, but that was still a fine result.

**//Whoever picked you from your world made the right choice, Your Grace.  
//Such an incredible natural talent would have been wasted on a world without magic.**

“Hey, I have other qualities, you know?”

**//Thankfully, or we would have both died.  
//Now that you are calm, I suggest that you tried meditating while sitting.**

She was getting tired so that worked. She did not get any associated skill despite her efforts. That was fine. Solfis had mentioned that it took a large amount of efforts and dedication to acquire and develop skills. That made sense. You had to commit for the magic of the world to help you.

They headed back in the middle of the afternoon. There was only so much mental exhaustion one could take in a single day, and Solfis still had plenty of light mana manipulation games to propose in order to pass the time and improve her finesse.

Marruk walked the familiar path to her new abode. Unease grasped at the proud warrior's heart.

Normally, a shaman formed the heart of any warband. A herd of Kark without shaman lacked fire and direction, something the hated northerners understood only too well. That was why they sent their despicable black blades to sever this vital string before attacking. That was how she lost her mother.

The witch was not such a one. She had the vision. She had purpose. She had discipline. The way she treated Marruk indicated that, certainly, she also had a heart.

No.

The problem was that she was insane.

It only took a glance to notice that the woman was a foreigner, and noble-born at that. When Kark feasted, they slurped and chewed with great animation to show their appreciation for the

food, bellowing compliments interspersed with mighty burps. The witch ate with her spine as straight as a sword and just as unyielding. She made no noise. She took small bites. The witch cared about appearance and cleanliness and the smell of excrements bothered her. The witch had bought food but no cleaning supplies. It was Marruk who had suggested getting them, therefore, the witch was used to having servants. And nobility was supposed to act a certain way. Casters were supposed to act a certain way. Not like that.

When the woman moved, she checked corners and assessed everyone around her as threats. Even in the Enttiku-cursed bank! She also kept everyone at a distance. Marruk expected it for herself, but not with Farren whose reputation as a kind soul was beyond questioning.

And she treated her small drake like a child, not a creature to dominate and discipline.

And nobody in their right mind would trust a golem made from fucking bone. What manner of madman would create a golem and give it a bone body? You had to be touched in the head by one of the dark gods.

Viviane was clearly out of her mind, though perhaps not in a bad way. Marruk had no choice but to stay and see what happened since she was herself desperate, she only hoped that the caster would receive the clerical help she needed for her wounded soul. Everything was fine for now, yet who knew how long it would last.