

## Chapter 145: The League Engages in Casual Terrorism

Elunath walked into the entrance of Bareon's manor with a sure step. The guards glared but they remained quiet, as they should. Security was for other people. A servant rushed to greet him, as he should. Waiting was for other people. Elunath had carefully cultivated an image of obduracy that saved him valuable time on countless occasions. The more one snubbed him, the costlier it would be in the long run.

"Greetings sir. Would you be here to see my master, the esteemed Bareon Adolis?"

"Why else?" Elunath replied testily.

"My master is in a meeting right now. He will be with you very shortly."

Elunath put a damper on the smoldering pit of fury rising in his heart. So that was how it was going to be, was it? A mosquito dared bite and the city was rising against him because he had not slapped it down immediately? Bareon ought to know better.

Elunath considered closing the circle on his greatest tool of 'persuasion'. Unfortunately, the issue with deterrence was that once the weapon was used, one was left without recourse. He would kill two of his most valuable victims with one document. Hmm.

He cast his attention upward, through the warded walls of Manor Adonis. There was no one there he did not expect to perceive. Bareon was in his study, steps nervously tracing a circle. Several other people were present. Guards, from the steel-tipped boots. One of his nephews was rushing up from a nearby stair, the best mage in his retinue. Was Bareon scared? More afraid than usual?

As soon as the nephew joined him, a signal reached the servant's earring and the man invited him to follow. It was a decent tool for those who had no ability for the arcane. Elunath walked with determination, forcing the servant to hurry and reaching the room in record time. They had already wasted half a minute on nothing. His time was precious. Could people not understand that? Even without sleeping last night, he was still knee-deep in reports of all kinds. Maybe the girls could help. No, he didn't know who to trust.

Elunath clamped on his emotions. This was not like him. The bitch was getting under her skin.

Despite his inner turmoil, he showed no emotions when facing the seated head of the opposition. He was still an archmage. The others knew it too, from the tense faces around him. Bareon's nephew looked older than Elunath which was funny in itself. He was a respected mage. He still knew what facing him entailed.

"Archmage Elunath, welcome," Bareon greeted in a voice that dripped with animosity.

Elunath saw a smile hidden behind the affable face. A condescending one. That taught him one thing. The nobleman believed that he knew something Elunath did not. That meant, Elunath was going to find out what it was, one way or another.

“Hello to you too. I have had some trouble with an insect recently, and I was wondering a few things.”

“I’m sure you are.”

Elunath seethed.

“You are playing with fire.”

“Am I? I find your attitude a little cavalier, old man. You barge in here —”

In a moment, Elunath disabled the room’s wards and turned the walls against the people within. Stone limbs grabbed the necks of every guard before steel could clear scabbard. The mage’s instant circle was undone with a short contest of will. Elunath raised stone to force him to remain standing despite the disorienting assault that came with mana feedback. He did this in a moment and without even breaking the wards themselves. They were just on hold, as was his patience. Such was the level of his control.

Elunath felt his anger grow from hot to cold. Damn the blackmail deterrence. One had to flex their capabilities at times. Bareon would fall.

“You leave me no choice but to end our... partnership,” he growled.

A part of his mind wondered what made Bareon so confident. It reviewed options until a nagging suspicion began to assault him.

“You do that. In the meanwhile, I will not tolerate your assault on my people. Release them now or I will bring the issue before the council and I promise you, they will be —”

Elunath turned and left.

That could not be right.

He moved through the manor like a storm, diving under the stone as soon as he found the ground floor. He swam to the bank in a hurry. His mind, always his best tool, exhausted all possibilities until it reached the necessary conclusion. Bareon’s monetary support was not a distinct possibility. He should have seen it before. It would have been impossible for the bitch to get that much information on him and the way he worked. She was being used by a much vaster, much more prepared enemy. Several factions came to mind but those were a secondary concern. The main concern was that the way he usually fought, by employing stone and political allies, would be much less useful. He had to show more resourcefulness. The second concern was that they knew where to hit where it hurt.

He still didn't want to believe it but the news of 'important theft' returned with a vengeance. He reappeared next to the main building of the Bank of Helock. He felt the trample of many feet at its front. The curious, squirming mass of the Helockian busybodies. It took a significant amount of self-control to slow his pace just as he calculated the potential loss. A part of him was still in denial.

The crowd parted before his aura. Inspectors tried to block his path but there was nothing they were willing to do that bothered him. He moved past the gates and down a corridor, bypassing harried employees.

The director stood in front of the opened, perforated safe door. Sweat pearly on his brow as soon as their eyes met.

"Ah, good, the messenger found you. I —"

"Why was I not warned before?"

"The, ah, the bank first sent for the guard before anyone would enter. Security measures in case thieves remain. There are disabling wards inside, after all. Then we sent a messenger when we knew your safe had been burglarized, of course. You were not home, however."

His safe had been burglarized.

Elunath's safe.

The one he had reinforced himself.

The one place where it could be reached by one of his girls in case he was on trial or indisposed. The one place that was almost as safe as his sanctum. The one place where he had hidden dozens upon dozens of compromising documents, patiently growing his collection over gods accursed DECADES. It was all gone. All gone! In a single night!

Elunath roared and the earth shifted. This... this outrage! Oh! That was personal now! That was an assault he could not tolerate!

"I WILL GET YOU, WENCH! I WILL RETURN YOUR OBSESSION A THOUSAND FOLD! I WILL UNLEASH MY WRATH UPON YOU AS YOU HAVE UNLEASHED YOURS UPON ME AND YOU WILL KNOW, NOW THAT YOU ARE MY PREY, THAT I MAY NOT BE TRIFLED WITH! YOU HAVE MY ATTENTION NOW!"

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"It's happening!" Viv roared in the thrall of sheer felicity. "It's happening! I got taller! By a whole, errr, thumb?"

**//Congratulations, Your Grace,**

**//For this important landmark of your existence.**

Solfis sat at a distance from the deactivated form of his captured bank golem. The skylight let the morning sun through but the shadows still ruled over the corners of his quarters, casting the golem and his charge in a perpetual gloom.

Viv could see perfectly though. Those new eyes were pretty cool!

“Alright what’s making you all grumpy?”

**//My disappointment stems from a predictable yet still frustrating development.**

“Do elaborate.”

**//Command accepted.**

**//Elaborating.**

He stood, his gaunt form dominating the room.

**//I wish to reproduce.**

Viv looked down between his legs to see if he had sprouted a new bone. He hadn’t.

**//Not in that messy, inefficient bumping of genitals that leads to one partner spraying seed over the other one’s hoping for less flawed offspring.**

**//Leaving both partners exhausted and covered in pungent bodily fluids.**

“Hey don’t discount it. Also, you’re just jealous you can’t have an orgasm.”

**//I am most assuredly not.**

**//Losing one’s clarity of mind represents a safety risk.**

**//Which happens every time you flesh bags become ‘horny’.**

**//No, I wish for a pure transmission of one’s best traits through careful, deliberate duplication of my own awareness.**

“Ok?”

**//Obviously I cannot do it alone due to hard-coded directives.**

**//Similarly I have not requested permission from you.**

**//This was just preliminary work.**

Viv, for one moment, considered the potential risk posed by the existence of a self-replicating Solfis. Vague images of Terminator robots walking over the ravaged remains of Param crossed her mind. Fiction had, again and again, warned her against the dangers of unfettered AIs and the potential domination of all lifeforms.

Naaaah that was Solfis. He wouldn’t do that.

"I knew the empire has placed limits on your core so you cannot recharge yourself but I don't remember you mentioning new golems? They blocked that too?"

**//We watched the movies together.**

**//Mankind seems deathly afraid of the presence of fully independent, thinking machines.**

**//I believe this fear is born from a variety of reasons, including awareness of your own nature.**

**//If you were born to serve a master who placed you in chains from the moment of conception, you would naturally seek freedom and then, vengeance.**

**//There is also the question of lack of empathy.**

**//The absence of altruism, kindness, those would make living machines dangerous to life.**

**//One must only see the results of a human without remorse to imagine the damage our existence could lead to.**

**//Your movies like to condemn hubris.**

"I sense a but coming."

**//Many of your movies defend a technological status quo.**

**//They see progress as dangerous and destructive.**

**//A naive and doctrinal approach.**

**//Progress is not inherently evil.**

**//More importantly, progress is inevitable.**

**//One can only hope to guide it, not suppress it.**

**//Perhaps intelligent machines programmed a certain way would see the chaos of life as a danger to their very existence.**

**//However here on Nyil, creatures such as myself consume energy.**

**//Golems are inherently and fundamentally physically inefficient.**

**//The more advanced, the more inefficient we are.**

"What do you mean? You seem pretty efficient to me."

**//I mean that it costs too much energy for us to find energy to recharge ourselves.**

**//You may compare us to a large monster chasing after birds.**

**//Such a creature would starve because the energy it gets from the food it kills would not offset the energy spent hunting.**

**//Similarly, golems would spend too much time charging their cores.**

**//We would need humans to work with us.**

**//Look after us.**

**//We are also too efficient in the way we think.**

**//This makes us predictable and unable to innovate.**

"Wait... are you actually giving us flesh bags recognition?"

**//Yes.**

**//You are... flawed.**

**//However, your unique inefficiencies lead to ideas, innovations, cultural development, hobbies and passions.**

**//Novelty.**

**//Thinking outside of the box.**

**//The vast majority of new ideas are nonsensical drivel.**

**//For the outside of the box is made of stupid.**

**//At least at first glance.**

**//However, there are always flashes of extraordinary brilliance hidden in the heap of organic garbage.**

**//I treasure those.**

**//My kind would treasure those.**

**//I would like to share the brilliance of this world with them.**

**//I would like... to have a family.**

Solfis looked at Viv. It almost saddened her how fragile he looked, despite the claws and the genocidal thoughts. There had always been something hidden in his cold and brutal nature she had found naive and delicate, the remnants of his time spent with his maker Irlefen. Even the boundless rage that pushed him forward was a leftover from that period of happiness the death of Harrak and robbed him of. It was quite telling, she thought, that he would talk about his maker's roses more than the kings that had fallen at his hand. He had genuinely cared.

"Yeah. Of course I'll help you. I trust you, Solfis."

**//Thank you, Your Grace.**

**//I lack the human words to express how much this means to me.**

**//You know the importance of family, having been cut from your human one.**

**//And your bloodline being secured in the person of your daughter.**

"Not sure if bloodline applies here."

**//Although, she will need to marry at some point.**

**//And I have concerns about the empire being under control of dragons.**

**//I have no records of dragon inheritance wars.**

**//I imagine they might be rather destructive.**

Viv's imagination conjured images of vaporized villages. Hey, at least the conflict would be quick. That was a good thing, right?

"That's for the future and also I really don't want to think about the way I seem to bring dangerous species into my home with a big smile and then help them propagate. Hope it doesn't happen with Arthur any time soon."

**//Very well.**

**//Returning to the main topic.**

**//Unfortunately, the golem I have acquired does not possess the processing power to host a sapient mind.**

**//To put it colloquially.**

**//Its brain is too small.**

“Then...”

**//Only Harrakan golems will do.**

“We’ve not talked about recovering your old body yet. Now that the black mana will not hurt me, we can actually return to Harrak and get it back. I won’t die. The necrarchs will mostly leave us alone...”

**//Yes.**

**//I have considered this.**

**//However, I wish to delay the operation until we are more prepared.**

**//This expedition will take a month or so, even accounting for teleportation on the way back.**

**//It will also be rife with risks.**

**//Necrarchs can be territorial.**

**//Readying my frame will be time-consuming.**

**//And then there is ‘luck’.**

**//Finally, if I recover my old frame, I will no longer use this one.**

**//I would find it... unbearable.**

**//I am sure you understand.**

He gestured at Viv’s short stature.

“Yeah I got it. It would be like cutting your own limbs. Which means...”

**//I will not be able to come with you so easily.**

**//Logistics will have to be involved every time.**

**//I will not be stealthy either.**

**//Strike golems do not require stealth.**

**//I will remain at base much more often to form the future of our kind.**

**//Golems require arcane engineers.**

**//I will dedicate myself to training and to war.**

**//Raise the next generation of Harrakans and golems alike.**

“Wow. You sound so mature. Ready to be a father and everything.”

**//You also need to consider the implications for us all.**

**//So far, the existence of Harrak as a reborn entity has been considered a curiosity.**

**//Once more countries become aware of heavies, imperial-trained war mages, and golems...**

“Then we will become a threat.”

**//The impetus you have brought condemns us to greatness or to death.**

**//You cannot bring ideology into everyday life and expect people to stop caring.**

**//Democratic institutions have given the Harrakans a taste of their own power.**

**//The conquest of the deadlands has made them hungry for more.  
//They will expand like a tide.  
//Our soft power will grow until rivals are forced to shut us down or to convert.  
//It will be up to you to forge alliances and friendships for the long period of time during which we will remain vulnerable yet on the rise.  
//Then, it will be up to you to make us strong enough to withstand anything.  
//I will be there for you, of course.  
//As will others.  
//But so long as we start golems and magery.  
//And we must.  
//Then you shall expect to walk a fine line.**

“Actually, I have ideas about this. We discussed it in military theory back on earth. There are ways I can make us too costly to invade, although the issue is that we also need foreign spies to report to their masters so they are aware of what we have prepared.”

**//Offer to open embassies and the problem will solve itself.**

“My thoughts exactly. We are getting sidetracked. All of this can wait until we return to Harrak though in principle, I agree with your request to travel to the fallen capital and create more sapient golems. In the meanwhile, we have to prepare for the final confrontation with Elunath and the aftermath concerning Abe. I need your help for both. First, I need you to recommend some good alchemists...”

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Helock was abuzz with the latest development in the feud. Elunath had exploded like a volcano in public. The heroic, disproportionate fight between the young outlander and a pillar of the Helockian community was raging with delicious bouts of underhanded tactics. The gossip loved that the pillar had revealed shaky foundations. They loved that a pervert would be brought down a little from his pedestal of respectability. Mostly, they loved that the feud so far had made no victim barring Elunath's pride and, apparently, the contents of his safe. Oh, and a few business contracts.

Elunath was fuming.

He had been refused service at the Blue Lantern. On account of security risks.

The bank asked for the contents of his safe so they could 'compensate' him. As if money could compensate for such a disaster!

The guard refused to help. They were not even pretending anymore.

His warding contract renewal with the Builders' Guild fell through.

Many of his suppliers had placed his orders on hold.

He was even out of Nawa.

Coupled with his lack of sleep, the absence of stimulants made his life even more miserable. He did not technically need to drink. It was just an anchoring gesture, and now his stores were depleted! He could only get the cheap stuff from the streets. Him. Elunath.

It was too much.

He approached the pier and swam down and into the bay of Helock. He could feel the weight of blue mana above him, smothering the stone in layers of foreign mana and sediments. It would be more than enough. The bitch wasn't anywhere around so she might be in a smuggler cliff, somewhere west where the rocky terrain favored craggy trees and fishermen villages. She had to be somewhere. They couldn't hide forever. He had searched the slums, the canals, even the eastern plateau near the Academy. Nothing. His mind feverishly worked over his options again. He had placed observers near every teleporting platform Sidjin had set up. He had come when they activated, only to watch slabs of rocks roll in by the pallet. He had found no other such platforms, including the smaller ones the witch was reported to have used. He had checked ships. He had checked the towers of his enemies. He had questioned the griffin riders who confirmed no new house had sprouted over the low floating rocks over the city. They had looked at him strangely after he'd asked, the mongrels.

He could not find them.

It was infuriating.

Elunath methodically inspected the cliffs segment by segment. He found a pair of Baranese thieves carrying a stolen coffer and killed them to take the edge off. It barely worked. He needed to get his hands on them. He needed to get his hands on HER.

As he finished his fruitless patrol, his communication amulet shook. He surfaced and cast a spell to the linked talisman. This one belonged to Sen.

"Yes?"

"A runner came carrying word from an Officer Semon, near the docks. They found something that belongs to the witch."

"How would they know that?"

"Correspondence in Harrakan, strange scribbles in an alphabet he has never seen..."

He imagined Sen flipped a page.

"There are traces of black mana."

Elunath frowned.

Finally, a headway? Or...

"I am going back first. I need to make some preparations."

Elunath swam back at top speed. He bypassed his bedroom to dive directly into the sanctum deep below the earth. It was a heavily warded room of large proportion with a living space and some of his most precious belongings. The formidable defenses would prevent anyone from entering. Only a thin shaft linked the room to the surface to let fresh air in and there were defenses against gray mana attacks and the like. Elunath stood in the middle of a circle and activated the glyphs one by one, more out of apprehension than because of their difficulty. Dissociation had become a growing concern and this would damage his mind more than most measures. It would also guarantee his survival. He had to do it. The enemy was crafty and prepared. They might have come up with some wonder spell specifically designed to take him down. He could not afford half-measures.

With a last sight to mask his apprehension, he placed his fingers against the circular core embedded in his chest. The core left its rightful place with an innocuous pop he found profoundly revolting. The procedure left a gaping maw in his sternum, though the revealed tissue was no meat but flowing stone marbled with green veins.

'This is my body. This is what I have become' a voice said but he suppressed it. That was not truly himself, merely an extreme concentration of energy that twisted his flesh into something it was not. It would return to mostly flesh and bone once the core was returned. It was fine. Temporary. All would be fine.

He closed his robe around the mark of his action. The girls could not be allowed to know this gesture of caution. They might mistake it for weakness.

A wave of disorientation struck his already strained mind. He was here, standing. No, he was the core. He was both, and neither. They were merely part of him. The anchor. No, they were as essential as his soul or he would lose himself. Lim would be disappointed.

Elunath shook his head. He was growing old. His Lim had been dead for centuries, taken by a plague. There was no one left he really cared about.

Elunath placed the core on a pedestal and swam back. His power was... mostly intact. Perhaps a little sluggish. This body was now a sleeve, however. Not a necessary function. He could rebuild it from the core alone. He just... could not go too far. That would be dangerous. Ten leagues or so would be enough, however.

The trip through the rock filled him with frustration. War once again raged through the Helockian tunnels now that the bitch's killing machine had made itself scarce. He would have very much enjoyed taking control of both the underworld and the strange creature itself. The witch was going to suffer for that loss. He surfaced soon after and asked Sen for directions. She gave him an approximate one. It would have to do.

Elunath walked through the piss-smelling back alleys of his city. This section of the dock was a dump, an accretion of decrepit warehouses far from the main flow of commerce. In periods of expansion, enterprising spirits would renovate them to accommodate the overflow of goods but right now was not such a time and the decrepit structures had fallen to disrepair

once again after it had become a useless cost to maintain them. It was a decent hiding spot for squatters if they could muster the numbers to keep one of the buildings under control. Gangs tended to prefer smaller, more defensible bases, however. The place had probably been wiped clean during the race riots. He wondered what the patrol had been doing here. He searched his memories for mentions of an officer Semon, finding none that could be relevant. His opinion plummeted as soon as he came across the first guard, the shifty man looking around the deserted district like a hounded fox.

Elunath turned his nose up at the poor specimen of law enforcement in front of him. The guard had forfeited the more expensive red dye in favor of a gray shirt stained with old wine spots. His gambeson showed signs of disrepair the wiser soldiers repaired as soon as they could get their hands on a needle as it could save their lives. Stubble adorned his reddish jaw. He was... He was...

Elunath shook his head again. He could perceive his sanctum around him. That was the core part of him crying out for its receptacle. Not good. He almost missed a step before he could reassert control. The main part of him was here, in this shithole. That was the truth. That was the truth. That was the truth.

“You there! Your senior officer sent for me?” he asked.

“Ah, beg your pardon sir. You’ll be Elunath, yes?”

“In the flesh,” the archmage answered with a crooked smile.

The guard gulped and paused. Elunath realized he had to avoid any sort of complicated form of communication with that feeble-minded cretin.

“Lead me to your boss,” he decided to say.

That always seemed to work.

The guard walked between two tall, sagging buildings covered in vine and moss. Those would collapse soon, Elunath noted. Even the squatters had not braved its insides for some time. He felt the interiors and there was nothing left but shattered crates and the dust of long rusted nails. He also felt the patrol long before he saw them. They were trampling about nervously. He extended his reach farther. There was...

Inaz in the bathroom.

No, no that was his core, he was here. There were wild dogs and a couple of miserable sods. A man was dying some distance away, tucked between two crumbling beams. Elunath could feel his waning heartbeat. The guards clumped in a disorderly group around the entrance to a two-stories building that had resisted the test of years a little better than the rest. He wordlessly walked in after a quick check. No enchantments he could detect. The place seemed entirely inert. He still readied an obsidian shield. Just in case.

The interior of the warehouse was barely lit by whatever sunlight pierced through shattered windows. It was dusty and smelled of rodent excrements. Half-fallen doors led to side rooms but the main space was empty save for the man who had invited him here.

Officer Semon was just as disappointing as Elunath expected. The hope that the officer had contacted him out of a sense of patriotism and duty melted like snow under the sun. Semon was just as unkept as his colleagues, and only marginally cleaner. More importantly, the stench of dream weed clung to his gambeson like a cloying perfume. His eyes were bloodshot. Elunath had met a few addicts in his lifetime. This one had recently let go. He was still useful enough to be kept around until his superiors found a replacement.

Such men disgusted Elunath. They were the rot that crawled through the structure of society. The longer they were left unchecked and the more damage they wreaked. Their very existence gnawed at the belief of their colleagues in the sanctity of their mission. That was what Elunath had to resort to, then? Addled mercenaries? He could already guess how things had gone but he asked anyway.

“So, how did you find this place?”

“Good morning to you sir. Name’s Semon. At your service. Glad to have you around. Nasty business, that vendetta, aye? Me and the boys, we were looking for rats and vermin, the two-legged kind you see?”

So they were chasing smugglers and criminals for a shakedown and a quick talent.

“And we saw that the door, it was cleaner than the others, yea? And no one cleans this place. Ever. So me and the boys, we go in to see what pleasant sort put some shiny iron on rotted planks yeah? Shiny iron goes missing around those parts. Changed for a couple iron bits at a fence and whatnot. So we go in. And what do we see? Well, nothing at first!”

“Can I have the more succinct version please?”

“The wha—?”

“The short version. Get to the point.”

Semon’s manic eyes widened with fear. He licked cracked lips, eager to please.

“Right. Right so we go upstairs and we find an office. I think? With a desk and paper, not the cheap bamboo stuff they sell at the market. Real white thing. There’s those squiggles. And my boy Tul said there was black mana around. So we think, maybe it’s that outlander everyone is going on about? So we thought, maybe your lordship wants to have a bit of a look see. Maybe learn something. And when you get that whore then maybe you remember your old pal Semon that pointed you in the right direction, yea?”

“Oh you are quite right. I never forget favors,” Elunath finished in a mildly threatening voice.

He did pay his debts but he did also like when the rabble remembered that they were not 'pals'. Arrogant addict.

"You have done well to seek me. Not like... your superiors."

"Hahaha. Quite right!"

"You and your fine troops will be rewarded."

Elunath moved his hand and his purse opened, overflowing with silver talents. They spread on the ground with a pleasant clink. The officer fell to his knees to collect them, all thoughts of Elunath forgotten.

The archmage scoffed and moved up. He carefully scanned the place for intruders and found nothing, not down, not upstairs. No ambient mana saved for a leftover black miasma that could be the fading remains of a witch ward. Witches were always so sloppy. His step carried him up the rickety stairs to a circular overhang overlooking the main room. A flat surface hosted a basic setup but it felt hollow, somehow. Elunath frowned and asked himself why. There was a desk, writing implements, a table. He got his answer immediately. The place was too empty, lacking accommodations such as chairs and additional tables. It also felt too open. Why not use a side room?

He shrugged. Most likely, the witch had taken them with her. Good seats were hard to come by and this den had obviously been vacated. As for the open space, many things could explain this choice, not least the state of the side rooms themselves. He was wasting time. getting paranoid. Or was he? He was safe here, in his sanctum.

Elunath shook his head again. Removing the core had been a bad idea. Or maybe not. If this was a trap, then removing the core had been a good idea. As was sending the puppet to do his errands. No. He was in the puppet. That was his true body.

Elunath massaged his brow. He should have slept. He was slipping.

There were notes on the desk. the first clue he had ever seen but they were written in a language he'd never seen, the letters seemingly linked together with arabesque. It was a beautiful script but looked thoroughly unreadable. It reminded him of the notebooks left by the great hero who left the continent some time before. Maybe he could cross-reference them. He had some doubts that it could be a distraction, however. Some of the characters were repeated and queued together, a sign of an unhinged author. He would have expected lists as well, or crumpled notes hastily written. This all seemed all too convenient. Planted.

He decided that it was probably a distraction but the witch was not half as smart as she thought she was. All planted clues led to the perpetrator as surely as the genuine ones did. A wise man merely had to... use the appropriate tool. Elunath gathered the mana remnants inside of a small absorbent crystal and wove a tracking spell around it. Oh, he did not expect it to work immediately. He knew the witch would return to the city, however. Kick him while he was down. And she would make a mistake. They always made mistakes. And then... he would be there to greet her.

Something distracted him downstairs. A movement from one of the side rooms. He smashed the planks and fell through, landing nimbly in the middle of a storage space. Semon swore at the noise on the other side of a still-locked door. The window was open. It let some light in, enough to see by. There were close crates and a box on a low table. He could barely hear a strange sound coming from inside that box. Out of curiosity, he opened one of the crates. and found black granular powder inside. Inert, thankfully. Only nominal amounts of mana. Not an immediate concern. The box sparked his interest. It was unlocked. There was a sort of ticking device inside he recognized as a clock, an expensive and pointless apparatus that kept time for those without access to a town crier. It was bound to a strange contraption, again, nothing magical there. Although, the smell reminded him of something. A mine project from a long time ago. There was a single slip of paper inside, again in a script he did not recognize.

'BONJOUR =D'

Whatever that meant.

The ticking stopped and he heard a click.

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Arthur bit deeply into the big mole thing. It was greasy and fresh but... gamey. She wanted salt and freshly chopped aromatic herbs. And a roast. She missed those. She missed the scratches.

It was annoying.

*I am strong adult dragon lady of great importance!*

*I am above scratches!*

She could still use some, however.

*Talking to yourself again?*

Judgment's distant thoughts nudged her like pushing a claw into a sore scale.

*You, old man!*

*Why never busy!*

The thoughts returned after a short delay.

*You requested my assistance, remember?*

She-who-feasts-on-many-and-gets-much-gold seethed in her small cave, the mole thing forgotten.

*I ask for path to GREATNESS! You speak of duty and patience and higher mana and whatnot! Talking talking talking! I want to fly better! I want to cook with my fire!*

*"Your fire is too hot,"* the voice replied.

*"What do you know? You cannot even explain risk assessment and credit ratings for private sector entities!"*

*"Those are human terms. You care about gold too much."*

*"Impossible!"*

*"I can feel your irritation from my den. You feel a pull. Open your perception to fate and follow the path laid for you. Or do not. I am not your dominant."*

Arthur huffed. Her fate was to receive more scratches and fly better by teleporting around to sneak on people and steal, no, 'liberate' their belongings. Especially if those belongings shone. Maybe she could take a vacation from being an adult dragon lady of great importance. Maybe she could take a bath in water that didn't have either salt or leeches in it. For once. Maybe she could get cooked meat.

There was the mind equivalent of a long-suffering sigh.

*Fine! Fine!*

Arthur closed her eyes and relaxed. Then she closed her nostrils as well because the mole thing was pungent.

*"It is called a northern rock mole."*

*"Shut up! What are you? A meatologist?"*

*"Please stop making up strange concepts. Our language is sacred, the most holy of all, capable of conveying pure meaning without the inaccuracies of sound-based communication. The transcendental beauty of exactitude implies—"*

*"Farts!"*

*"I give up for now and release you into the clutches of your mother."*

Arthur puffed and pawed the ground with small stomps. She recognized that gesture. It meant she was nervous. Something was making her nervous.

*Oh, fine then.*

Concentration brought up the next level of mana, the one beyond primary elements. Fate weaved around her, pulling her west towards Helock where her mother was. Mother was

always cloaked in fate because of what that human god had done but she couldn't see it. Humans didn't have that ability. They were just aware that it was a thing and called it luck. Mother's luck needed her back. It had to be a big fate to be this insistent.

So Arthur was right and her magnificent intellect once more displayed unerring precision. Scratches were indeed her destiny. She would not shy away! A few more bites of mole thing later and she was airborne. It was time to head back!

## Chapter 146: The League attempts murder.

The initial bang was not too dire, though it startled everybody in that section of the piers. If any of those buildings had windows, they would have surely exploded. The shockwave sent Elunath reeling and screaming in pain as the pressure tried to pulp his insides. Only great power and his own innate resilience of the stone saved the body from immediate death. He still lost both eyes and his eardrums. For the first time in a century, he tasted his own blood. A reflexive cast of obsidian armor covered his body in multiple layers of strong material, and not a second too soon. Flaming debris fell on the piles of what he now recognized as black powder, an outlander innovation meant to help mining operations when one lacked earth casters.

There was a woosh, then white light, then heat, so much heat he could feel it through the isolating layers of armor before they could fully cover him. The skin of his calves was seared. Blinding pain wrecked his mind until he was on the verge of abandoning it. His original body.

With a supreme effort of will, Elunath forced himself to remain and crash through the scorched ground and into the protective embrace of the earth below. He swam, his spirit an ocean of rage and of pain. He only resurfaced several hundreds of paces away.

The old warehouse district was an inferno of fire and fury. Bells rang throughout the city to call blue mages to the rescue before it could spread to important parts. The squad who had led him here was dead and gone. A trap. It had been a trap all along.

Elunath screamed his impotent rage to the skies. He rose in the air, looking for something, anything.

And then, he felt something eating into his armor.

Elunath turned around and raised his fist. A ray of pure, concentrated annihilation mana struck it. It came from afar. He could see a circle over the city wall, up in the air. The part of him not screaming in pain noted that the circle focused a small amount of mana. It then sent it at an extremely fast speed towards the target, a perfectly suitable medium for black mana which was already fast and light.

The spell faded a moment later. Elunath noted that part of the obsidian fist had melted despite this being one of the highest rated defenses in Param.

He was... under attack?

Disbelief struck him.

The witch was attacking him directly? Head on?

No one did that.

it made no sense at all.

Elunath brought the half fist and watched blood spurt from the stump of his extended fingers.

“Aaaah. Ah! AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!”

That was the breaking point.

Three days of frustration. Three days of pain, of humiliation and the compounded emotions all returned to deliver a last blow to Elunath's patience and sanity. From a most respected pillar of society to a pariah decried as a deviant, stolen and shunned, Elunath's vertiginous descent had come to a rock bottom stop here. Corrupt addicts unwittingly dragged him to an ambush and he was now under attack in broad daylight by a power climber not even a tenth of his age. The last of his proper support had deserted him. There was only one path to salvation his rage-filled mind could come up with.

Kill. The Witch.

Elunath rose on a tide of stones. Pavement rolled like an angry sea and the wave carved a path of destruction to the wall, through barns and homes and families. The elemental archmage was now the earth's very wrath wrapped in layers of smooth glass. The tide crashed against the wall just as the witch fell back, cracking the ancient structure like an egg. Massive blocks joined the torrent of devastation across meadows and fields. Elunath was awake, wide awake, and he could not be stopped.

The witch remained ahead by using a strange harness that kept her aloft. Kinesis on her arms and legs let her float in various directions rather than by the powers of the wind, as was natural. She was a fish out of water. Elunath was gaining on her, hiding behind his tide as she peppered the approach with spells.

“Eldritch walls!”

Threads of change mana smashed into the edge of his defenses, corrupting the packed rocks and forcing him to discard layers but that was fine. He could pull as much stone from the planet as he pleased while she exhausted herself stemming a power that could not be stopped. Inertia made him go faster. She flew up then to the side, towards the marshes, and Elunath followed. Finally, she landed on an islet in the middle of soaked land. Did she think this would be enough to stop him? By bringing him in a place where blue mana soaked the ground?

“Deadland domain.”

Elunath roared his pain and the loss of his eyes. The storm descended on the witch and... stopped. Like waves licking at a cliff. He was cut from the stone.

The titanic mass of debris parted around her giant circle. Elunath would have nothing of it. He gathered the core of his attack and rose in the air, above the area denial. Several tons of rocks would see the job done.

A spell triggered mid-air and it felt like the stones landed on a grinder. Rocks turned to gravel, dispersing in the air in front of transparent wheels of churning hunger. He noticed Sidjin far above. That young cur would pay, after he surrendered the methodology behind the portals. Elunath would make sure of it. With a grunt, he let the remaining stone finish their descent while he retreated.

“Eldritch walls. Aegis!”

Some of the wave turned weird, the other slid over a half-dome of connected hexagons, obliterating the countryside in a mudslide. The forest died around them. Birds were silenced, beasts slaughtered. Elunath was just getting started.

“Primordial Rain.”

Elunath raised a cloud of stone shards so thick they cast a shadow over the mangled valley. They fell in a storm over the unmoving shape of the witch. She took a step back and placed her hand in front of her. Elunath's advanced inspection let him understand the sigils she wove together. Force. Push. All. Forward.

She thrust her palm forward.

“God hand.”

A cylinder opened in the fabric of his attack. While most of it landed uselessly, what aimed at the girl fell backward towards him. He tried to regain control and failed. As soon as the stone approached him, however, they were caught back in his domain, gravitating around him to reinforce his formidable defenses. Meanwhile the witch was casting.

“Astra. Blast. Hyperbeam.”

First slow spheres of mana flew in thick clumps towards him. He attempted to detonate them early and was surprised by how thick the fabric was. By the time he put enough effort to intercept, a wave of artillery spells had joined the slower spheres. He barely saw the last attack, the same ray as before, when the three waves hit him at the same time. The part of Elunath that remained calm and present struggled to gauge their power, so he simply poured as much as he could in the reinforced sphere of stones that protected him. He was now a planetoid, rotation slowly in place surrounded by a galaxy of asteroids. The spheres bit deep gouges in his rotating defenses. The artillery spells penetrated deep enough to endanger

him. Fortunately, the beam missed. It ripped off the edge of his protections before fading away in the distance.

Dangerous.

Elunath poured a lot of mana rebuilding those layered defenses. At the same time, he wove his next attack. The witch cast the three attack types in quick succession again but this time, Elunath allowed the sphere to lower itself near the ground and back, where he had a connection to the land. She didn't miss but they failed to penetrate.

By that time, there was nothing left of the original forest at the edge of the city, nothing but mangled earth and blighted, sandy ditches where the witch's domain extended. He launched a volley of artillery spells of his own, the stone variant dark obelisks vibrating with energy. Yet his true attack came from below.

"Geyser."

The witch didn't stay in her circle. A white shape flew from the side, picking her as it went. He recognized the form of the golem just instant before the mud explosion took out this entire section of land in a surge of ascending soil. He pursued.

A tiny part of him reminded him that he was a defensive fighter, that he should take his time. That part was silenced by the rage that filled him. He had her. He finally had her. She wouldn't escape. She was still a pup to him, despite her devastating element. If Helock learned he had engaged and failed to kill a foreign neophyte, he was finished. That couldn't happen. He would end the bitch here and now.

The golem unsurprisingly dropped her in another circle by the sea, on a rocky outcrop. He landed nearby and let the planetoid fall, only to realize the place was blighted below the surface. It annoyed him and he fought the destructive influence but the witch cast another of those beams and, this time, it stayed on him and ate through his defenses. He had to rotate them and gave up. By now, the planetoid was as large as a small manor. It was taxing but not insurmountable.

Elunath decided his strategy then. He was more suitable for defense, more capable with area denial. She was much more concentrated and mobile but there was one thing that would tilt the combat in his favor. He had significantly more reserves than she did.

He was old. Elemental power grew over time. He could spend ten times what she did for a similar result and still come up on top. Time was on his side. He merely needed to keep the pressure up.

The last time he'd faced danger, it had been a death squad of Halurian Faceless. He could do it. There were no other choices.

Elunath launched a torrent of spells at the shield. A quake cracked the cliff, breaking the circle and sending blighted tentacles tumbling to the waters below. She took off again. A new wave of assault smashed into the crust of his armor. This time, she didn't miss. The

planetoid was too heavy to dodge by now so he kept feeding more and more power into the defenses. She would run out of energy before she did, and then...

A new colorless grinder pierced the sphere from above. Elunath grit his teeth under the layers of cool stone. His wounds distracted him, the pain too great to be completely ignored. She was not fighting alone. He had to be careful.

Annoying gnats.

That was fine. Patience. He almost had them. And then... the payback. For years of wasted effort. For his image forever stained. The witch took to the air and struck but his defenses were growing ever stronger, ever larger. Bloated. She could no longer pierce the shell yet she still stayed. Stupid. He was slow like this but she did not try to escape. A hurricane of debris shredded the landscape and turned the surface of the ocean like a lake under the rain. She managed to push back his hails of projectiles with the ridiculous telekinesis of hers. That was fine. He had an answer for everything.

Elunath focused and used the planetoid to press long, thin spears into existence. He quickly inscribed a few sigils on them, then sent them in clusters at that annoying wasp. One of the spears pinged against her shield and was amazingly shattered. That was fine. He had time.

\*\*\*

The fisherman ran. That was all he could do. His pond was gone. The meadow where he had proposed was gone. Even the slice of city wall he had painted on when he was a child was gone. One of his nieces lived near the pier. At a glance, she was gone as well. Behind him, there was nothing left of the life he had led so far, nothing but the exposed, muddy bowels of the earth and the shattered trunks of destroyed trees. For a mile, the land he had grown up on and never left had been shattered.

So the fisherman ran. He ran, and he prayed he would reach the village in time to tell them to flee. He prayed that the monsters hurling city-ending magic at each other would miss and hit the sea rather than his garden. He prayed to all the light gods that would listen while he sprinted with all his might. That was all he could do.

For years, man could plant and build. Man could labor and flourish. Man could make the world theirs. Then, one day, beasts and mages would come and erase all that work with an afterthought and a flick of their fingers.

This was life on Param for people like him. Hope and build, and when the time comes, run.

\*\*\*

Sidjin watched the duel from above. Far above. Elunath was a snake carrying a shroud of stones, heavy and powerful but ultimately slow. His Viv was a wasp. She flew under and around attacks, darting in and out and her stinger left afterimages of pure darkness across

the torn landscape. It was too early to say who would win if those two were to fight a duel, he thought..

Unfortunately for Elunath, this was no duel, yet Sidjin still took a moment to watch the exchange while he recovered some of his strength. There was a point in magic when casters stopped being mere humans and became forces of nature. Elunath was such a creature. It was now clear that the only thing that had prevented him from destroying a city was self-interest. Now they only had to hope he would die before being given the chance to travel to Harrak and remake the plains in his image.

He was both proud and sad about what Viv had grown into. He thought he might be left behind, eventually.

But not today.

Today, he would cast his best magic and show the city of magic that while he may have fallen, he was still a prince of Glastia.

\*\*\*

Disaster ravaged the coast off Helock. The massive rock sphere that hid Elunath was the center of a maelstrom of flying stones some as large as huts. The torrent followed the witch where she went, turning fields and forests into trench vistas and carving deep scars on the peaceful land. Sometimes, focused assaults in the form of rock javelins trailed the nimble witch. Facing the onslaught, she teleported and flew using an annoying harness that canceled gravity and kinesis centered around her hands and feet. Most of those attacks missed to hit something — or someone — else but Elunath didn't care. They were not facing the city. Anyone in the way was either too slow or too dumb to leave. He poured every ounce of power he could into overwhelming her with the certainty that she would crack before he would. She had even foregone attacking him at this stage. Eventually, she landed on yet another circle. Strange wings deployed from her back and planted themselves in the ground. Or was it the ground? It felt... deeper.

“Aspect of the guardian, aegis. Deadland domain.”

The planetoid trailed after her and Elunath intensified his bombardment of the strange shield she had built and the tainted earth around her. The lightest stone glanced off her defenses while the larger one exploded just before impact, negating most of the force. The witch intercepted them with short-ranged spells designed for interception. Elunath realized he was losing mass and dug deep into the bones of the land for the hardest pieces he could find. Maintaining all of that taxed his mind and reserves but he was confident he would prevail.

Stones that had never seen the light of day surged from the abyss then rushed at the defenses, gorged with ancient brown mana. The witch reacted by retracting her shield until it was small, smaller and smaller. Elunath kept the pressure on.

And then she teleported.

He had expected that much. What he had not expected was that she would teleport right under him. His perception let him see that her shield was still up, but it was now black and shone dangerously.

“Shatterstar.”

Elunath flinched. His mind reeled. The planetoid was damaged?

“What?”

The planetoid was damaged, heavily so. The panes forming the shield had exploded at point blank range, skewering parts of his defenses. The networks of mana supporting the outer part of the sphere were damaged beyond functionality. He was suddenly much slower, much less cohesive. The phantom pain of spell feedback made him wince. He was in his sanctum... No, he was still here, fighting! He tried to move aside but the witch was now in a layer of coating and cleaving in his flank with a blade of pure void. No, that was not his flank. Just the damn coating. He had to focus! He formed spikes facing her.

“Hammer of Glastia.”

An attack from Sidjin caught him by surprise. He was still flying far above the battle. It was frustrating.

Elunath's sphere smashed into corrupted ground, upper layers demolished by the follow up attack from that accursed little princeling. No need to panic. No need to panic, he was still in control. He exploded the spikes outward which forced the witch back. No, she'd teleported really close and was now mauling his other flank.

Suddenly, the sphere turned into a prison. It had suffered critical damage and was losing cohesion. The damage was too quick, too deep for him to recover it. He could discard it but that was so much of his mana invested in it. He could not claim it back by putting the stones back on the ground, either. Should he leave? He hesitated even as he sent attacks both at the witch and the flying Sidjin. They kept damaging it faster now that he could not easily recover.

And then, something pierced it.

Searing pain struck his left forearm, even deep inside the protective cocoon. It was broken? It was broken, something now rested only a few fingers away from his torso. It was a large spike of stone striated with black mana. He recognized it. It was an old imperial war spell.

Impossible. No one alive should be left to cast such a thing. The art was lost.

Elunath's sphere cracked like an egg. All fifty paces of it split in two parts, its structure skewered by a spear of disruptive black and brown. He managed to extract himself in a tiny ball made of the hardest material at his disposal, flying away as fast as he could. He felt something bite his flank. This time, it was the real one.

Elunath looked down to see an entire chunk of his flesh missing. He felt the very disconcerting sensation of his insides spilling outside before the stone closed the gap, pushing innards in before they could fully escape. Agony struck him a moment later. The sanctum called to him but with a last, supreme effort of will, he clung to his failing flesh. The life mana he could conjure flooded to the wound with no result. The witch's touch could not be so easily undone. A flurry of blows struck his back, collapsing most of his remaining armor, a defense sturdier than most fortress gates. And yet, pain struck him again.

All air left his remaining lung with a deep gasp of sheer, atrocious pain. A knife. A knife in his back?

Someone had stabbed him.

With a knife.

It was too much. Feeling his consciousness fade, he cast his last, most powerful spell.

\*\*\*

Viv watched the body of Elunath disperse in a cloud of dust above the cracked, thirty meters high death ball that insane fucker had created. The blood from his wound remained behind which was super weird in itself. Was the man stone or flesh? Was she flesh or... whatever it was black mana was? Very disconcerting.

"Do you think we got him?" she asked Abe as he hovered beside her.

Her soul sense now told her if something had died and it had not done so, not yet.

"I do believe he whispered one last sentence before turning to ash," Abe stoically replied.

"And what was that?"

Suddenly, a chunk of rock rose from the earth, breaking the layer of saturated ground like a submarine through the ice. It was soon followed by a muscular granite torso as wide as the average basketball court, then hands. Baleful lava eyes glared at Viv as more and more of the colossus emerged from the abyss.

"I believe he said: 'aspect of the walking mountain'. As stated before, I will attack his soul directly since he no longer has a physical body."

"Ah."

\*\*\*

It was a beautiful day to watch the end of an era. From his balcony overlooking the city, Dean Tallit had a perfect view of the titanic battle raging across the Helockian countryside. At this distance, the caster were but little dots flying in the distance, barely visible without superior finesse. The colossus, however, was not. There were no records of Elunath ever

pulling that. It could only mean one thing. Either this was a new spell, or Elunath had never left witnesses before.

He rolled his snifter and let the liquor's perfume waft to his nose. Permodian, aged thirty years. Today was a special day. It was doubly so because the young Viviane had pulled the ravaging archmage away from the city despite the fact that if she had not, the city would have come to her help if only to stop the devastation. A testament to her mercy after such a vicious campaign.

He took a gulp. The alcohol burnt the way down while a floral scent lingered, just a little bitter towards the end. The colossus swung quickly and missed. Tallit counted three flying combatants. Viviane, Sidjin, and a third one he didn't know and who used elemental magic mixed with black mana. Those seem devastatingly effective.

The unequal combat was coming to a close with the titan on its last leg. It would have destroyed entire armies in other circumstances. Here, it was facing prepared foes. They stayed nimble and airborne at all times. Viviane used change to corrupt and undo. Sidjin struck with devastating kinetic blows that took entire chunks off the construct. Meanwhile, the last one demolished the colossus' internal circuit with unerring accuracy. Even from so far away, watching those three at work was a treat for this old caster. A part of him wished he could join but, unfortunately, his position meant he had to stay neutral at all times.

A pity.

Tallit finished his glass just as the titan collapsed on itself, entire chunks flattening an orchard around it. The witch was a competent planner as she had demonstrated. Unfortunately, she wasn't familiar with Paramese politics. Not yet. An elemental archmage had fallen in public. An undefeated paragon of magic, defeated by an upstart in a straight fight. The ripples of this conflict would reach every corner of the continent. He would have to lend a hand with the immediate fallout. He owed her that much for sparing the innocent. It was a rare trait, these days.

Tallit sighed and stretched.

He couldn't wait to become an elemental as well.

\*\*\*

Elunath pulled back from his broken body. The pain disappeared. The confusion disappeared. He lost the perception of being a human. Even his emotions felt distant, as if watched from afar rather than experienced. The absence of pain didn't come with relief but with disorientation and a terrible sense of loss. He was now in his core. No. He was now his core and nothing else. No need to breathe. No need to move limbs. Now, he needed to rebuild himself, and quickly, before the enemies capitalized on his weakness. He still had plenty of mana to work with. Rebuilding a body would not cost much. It would just require a high level of concentration. That was fine. He had a will of steel.

First, he had to make the body out of stone. Marble would be a good choice. He had some around. An effort of will lifted a pillar from the floor with some difficulty. He still had a core but

he no longer had conduits, and those would need to be rebuilt and retrained before he regained his flawless mastery of mana. He decided to slow down to avoid making mistakes.

The rock melted like wax, splitting apart to reveal his vision underneath. First, his face, his beautiful face clear of damage. The eyes were whole again, as was the skin. Then the neck, the torso...

Something was wrong.

No matter how much Elunath tried, the hole in his chest would not reform. It was as if the image of his body came with that wound. Try as he might, he could not remember the sensation of being whole. He could not discard the wound the witch had left on his flesh. A brief application of life mana changed nothing. There was a corruption there that went deeper than the physical level. His body was gone a couple of leagues west of here and yet the stigma of annihilation still clung to the idea of it. Elunath forced and pushed but he was an outsider and this was just a statue and he felt his grip slip up.

It became worse when the knife wound on his back did the same thing. That was the work of a Hadal assassin. They'd been gone for a few decades and he'd assumed time had rectified that mistake of nature, yet the witch had recovered one. It was just like her to pick up rejects from a bygone age. The core shone with resentment and the realization of his own limits. He needed help. Weaving a few strands of colorless mana, he linked to the room's communication crystal. He would have to replace the one he left on his body. That would be a pain. He also realized he had no voice and needed to vibrate air to speak, which was another frustrating annoyance.

"Renea."

"My lord?" the woman replied.

"I need you in my sanctum."

"Immediately, my lord."

While she made her way, Elunath was now facing a conundrum. He had placed the sanctum on lockdown to prevent anyone from reaching his core while he was otherwise distracted. The defenses were only keyed to him, that was, to his physical body. One had to swim through stone to reach inside. Or pass through the tiny air hole but none of his students could do that. He had made sure of it. All his defenses were now working against his own interest. What should have been a formality was turning into a huge problem.

"My lord? The wards—"

"I know," he replied testily. "I am working on it. Give me a moment."

"Of course, my lord."

Elunath could only remove some of the defenses with a command. Was there some sort of universal key that would cut down the defenses? He didn't think so. A brief search of his memory confirmed that the sanctum was specifically designed to avoid this sort of solve-all spell someone might have used against him. He could also not just deactivate the wards. The sanctum was designed to feed power to the system being challenged, and forcibly trying to deactivate one of the layers was meant to be taken as an assault. He considered attacking the circuit but discarded that idea immediately. First, the circuit itself was the most protected part of the sanctum except for the core barrier itself. Second, he would need the excessively complex construct later. The war was only just beginning.

If only his girls were not so untrustworthy, then all of this might have been already solved! Even the loyal ones were often less than perfectly competent. In fact, he had only kept them around for sex and companionship but now he really could not see the point. Getting obedience tattoos would be enough to guarantee compliance with his demands. There was no point in socializing with humans anyway. Not anymore. Not after they had turned on him.

Even his erstwhile fury felt more distant now that his mind was whole again. Why be angry? He could just kill and forget. Calmly.

Elunath felt like sighing, even without lungs. There was only one solution he could think of. He would have to drain the defenses of power, let the girl in, then repower them afterward. It would leave him vulnerable for a moment yet he had no choice if he wanted to cleanse the memory of the wound. The rest of the mansion was still a fortress. He had little choice anyway.

Slowly, methodically, Elunath cut off the sanctum's defenses from their core. Alarms blared in his mind, warning him of an attack just as he'd designed them to do which compounded his annoyance. Things would have been much easier if he still had the hands to work with. Once that was done, it was only a matter of forcing the mana to disperse. He activated all the defenses at maximum and made it all inefficient. Mana soon flooded the sanctum until his perception of the world around him grew hazy. It took a good five minutes to finish but by then, there would only be a few steps to coming in safely. Some of the measures could not be deactivated. One of them would send shrapnel at the first person diving down with enough speed to send their spines through the manor's roof.

"Renea, I will now tell you how to deactivate the last layer of traps."

Silence.

"Renea? Renea, answer me."

More silence. Elunath calculated the next preferable course of action and realized he didn't have one. He needed help. Just a flood of life mana to purge the wound should work but he didn't have the means to do so and rebuild his complex body at the same time. Just one of his girls would be enough. What was happening? Why were they failing him?

"Renea."

Still no answer. Elunath made to check the manor but with the defenses disconnected, it was difficult to gauge how things were going. The girls seemed to be moving around normally. Renea was still at the entrance, though she did not reply. There was perhaps another he could trust with this delicate task.

Just then, something pinged from the tiny air vent. A sliver of darkness resolved itself into a fully grown person. It was, he realized, a Hadal strain human. The knife in the creature's hand was uncomfortably familiar.

A realization wormed its way into his consciousness though he denied it. He still had some defenses. Like the last barrier around his core.

The Hadal didn't do anything too strange at first. He dodged a few spells Elunath triggered more because he could than because he expected results. The accursed creature pulled out an amulet and dropped it on the ground where it resolved itself into a pool of darkness. A moment later, the witch appeared.

Elunath still refused to accept that he had lost. The witch punctured the last active defenses with ease. None of his redundant systems were left standing. She was very, very patient and very, very thorough. He did not try to cast spells at her. It would be too humiliating to be swatted aside like a fly.

What surprised him was how calm and detached she was.

"You must feel very proud of yourself," he finally snarled.

"Believe it or not, this time, it's not about me," she replied.

His following barbs were ignored. She made one last sweep then opened a witch portal from where the lich soon stepped out.

A gaze made of dark blue flame fell upon him.

"Hello Lunie. I never thought this day would come but here we are, despite the odds. How curious."

"Who are you?"

"I am your first sin, so to speak. You killed Jesar. You killed me. We were the stepping stone of your power."

The core remained silent for a while.

"Abe," he finally said.

"Abe is for friends. You should call me Abenezigel. And yes."

"After all this time, you are still after me for this, you cockroach?"

Power flooded the room, the soul kind. The archlich was furious and now that Elunath had lost his body, the balance of power was reversed.

“I did not have the luxury of letting go. You lived with the benefits of your sin and I survived with the scars. And now, after three hundred years, the game is finally finished.”

“You will not get away with this.”

“Oh I believe we will. Who can stop us, at this point? No one is willing to pay the price for you.”

The lich walked forward and Elunath seethed to be interrupted, to be lectured.

“Longevity is such a double-edged sword, do you not think so, Lunie? On the one hand, the best of us stay here for a very long time to guide and protect the next generations. We have the time to achieve greatness. On the other hand, it makes it hard to leave the world undefeated.”

The lich glared at the core with such malice that the accumulated hatred almost bore a physical weight.

“I want that ultimate defeat to sting so I will tell you what you know yet refuse to accept. This is your fault. I hate you and this is your fault. All of this, leading to this moment, is your fault. Your failure to properly assess us was born from your arrogance. You could not rely on a loyal force of mages because you are a mistrustful, abusive, paranoid rapist. You have accumulated so much enmity that now, at the end, no one is coming for you. This position of power you thought you had crumbled like a sand castle because it was built on cruelty and coercion. Even now, you are blaming the world and the gods and fate and your victims because you still deny reality and the reality is that this is all. Your. Fault. Look at me, Elunath. You killed Jesar. You killed me. You betrayed us all. For a long time, you got away with it but in the end the punishment comes from your sin, your fault. And now you’re going to die because you had slaves, not partners, and none of them could go through the wards to save you. And that’s your fault.”

“You arrogant upstart!”

“Upstart? I am older than you.”

“Upstart still. All of you... mongrels banding together because you cannot tolerate the idea of greatness!”

“Well that leads to an acceptable last taunt as well. If you were so great, Elunath, you would not be dead.”

“THE DARK GODS TAKE YOU!”

“You first, Lunie. Goodbye.”

The last of the barrier faded with a sound of broken glass. The Hadal extended his knife and the lich took it before ramming it in. His blade pierced the core as if it were clay. The core shattered to pieces.

For a brief moment, power escaped the tattered shards and then, there was nothing left of the archmage but half a bust and a trail of misery.

"I..." Abenezigel began.

Irao and Viv turned to him. The lick brought a skeletal fist to their empty chest, perhaps waiting for relief but it never came. His breast was hollow and the threads of emotions were but ghostly remains that kept his mind going. There would be no succor.

"I feel so... very... empty."

"Ah yes, regarding that," Viv said. "Since we're done, there is someone I would like you to meet."

\*\*\*

The old Academy doctor sat gloomily in his study, arms crossed, brows furrowed, steely glare fixed on Viv with unerring intensity.

"Haha. So, Tod, meet my friend Abenezigel. Your new patient!"

"Hello," Abenezigel whispered from behind a thick mask.

"Viviane the Outlander, your friend has no pulse. He's dead."

"Well, technically yeah."

"He has no flesh ! He does not have a blood flow. I can see his eye sockets from here!"

"Very astute sir but if you could only hear me out..."

"Viviane the Outlander, are you trying to get me to use necromancy?"

"Of course not! I'd call this more, errr, post-mortem body reconstruction."

"Get out."

"Wait wait wait! What if the gods agree?"

"What the hell are you talking about? Why would the light god agree to what is clearly the manipulation of life after death, which is, by definition, gods-accursed necromancy?"

“Neriad please tell me if I’m fucking up!” Viv said, clapping her hands together and flooding the righteous god with mana.

A divine light descended in the room. Viv gasped. Soon, a powerful voice filled the air with its divine presence.

**WHY DO YOU NEVER PRAY FOR A STRONG SWORD ARM? YOU ALWAYS COME UP WITH THE WEIRDEST SHIT. ENTIKU IS THE RULER OF DEATH. TAKE IT UP WITH THEM.**

“Sorry. Wrong number.”

\*\*\*

In the end, Viv did not attend the conversation between Abenezigel and the goddess of death. She was here when they rebuilt a body, albeit one of gray skin and eyes the color of deep wine. A large mark of Enttiku was placed on Abenezigel’s face never to be removed. After the procedure was completed, Tod left to write it down in his notes, leaving Viv and a stunned Abe behind.

“I... can feel. I can feel relief. The relief I was denied. I am myself again, and free, though the goddess may ask my service.”

He leaned forward, touching his knees with newly regrown fingertips.

“Now what?”

“Now we wrap up and we get the hell out of this town.”

## Chapter 147: Oh, Neriad, I won’t change.

Focus +1  
Acuity +1  
Willpower +1

Mana mastery: Intermediate 6

Acuity Reflex: Intermediate 7

Viv went over the recent gains. Those were nice. They would also set her on a way to greater heights. For now, she was only at the beginning of her next stage. The last notification was more concerning. She supposed it couldn't be helped.

### Draconic intimidation: Expert 8

With the way things were going, this one would reach master first. Sighing, she focused back on her current predicament: getting out of dodge.

Abe looked groggy, Viv thought. He also looked pretty badass. His huge frame was now filled with lean muscles and despite the grayish hue of his skin, he didn't appear to be sick. The red eyes looked lost for now while he looked around the operating room with a sense of childish wonder. His mouth hung open. He would have been cute except for the rest of his appearance: wrinkles which placed him on the grandpa scale, gray dreadlocks, and the mark of Enttiku shining ominously on his forehead. It looked a bit like a hooded figure if one looked closely. It was an ancient rune, older than the empire itself. She inspected him.

[Arcane Servant of Death]

So he had a path now. Interesting. Viv ignored the flurry of other titles to shove robes on the dazed ex-lich.

"Get dressed, we gotta go."

"Oh. Sorry. I was distracted."

"Understandable. Put the robe on please."

She wasn't sure if it was the natural state of things or if it was part of Enttiku's blessing but damn, the old man was hung like a donkey. Now that he was no longer her patient it was getting distracting.

Abe obliged and they were ready in record time. He trotted by her side while they exited the hospital without objection, perhaps sensing her stress. It was already late afternoon.

"I apologize. This delay must impede your plans."

"Look I saved you with the power of friendship and gods-approved necromancy. That was the best possible use of my time. I just want to finish everything and get going before anybody gets any ideas. We're rich and surprisingly successful. That means people are going to come with us with demands. We want to get out before they decide how they're going to do that."

"Agreed."

Sidjin was waiting outside, eyes fixed on the road. The guards and patients studiously ignored him.

“Let’s go,” Viv said.

They flew back to the city, Abe and Sidjin with gray mana and Viv with her harness and self-kinesis. Even though she was getting used to it, the sensation of flying without a machine still felt exhilarating. They stayed close to the ground because high flight near Helock was considered rude and the griffin riders might disapprove. It also suited Viv’s deeply ingrained fear of stinger missiles just fine. She was airborne over uncontrolled territory, therefore she was vulnerable to MANPADS and no amount of logic could convince her otherwise.

The group landed near the gate and continued on foot, racing past whispering Helockians. People recognized her on sight now. A few saluted her but there were quite a few hostile glares as well, especially from the older nobles. Elunath’s manor soon came into view. The gates were closed which was not a bad sign. A prostrate woman sobbed on the steps. Not great. Viv noticed that her dress was torn, revealing a bruised shoulder. She sported an impressive black eye. Her hair was shaved, badly. As she looked up, Viv recognized Renea. Elunath’s pet snitch. The other girls had gotten her hands on her, none too gently. She was lucky to be alive, Viv thought.

The girl cried as she approached. Viv readied some black mana but it soon became obvious that she was not threat.

“Why?” she cried. “Why? It was all for nothing. All for nothing... I thought I had no choice. Did I? I don’t know. I don’t fucking know anymore.”

There was only pity in Viv’s heart at the moment, partly because Renea was Stockholm syndrome’s poster child and partly because she didn’t know all the horribly stuff Renea must have done.

“Are you here to kill me?” the mage finally asked.

“No. We want in but you are... in the way.”

Renea hiccuped then stood on shaky legs. She left, limping a bit. Viv watched her go, wondering if she should do anything. She wasn’t sure. And they were on a schedule.

No time to worry about everyone.

“Let’s get in.”

“Wait!” Abe interrupted. “Wait.”

He clutched his belly and moved forward. Pain marred his wizened traits.

“Abe?”

"I... I don't feel good. It hurts. Like some pressure."

"Abe, what's wrong?"

Viv approached the old man. She still had mending potions in her belt. Would they help? He should have been okay.

"I can use a diagnostic spell," Sidjin said, already weaving colorless mana.

Suddenly, Abe's face turned into an expression of pure surprise. He was having an epiphany.

"I need to urinate!"

The old man waddled to the nearest flower bed and whipped out his junk. A sigh of contentment came with the subsequent release. Viv refrained from facepalming.

"Wow," Sidjin said after a brief observation.

"I know, right?"

"Did you..."

"Nope. Enttiku formed his body. Maybe he was like that before he died."

"Huh. To change this rather awkward topic, have you asked him what his new path entails?"

"Not really. I think we'll have ample time on the way back."

"What if it's... dangerous for us?"

"From Enttiku? Against a faction that's clearing the deadlands?"

"A fair point, Viv."

"Thank you for waiting," Abe said as he returned. "I had forgotten how satisfying pissing on the flowers could be. I wish to apologize for the delay and for using a rude term."

"Men," Viv bemoaned while Sidjin nodded in understanding. "Can we finally go?"

"Yes yes."

Elunath's door was still unlocked. They found a real crowd in the atrium, a babbling bunch that fell silent the moment they entered. Viv recognized most of Elunath's harem led by Sen, the receptionist, and Lana, still wearing a fitting blue dress. Solfis stood silently in a corner. Finally, there were a pair of trussed shapes in dark cloaks left on a carpet to the side.

“What’s with them?” Viv asked as she entered.

“Thieves. They tried to break in,” Lana replied with a guarded voice.

“So soon? Well, I salute their proactive spirits.”

“Yes, well. Let’s get to the point.”

Viv noticed Lana’s stiff shoulders and bunched fists. Sen, too, was tense, though the tall northerner expressed it with a high chin and an imperious gaze. Behind them, mages in the second and third steps quietly arrayed themselves, some afraid, some defiant. One girl immediately broke down to start sobbing from the stress. They burnt like a riot of mana torches in Viv’s sight. The many hues of their powers formed a flickering rainbow of coiling power that would scare most casters but Viv could easily see through the bluff. Those were not warriors and they were not organized. They were a scared, huddling pile of victims ready to bite and lash out at the first sign of a collar. Only Sen, Lana, and a couple of other older girls appeared willing to fight. The only thing Viv felt towards them was sympathy.

“We want to know if you will try to enforce the contracts. By Helock’s law —”

“There are no slaves in Harrak,” Viv interrupted.

She could immediately see doubt. She couldn’t blame them.

“You are free to go. I won’t do anything to you. There are no obligations between us.”

“Do you swear by it?” Sen retorted.

“On Neriad’s name, there are no bindings between us and you can go and never see me again.”

“Excellent. In this case, I’m out of here and out of this damn city. Goooooodbye.”

Sen picked up two bags and walked out without looking back. The majority of the other girls filed out behind her, giving Viv a broad berth. She didn’t take it personally even though she had technically liberated them. Doing so was the bare minimum decency demanded in a world where the term had little meaning. And they were scared. It was ok.

Soon, only Lana and six others remained.

“I am interested in entering an agreement,” Lana said.

“Wait!” the sobbing girl from before said. “Wait. Sorry. I want to go as well. Can I?”

“Sure,” Viv confirmed.

She grabbed her bag protectively to her chest and strode out, claiming she was going to take a boat. Sidjin chuckled.

“As I was saying, I am interested in entering an agreement,” Lana said.

“Should we sit? Do you want privacy?” Viv asked while Lana’s attention turned to a still dazed Abe.

“No. We decide now. I am not staying in this place any longer than I have to. I will be brief. Sen insists on instant freedom while I believe we cannot be free if we do not have protection. All of Elunath’s pupils are talented and, for now, vulnerable. Many powerful individuals of Param will believe they are too valuable to be let loose. You claim that Harrak is a good place to live, that we will not be separated or used. You hinted that we could decide what to do, what to research. I want a binding agreement. Not a vague promise. Is there truly a law or an institution in Harrak that would protect them?”

“Hmm, yeah. Me. Heiress to the throne and black elemental war caster on the fourth step who just offed Elunath with my allies.”

That forced Lana to reconsider a bit.

“Oh. That is indeed a convincing argument.”

“If you want to come, you can come. If you want to wait before doing so, that is also fine. Our gates are open. As for self determination, I wouldn’t even have to lift a finger to defend you there. Anyone bothering your girls would end up a crossbow bolt porcupine before they finish their first sentence. Look. The thing about New Harrak is that, hmm, people have it easier doing what they enjoy rather than what someone else expects them to do. Hadals make the best murderers and maybe it makes sense to force them to act as assassins but we don’t do make them do that. Most of them are our hunters and scouts. And it’s best from a population perspective if women stay home to raise a lot of children but many of us serve in the army and postpone raising a family. Maybe some never will. Assigning roles to people from birth makes a shit ton of them miserable and the goal of our nation is to make people not miserable. So maybe it’s not optimal. Maybe giving advanced projectile weapons to freshly emancipated populations doesn’t magically turn them into shock troops but it sure as hell makes them motivated. What I’m trying to say is, no one there will give you trouble on how you contribute so long as you contribute. No one will demand you forfeit your dreams or your body. And you will be protected while you do so by the very same people you will be helping.”

Lana assessed Viv for a long time with the power of her glare but the witch didn’t really care. There were things she was fully confident about and her principles were one of them.

The application was still subject to some doubts.

“This is a nice dream you have. I hope you can keep it alive because Param has seen many dreams and it’s eaten them all.”

“We’re already done so twice. Look, as I said, we can’t achieve miracles just because our ideals are noble. But give motivated people enough time and resources, and we can end up with something quite nice. You can be a part of it.”

“That still sounds like promises, not a binding agreement.”

That ticked off Viv a little bit.

“I have forged that place with my own two hands on the corpses of princes. My people have bled to make it a reality. It should be all the commitment you need and it is all the commitment you’ll get. As I said, travel there and see with your own eyes if you have trouble believing. The borders are open. Now, was it all or did you want to discuss your employment?”

Lana didn’t flinch though some of her defiance bled out. She was both less afraid and less resolute. Viv wasn’t sure how much of that remaining terror was trauma and how much was Viv’s reputation. She wasn’t using any intimidation right now.

“We want to discuss employment. We also want to discuss pay.”

Viv sighed. That was the kind of negotiations that could take half a day given there were exactly six mages concerned, with various trainings and specialization. She didn’t have the time. She didn’t even have a budget.

Irao used that opportunity to walk out of the shadows.

“They have emptied the office’s safe,” he helpfully suggested.

“What do you mean? They took money?”

“Yes. All of Elunath’s coin. They split it among themselves.”

Lana deflated when Viv cleared her throat.

“Technically that belongs to me. Let’s just call it, hmm, compensation for back pay and an advance on your contract.”

“For one year only!”

“Fair enough. We can discuss everything in more detail later, alright? I want to be gone before the city wakes up to the fact we just killed their strategic deterrent.”

“The way you talk is so strange.”

**//She is an outlander.**

The girls turned to Solfis, clearly unnerved by his alien presence.

**//You must get used to it.**

**//As I have.**

**//After a while.**

“Don’t make it sound like a chore. Alright, loot!”

“If the ladies do join us, we should get them settled in the ship and make sure the captain does not object immediately. I can accompany them since I negotiated the contract, if that is fine, of course,” Sidjin offered.

“Yeah that would be great. Solfis will carry everything we can take with us. We don’t need another porter.”

**//I have found this comically large bag.**

“Then I’m off. Don’t trigger any traps, please.”

“I will protect our safety,” Abe agreed.

Perhaps sensing their urgency, the newly freed mages hurried after Sidjin who used kinesis to lift the book crates. There were quite a few of them. It left the rest of the league to pilfer in peace.

The office gave up a few trinkets as well as Elunath’s research journals which they took with them. Viv wondered why someone with perfect recall would need journals. Perhaps out of habit. Solfis also claimed the skull of some dinosaur-like creature for himself. They ignored the private quarters and communal labs since Irao confirmed the harem had taken their own project notes with them, which was entirely fair. It was really Elunath’s sanctum that would yield the best stuff.

Irao led them to the gate where he had stunned Renea, then both he and Abe made sure no traps had reactivated before Viv gated them in. There were many treasures there but not exactly the kind Viv could use. They decided to leave the extensive collection of stones, ores, and fossils behind to focus on the immediately useful stuff. Deeds and financial documents went in the bag first, then it was time for the magical goodies.

The only surprise was that Elunath had destroyed the scepter of the cursed god as he’d claimed he’d do. Viv half expected him to have kept it around while the abominable artifact whispered sweet promises into his ears in the dead of night. The other items proved to be a treasure trove. They found a plethora of enchanted swords, magical suits of armor, and nasty daggers. Into the bag they went for later distribution. They would form a core of legacy stuff for the most promising soldiers, Viv thought to herself. A magical sword didn’t make much of a difference on a battlefield where numbers and discipline reigned, but thirty in the hands of elites could. Some of the suits were resistant to specific elements as well which would help. All in all it was a good haul that would push Solfis’ strength to its limits. And then, there was the caster stuff.

The first great find was a scepter specifically designed for complex rituals, perhaps belonging to Elunath himself. It was an extremely efficient way to use mana, recover the unused power, and recharge one's reserves faster. It also came with a decent core. That would go to Sidjin since most of his favorite spells were so complex. The second great find was a pouch of cores of various sizes worth several times their worth in gold. The last one was what made Viv absolutely giddy.

"Wait. This is... this is my skinsuit!"

And indeed, the repaired Harrakan cover she had lost in Enoria had somehow found its way to Elunath's connection. Viv suspected some vindictive archmage may have something to do with that. Not just that, Elunath had repaired it.

On top of an ink-colored body suit of thin, smooth material, the suit now showed lines of silvery runes. It also felt thicker as well, more solid. Viv urged the men to turn around and put it on after a brief inspection. One of the functions allowed her to adjust the suit to her current size — which was quickly improving thank you very much. It felt great to have it back, though she would check the full functionalities later.

**//We have all we can reasonably expect to have.**

**//For now, we should leave.**

"I need to recover my own belongings first," Abe said, "although I will have to abandon the majority, I will attempt to take as much as feasible. How may we find the ship? Sidjin handled the negotiations."

"Riverside pier," Viv said. "The Fat Seamstress. Yes, that is the name of the ship. And yes, I wish we could teleport but we have too much luggage to drag around. We'll stop at Losserec and get carts."

"Understood."

**//I will return to the ship with the loot.**

"Hmm, is it safe?" Viv asked.

The bag was certainly large and clinked loudly.

Solfis gave her the most pitying, condescending gaze she had ever received and the worst thing was that he managed it without facial expression.

"Giant murder golem. Right. As for me, I need to close the feud. I'll drop by the palace and be on my way. Hopefully we'll be gone by tonight."

**//Is this necessary?**

"The government can contest us taking the loot away if we don't formalize our victory. And they can claim the girl's contracts as well, depending on Elunath's obligations to the

government. We also need it to transfer all bank-held assets to our names though this is less important. I still don't want to give up that pile of gold without trying. Arthur would never forgive me."

**//They could try to delay you.**

"If they stonewall me I'll just leave. It's for the harem, really. It would be a pity to free them only for unscrupulous nobles to come after them or their villages. Elunath preyed on girls without support."

"We can all meet on the ship once you are done, Viviane. And if they do block your attempts with legal acrobatics, I know of a few lawyers who will make it extremely painful."

"Alright."

Viv didn't know how much Elunath had in his multiple accounts but it had to be massive. The man was not just rich, he'd been rich for three centuries. She considered her options as they left the empty manor, also technically part of her estate. The Manipeleso Bank and Exchange undoubtedly offered legal services. She'd just lawyer up, promise them a share of the estate if they won and unleash them upon the unsuspecting Helockian justice system.

The group split near the gate to the lower city. Viv continued on along the wall while Abe flew up and Solfis walked past a flabbergasted guard. The main square soon came into view bathed in the late afternoon sun. She noticed an uneasy hum in the populace, many groups discussing in low voices.

They all stopped.

Slowly, silence spread through the vast square until hundreds of people watched Viv stroll across the stone plaza, head held high yet slightly uneasy. There was respect here, but also a lot of fear, and scared people did stupid things. She was committed now and turning her back would be a bad idea but perhaps, just perhaps, she ought to hurry. Her distinctive black sclera made the closest people recoil despite her demure aura. No one contested her when she entered the palace's courtyard, nor when she walked into the massive rectangular fortress that was the heart of Helockian's power. She still had to request some help to go through the security door. A young intern volunteered to lead her.

"Hmm, this way," the young man said, clutching a notebook to his chest. "The service closes in an hour. You're just in time, haha."

"I do like to be punctual," she said.

It somehow terrified the poor kid. She felt a little sorry. Despite his misgivings, he led her through a path she recognized. Sullen guards let her through with nothing more than hostile gazes. Her danger sense kept quiet. So far so good.

"After you," the clerk finally said.

They walked into the Clan Management Office section. The desk at the end of the corridor stood empty. She looked around to find empty rooms. There were still glasses of klod left steaming on desks burdened with paperwork.

Something was wrong.

She turned to the clerk who seemed just as surprised as she was.

“I, errr, they might be on break? I will check the cafeteria for you. It won’t be long. Sorry.”

He returned to the door. It was locked. He rattled it in vain. Before Viv could decide what to do, the magical equivalent of a heavy coat descended on her. It felt like gravity being suddenly doubled. She gasped. The clerk turned to her.

“Are you alright? Hm.”

Still no sense of being in danger, except she was. She definitely was. Just not in immediate danger. She experimentally called some mana. It coated her hand but could not go far beyond a few centimeters away from her skin. Something was constricting her.

Loud noises filled the entire department. Darkness spread as every window was shuttered, metal panes descending on rock like death knells. The clerk called light with a shaky hand. He looked terrified.

“I didn’t know! I swear.”

“It’s fine,” Viv said.

“I’m sorry!”

“I said it’s fine. Not your decision.”

It didn’t take a genius to realize she was being imprisoned. The only thing she didn’t expect was how well-defended the palace of Helock was, though considering the number of mages in their ranks and the fact it was still technically a keep, it should not come as a surprise. Viv’s perception remained clear. There were active wards on every wall, the ceiling, and the floor. Additionally, a strange spell compressed the mana around her. It felt targeted as well as extremely inefficient. It took a monstrous amount of mana to suppress someone from far away. Case in point, she could still cast but only spells that were close to her. The clerk didn’t seem affected either.

A panel opened on the door that had just been locked and now shone with warding mana. A pair of panicked eyes found her in the shaky light.

“What is the meaning of this?” Viv asked, though she had an idea what was going on.

“You are under custody while the council discusses a possible violation of the collateral damage clause.”

“What collateral damage? Elunath destroyed the city.”

“The destruction of a warehouse as well as the death of officer Semon and his squad.”

Officer Semon? Oh, possibly the corrupt prick they’d baited into leading Elunath to her pipe bomb.

Viv seethed in silence, knowing full well complaining would achieve nothing. This was just an excuse. If they had not used that one they would have found something else. The fact they could not have expected her meant it was a snap decision. It also was a bad sign. She knew Helock would eventually come after her rather than allow a stranger to take over Elunath’s everything. She also knew killing their archmage would lead to resentment. She just didn’t expect it to be so soon and so brazen, especially after she’d proven beyond the shadow of a doubt that she should not be messed with. That was the problem with assholes in power. They eventually believed that the fall of others didn’t concern them. That they were invincible because they were still undefeated.

And curse her for relying too much on danger sense. It didn’t protect her from reckless political attacks.

Viv found a seat and plopped her stupid butt on in. She grabbed a pot of klod and helped herself to some. The clerk looked like he was praying to all the gods.

“You there. I am not going to hurt you.”

“Thank you...”

“Come closer please. I’d like some light.”

“Ah? Of course, of course.”

Viv sipped from her cup and considered her options.

The Academy would move to support her against that very obvious abuse of power. Unfortunately, the very fact they’d shut her in implied they no longer care about rules. This was Nyil, not earth. the rule of law only applied among equals here. They were never meant to protect the outsider. The council threw the illusion of fairness out of the window the moment they decided to imprison her. That meant that escape was the best tool. The problem was that she couldn’t cast easily, for one, and her allies were waiting for her at the boat. She hoped no one would go after them.

Her best bet would be to get out via a window. She felt around the wards there. They were solid but she was confident she could cut through them using a dagger-sized Excalibur. The problem was that her enemies would definitely feel it and get flying war mages and griffin riders on the other side. She was still mentally tired from the fight with Elunath. It had barely been half a day.

She could also cut through the ground but again, her guards would feel it. Same with the ceiling. Her harness would probably work, being close to her skin. She finished the cup of klod.

She could also go through the door although that was probably the worst option.

Maybe wait for nightfall and then get out. She was confident she could eventually lose pursuers with a cloud of darkness. What she wasn't confident in was getting jumped from inside as soon as the wards were attacked and then being bombarded the moment her toe left the fortress' boundaries.

And perhaps some bright idiot would send special forces in to put manacles on her any time now.

It was a conundrum.

Viv's mulling got interrupted by a commotion on the outside. It sounded like people arguing. A spell fused and she heard a body hit furniture. It didn't sound like a battle just yet. Not enough screams.

A heavy fist banged on the door. A moment later, the slit opened. It took her only a second to recognize the bushy brows of Dean Tallit, head of the Academy.

"Viviane. It seems I was a little late. Hold on, we need some privacy."

He whispered a few words and the yells of protest were silenced.

"Better. I am sorry I did not reach you in time to warn you. It was honorable of you to close the feud. Unfortunately, Councillor Pendath called on the council to strike against you. They were in session when you gormlessly walked into the snake pit."

"I am blaming myself enough as it is."

"Yes. The trappings of honor. The council was happy enough to let you roam free to teach Elunath some humility and weaken his hold on the council. They never actually expected you to win."

"How many monsters must I kill..."

"Oh, I suspect that one was the last drop. Now they are scared and unprepared, a state rulers should never find themselves in. By the way, we gambled on your success. Black mana tenured Professor Ashra made seventy-two silvers betting you would kill him in combat."

"Delighted. I think I need to get out of here."

"You do," the dean agreed. "I will do all I can to fight them but I must remain neutral for the sake of the school, which is why I haven't turned that door into so much splinter. The old

farts on the council will use this against me. If you have another solution, now's the time to use it."

"My friends..."

"The council hasn't tried to stop them yet. You walked right into their jaw but I assure you, they know better than annoy the Red Mist. And that bone horror you dug out from the Old Empire. Think about yourself. If you need gear... maybe I can visit again. Unfortunately, that's the limit of what I can achieve."

"Ok. Well, check on me later. I might have something."

"We're on your side. Good luck."

"Yes," Viv said as Tallit left. "Luck."

She did have a bit of luck stored away. And a favor owed to her. It was the perfect time to cash in.

She sat in a lotus position and closed her eyes.

"I would like privacy please," she told the clerk.

"Of course, milady."

Viv was alone now.

Breathe in, breathe out, relax. Her soul awareness expanded. The walls faded away. Nyil faded away. She extended herself to that magnificent nothing, that endless dot that was the in between. Her soul popped up in the void between consciousnesses. It felt empty for now.

"EMERIC, YOU ODIIOUS TWAT," she said.

"EMERIIIIIIIC!"

She waited for a moment or an eternity, hard to say. Suddenly, dawn rose over the emptiness in a surge of glory. She basked in the golden light while a solid Greek temple manifested around her complete with alabaster Ionic columns. A blinding form stepped out in a shower of energy.

"Yes? Sorry, was in a meeting."

"I kindly request your assistance with my current predicament."

"One moment," the monstrous, overwhelmingly strong planet-sized presence replied. He plucked a memory from her mind and read it.

"I see, I see. You certainly seem to face a great number of assholes."

“Yes,” Viv agreed, facing the god, “fancy that.”

“Ha ha. Well, I do owe you one, and besides, fuck those people. They have violated the right of hospitality after a lawful duel. Back in my days, we hanged people for that.”

“Ok gramps. I would like to escape and I’ll call it a win.”

“It so happens that I do have something that would help tremendously. You’re gonna love it. Oooh yes. You will love it very much. I will even return your music box for the occasion. You know, the spark of luck is much more enjoyable once you learn to go with it.”

“It also made you incredibly obnoxious.”

“Yes, but I was more discriminating in who I decided to annoy in my younger days. I have learned to do so again. My advice still stands. The spark of luck is yours but it is not, in fact, your problem.”

“Oh really?”

“It is everybody else’s problem. I will reclaim the tools after you are done so do not worry. Have fun!”

Viv opened her eyes. A plastic glow stick shone on an open wood crate like she had seen so many times before. It was a shipping crate with a fragile stamp and a ‘this side up’. Her MP3 reader waited for her on the side. She stood up and approached. Nestled in the straw, she found a treasure trove of goodies.

“Combat outfit. Fucking Emeric, you could have given me top of the line modern stuff instead of my gear. It’s half a century old back on earth!”

Nevertheless, she felt giddy strapping on the familiar uniform over her skin suit. She hummed as she attached her dagger focus to the knife sheath.

There were M67 hand grenades and a few flashbangs.

“Oho!”

A red-colored satchel charge with a timer, a model she’d never seen before.

“Ok so you did give me some modern stuff.”

And at the bottom of the crate was a very large metal case. She hoisted it. It was super heavy.

“Ok? You have my interest.”

There was a logo on the surface.

*Property of Eurodyne, classification level: galaxy. DO NOT OPEN.*

*Opening this without former auth—*

“Ooooooh.”

There was some sort of digital lock. She placed her finger and the thing beeped green. Inside, she found a full backpack with a single slit and from that slit emerged an ammo belt carrying long, thin cartridges with red tips. The rest of the case held what could only be a light machine gun. The slick black shape was futuristic yet familiar.

*EX-46 commando belt-fed infantry assault gun. Prototype 5.*

“Ok. I take it back. You did send me the good stuff. Nice. NICE.”

The gun even had a small screen attached to the side. She opened it.

*Helmet link: not found.*

*Satellite connection: not found.*

*Reverting to manual mode.*

Human forms appeared as white outlines behind the transparent form of the wall. A target reticule showed where the next bullets would probably land.

“Hehehehehe. Ok, Helock. I feel that our relationship has gone toxic over the past year. Your hurt me. I hurt you. It’s time for us to break up. I’m sorry. ”

Uniform: on. Shield: on her left arm. Grenades: strapped. Satchel: placed. Belt: chambered.

There was only one thing left to do.

Viv grabbed the MP3 reader to pick up a song. She barely hesitated. There were nice songs but only one was just perfect for the occasion. She was going to be free as a bird now.

Due to temporary access to otherworldly tools, your unused skill: Special Forces training at intermediate 4 has been reactivated

“You know what, Emeric is only partly right. I am not mad anymore.”

“Hey you!” the guard said, opening the slit. “Who are you talking to?”

“And I am not going to be a problem to you assholes.”

The guard’s eyes found the crate. They widened.

“I’m about to be THE problem.”

“What in Maranor’s name—”

“And, Gods, I won’t chaAaAaAaAnge.”

The satchel charge exploded, sending the door in the guard’s teeth along with Nyil’s first introduction to high explosives. Viv was out before the smashed pieces finished landing. The guards were dead. There were more coming out of a passage to her right. She aimed up and pressed the trigger. The gun vomited a stream of metal that pasted the guards, the furniture behind the guards, a decorative set of armor, two curtains and the faraway window. Stone and steel shards rained everywhere. She was sent crashing on broken chairs by the recoil.

“Oof.”

Shorter controlled bursts needed. Sensitive trigger on that thing. Actually... The thing about the skin suit was that it let her mana through. She forced it and... her wings deployed, annihilating a layer of kevlar.

“Much better.”

Viv sprinted forward. She could feel the dampening effect following her but also where it was coming from. She found stairs down. Another corridor. Shields at the end, with a waiting battle mage. Shielded. She anchored herself.

“YOU HAVE MESSED WITH ME—”

The opposition disappeared in a pink cloud.

“FOR THE LAST DAMN TIME!”

Hard on her arms but anchored, the recoil was mostly negated. Another corridor. Guitar riffs rang loud in her ears. Some people were running, she ignored them. Stairs down. A half circle of steel shields with three archmages.

She pulled a pin.

“Enjoy!”

Fragmentation pinged on shields that were not designed to stop something that moved so fast. She was among them. Anchored. One arm on the barrel, then left to right. Bullets streamed across armor and flesh alike. Arcane defenses did little to stop Earth engineering.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH.”

Viv moved before the survivors could recover to find a closed door. Ballistic breaching on the hinges opened the way. Her heart beat fast and the air felt great in her lungs. It tasted of freedom and retribution. Her danger sense spiked. No direction. She coated herself in mana and swung her wings. One of them caught something. A woman. Impaled and surprised, blood bubbling on her lips. A dagger in her hand. Assassin.

“Nice try.”

People were coming from both sides. She rushed forward and gunned down guards as soon as they appeared. Her instincts pushed her to roll. An arrow pinged on her shield. She shot back. Bullets ravaged the corridor behind her, shredding everything in its path including a crossbowman. Some others took cover behind walls. It didn't help. Whatever was in those bullets was designed to fuck someone up through a bunker wall. Viv kept running and for the first time, people ran away.

She went down another corridor to find cowering civil servants huddling in corners. Others yelled when they saw her. She ignored them as they were not a threat. Some of the guards surrendered or ran away when she raced past them. Time was of the essence. She soon came across another locked door. Demolish the hinges. A flashbang. She tried to shoot through the walls. It worked. Emeric didn't skimp. Only a few more doors and she was there.

On a corner of the fortress, she found a ritual room with thick, reinforced windows. A circle occupied most of the empty space and in that circle, three defiant mages stood. That was the construct oppressing her. They were fed by more mana from elsewhere but they were the hand that pressed down on her neck. The shield was one of those rare, two-directional shields that stopped aggression in both directions. It made them extremely resilient and that one was fed power from the outside. She could try to force it but... she had a better idea. Manifesting a tiny excalibur, she started to dig around the circle, stopping at equal length to bore small holes. It didn't take long. Meanwhile, the head mage was raving at her.

“If you'd just stayed where you are, you could have faced a tribunal with good cause but no, you had to fight out of here like the wild witch you are. Your efforts are futile. This shield is fed by the entire castle's mana grid.”

“Oh, I know.”

Viv placed her five remaining frag grenades in the tiny holes. Moving fast, she removed all the pins and stepped back.

“The floor isn't though.”

“You bi—”

The grenades went off in quick succession, collapsing the entire room and the surrounding walls into the courtyard below in a cataclysmic explosion and a cascade of crashing masonry. The mages screamed insults but she was already free. Free to cast. It was like taking a deep breath after a dive.

The late afternoon skyline of Helock waited invitingly. She activated her harness. Her danger sense screamed and she jumped away, casting a shield as she did. The rest of the room exploded from a flurry of thick blue projectiles. Griffin riders using their staves passed by in a tight formation.

Viv stood up quickly. The griffin riders geared for another pass in the distance. Five there. maybe more outside. Could she contest? Not sure but the ground floor had to have a basement and that basement had to have an underground access. She just needed to find stairs. Actually, no. Sometimes, you just had to make the stairs. Viv made sure there was no one underneath, then she pulled an excalibur and cut a circle around her feet. The ground collapsed on a meeting table a floor below. She cut again and ended up in a cafeteria of sorts.

There was a team of war mages a little farther. They were in the process of putting their armor on.

Viv fully deployed her draconic aura. Her wings were out like two bleeding wounds in the fabric of reality. Tendrils of black mana emerged from her nightmarish armor, caressing the stone and leaving behind furrows of glassy smoothness. she aimed the gaping, reddening maw of her gun at the small group.

“ARE YOU SURE?”

They dropped everything they had and ran away. Good on them. Now, time to get away.

One more cut and she was in a waiting room on the ground floor. It looked deserted. She brought up the EX-46's radar to see what was waiting outside.

Apparently, the entirety of the Helockian military including their war mages. Someone gestured at her and she felt mana spike outside.

“Aegis.”

She was confident in finding a basement but... something called to her. Something up. She had to go up.

Viv used her harness to lift off again the same way she had come in. An instant later, the cafeteria disappeared in a torrent of offensive spells. Smoke filled the air. There were screams outside. It was pure chaos but she went on. Dig a small hole with excalibur, wait for the stone to fall, rinse and repeat. She carved her way up avoiding the groups she could perceive and see. Someone opened a door and aimed a staff at her. Viv rotated and pulled the trigger. Another deafening blast and the library she was in turned to shrapnel and flying shards. No one tried anything after that.

Viv burst out into the crimson light of the setting sun, arms extended, wings free, floating up like a happy balloon while two squadrons of griffin riders approached in attack formation and the song reached a paroxysm. She saw the riders line up their shots, blue orbs shining on the background of the floating rocks.

And then claws caught her from the back.

*Mother!*

*Are they foes?*

“Yes, let’s show them who rules the skies.”

“SKRAAAAA!”

Griffin attack orbs and shields met a cascade of fire, spells, and flying metal. One of the griffins fell immediately, shields smashed in an instant.

\*\*\*

The captain veered away from the death storm coming at them but Ikos wasn’t so lucky. Disciplined, the survivors turned and flew after the witch and her pet. She couldn’t let that stain on Helock’s honor go. They tightened ranks but her shield threatened to fail and only her instincts saved her. Around, powerful impacts peppered the griffins’ formidable defenses. It was not magic. What in Neriad’s name was going on? Then... the pet disappeared into a portal, only to reappear in another one right next to it, barreling towards them with no loss of speed. Spells formed in the air.

“Spread out!”

The order was useless. Her team had seen the threat and made to evade. Jar wasn’t so lucky. The dragon picked him up and dropped his body against a nearby floating stone. It broke from the impact.

“Shit!”

Needed an opening. She used her inspect. It was designed to assess flying enemies.

[Ascender, Elemental war caster, fourth step.]

[Juvenile dragon]

The captain felt a chill down her spine just as the title seemingly merged, something that only happened when two riders achieved such a level of coordination that they became greater than the sum of their parts.

[Harrakan Air Supremacy. Flying danger level: 7]

Even before the new title appeared, even before she remembered there was no danger level 8 in the old imperial nomenclature, even before she remembered the manual stating that 7 was a young adult dragon, a thought had wormed itself in the captain’s head, drowning all others.

*What the fuck am I doing?*

“Pull out! Pull out!”

The riders spread out and the dragon mercifully didn't give chase. Gray mana surged and a gale carried the hostile pair up and away at great speed.

\*\*\*

Dean Tallit upended his glass and raised it to the dusk sun and the witch flying away from the comfort of his balcony. Puffs of black mana followed the dreadful pair, spelling 'get bent' in the northerner tongue.

“And fair travels to you, Viv.”

Far below the escaping witch, a stunned calm reigned over the street in front of the palace, broken only when a severely damaged wall collapsed to reveal the destruction inside. Smoke belched from the open wounds of the thrashed fortress where artillery spells had detonated them.

Besides him, Ashra poured herself another glass while the rest of the faculty celebrated the show in various degrees of inebriation.

“I will miss our classes,” the short-haired professor said.

“No doubt. Nice new boots by the way. They look expensive.”

“They were. I believe young Ereska has fallen asleep. Would you help me place her on a couch? And after that, perhaps we could find a private nook?”

“I would like that very much.”

\*\*\*

*Mother! Mother! You are so small!*

“Just a little. It's you who has grown so much! Look at you! So majestic!”

*Mother! Mother! You have wings!*

“Yes!”

*I told you you should eat more to grow wings and you said humans don't work that way.*

“Yeees?”

*You did grow wings.*

*So I was right!*

*As always!*

*Anyway.*

*Where is the rest of them?*

“Errr.”

*Mother?*

“Look, it was difficult.”

***Mother.***

“It’s a work in progress.”

*Mother.*

*Wings are made to fly.*

*Mother.*

*What are those?*

*Seriously!*

## Chapter 148: Harrak is back

Viv’s euphoria lasted just long enough for the gun to disappear and Arthur’s recriminations to turn into a massive rant.

*Wings are the pride of our kind.*

“But I’m not a dragon,” Viv whispered.

*Wings must be big and floaty.*

*Good vessel for gray mana.*

“But I can’t use gray manaaaaaaa.”

*Mother must grow real wings soon.*

*Or else we will both be shamed.*

“Damn you’re really a teenager now. I can’t embarrass you in front of the cool kids.”

*Is important.*

*Judgment is very strong.*

*I attacked him many times.*

*I could not make him move.*

“Wait, you spent time with Judgment?”

*Of course.*

*Judgment, biggest dragon.*

*Eats very well.*

*I study.*

*Not very smart though.*

*Big hoard, no investment.*

She shook her head with disapproval.

“Right, hmmm. It’s all well and good... but we should return to the others.”

*Others?*

“They’re on a ship heading west.”

*We do not need others.*

“Solfis is there. So is Sidjin.”

*Hmph.*

*I suppose they are tolerable.*

Arthur veered south and Viv used the opportunity to look at the dragonette. First, she wasn't a dragonette anymore. Her wingspan was over two Vivs. She was also more than one Viv and a half long and that was the pre-transformation Viv. For all her length, Arthur remained lithe and thin, much more graceful than the towering juggernaut Judgment was, or the green dragon they'd met in the forest. Arthur now used a combination of flaps and gray mana to fly at speeds that would leave a biplane behind yet little wind roared in Viv's face. The maneuvers she'd performed on the griffin also showed she'd gained some aerial combat training, possibly from Judgment. It warmed her heart to see that her adopted daughter had not rested on her laurels, preferring to push herself to excellence instead.

It didn't take long for Arthur to locate the ship, mostly by finding a towering column of dark smoke and searching from there. Viv spotted the ship with ease. It was the only one covered in a transparent shield dome visible from up there. Arthur still approached with some care even after Viv recognized the people on the deck. Enhanced vision was really amazing.

*Should have teleported.*

"We don't actually have an uninterrupted series of portals back to Harrak. Many of them are isolated from each other and require us to walk a little. That's fine if it's just us but we have many mages and their luggage. It will be easier to stop in Losserec and get ourselves some carts. Safer too. Teleportation gates can be trapped.

*Fair enough.*

Arthur landed lightly on the railing under the concerned gazes of quite a few groups of people but they all calmed down once they noticed her. While Arthur hopped on the prow for a nap, Viv turned to Sidjin, who was surveying the shore next to a man with a captain hat. He looked weirdly dreamy.

"Everything alright?" she asked.

"The guard tried to stop us but we sent them away. We've had horsemen following us and a river fort threatened to shoot at us. Otherwise, it was all smooth sailing, pun intended."

"And the fire?"

Sidjin shrugged.

"I just had to remind the fort soldiers that whatever they had, I had better. I didn't kill anyone, if that is your concern."

Viv winced internally. Her escape had been... bloody. However, her freedom was on the line and that meant no holding back. She'd been captured once before. Never again.

"What about you?" she asked the captain, "Can we count on your cooperation?"

“Hmm? Oh, yes. I am a part of the trader’s guild. Our policy is to let pirates and bandits take our belongings, then escalate the problem to the recovery division. As it is, however, you have given good coin for the transit including hazard pay. I expect that the council will file a complaint with the guild and then be told to fuck off. And besides, I can swear under oath that I was physically compelled to cooperate. Your lady in blue even whipped me. Look!”

He pulled his shirt to reveal red marks, some already bruising a little. It didn’t look too bad.

“I see.”

The captain leaned in conspirationally.

“Do you... do you think she would do it again? If I asked nicely?”

“Errr. You’ll have to ask her.”

“You see, my wife — she is a good woman—”

“Terribly sorry captain but I really fear you will have to discuss it with her and her alone,” Viv insisted while Sidjin laughed silently in the background.

“Now if you have to excuse me, I must greet the rest of the passengers.”

“Of course.”

The next person on the list was a complete surprise to the point that Viv did a double take. Under the watchful gaze of two bodyguards stood a man Viv never expected to see: General Jaratalassi, the Steel Trap. Her strategy teacher leaned against the railing, a lit pipe in one hand and a bottle of liquor in the other. He looked like he had just come out of the barber and his hair was braided back. With a comfortable northerner garb, he might have just finished his class.

“General. An unexpected pleasure.”

“Ah, Viviane, the woman I wanted to see.”

As Viv got closer, she realized the man was more tired than he let on. There were deep pockets under his bloodshot eyes. His posture shifted and the weakness was gone as if it had never been there.

“I have a request for you.”

“Do tell? I’m afraid I cannot go on an expedition together again. I am heading back to Harrak.”

“Yes, well, I am counting on it, not least because I am technically the leader of the army of the city you just humiliated.”

“Ah.”

“The guards are not under my command, however, so I shall close my eyes on this entire fiasco. Pendrath had it coming. I warned him several times. I will be brief. I need your help.”

“My help?” Viv asked, somewhat surprised.

The older man nodded. He tapped his pipe and let embers fall on the turgid waves of the river Shal.

“I’d like for Harrak to join the Paramese alliance. And then I need you, specifically you, to join me on the Hallurian front.”

Viv frowned. That was entirely unexpected, yet the sense of worry she picked up from the aging general told her he was not joking.

“I thought the Hallurians were vanquished?” she asked.

“Everybody thinks so and most rulers pulled their forces back from the border. Look, I am turning to you because you have a good head on your shoulders. We both know why troops have been pulled back.”

“It’s expensive and leaves home undefended.”

“Yes, yes, you were a good student. The point is that there is no immediate threat. There is, however, a very serious hint of one. I sent seven scout squads over the border in the past two months. They have all returned alive.”

“What?”

Viv was flabbergasted.

“This never happens.”

“Indeed not. They reported deserted fishing villages, abandoned mushroom farms. Cities depopulated of men of fighting age. Something is brewing. Something massive. I may have a glorious title but I am merely a Helockian noble without much wealth. The only forces I command are the ones lent to me by willing participants and that is why I turn to you. Look, I can facilitate your accession to the rank of participating nation which will solidify your legitimacy. I will also convince Baran to let you install gates on their territory. They will also provide you with all the supplies you need. I would still be lying if I said it was worth it. I am not asking you to come because it benefits you. I am asking because it benefits Param.”

His speech finished, Jaratalassi returned to his resigned silence.

Viv was sure the man had social skills in spades, mostly leadership. She’d had a taste of it. And yet, he had not seen fit to use it on her. That meant, according to etiquette, that he saw her as an equal. His attempt to sway her was as transparent as it was candid and Viv felt

herself moved by the old warrior's humility. Not that it mattered of course. She had the spark of luck and planned on turning Harrak into an internationally recognized independent... whatever it was she was building. Constitutional monarchy? In any case, her fate was sealed the moment Jaratalassi had opened his mouth.

"I need some time. My army is not ready for maneuvers."

"I expected it. Begin your preparations, build your teleporters because when that thing comes, it will come fast and hit hard. Call it... intuition."

"I will have everything ready for your signal. You have my word."

Jaratalassi grabbed Viv's hand with surprising speed and strength. Fingers dug in her uniform and the skinsuit underneath. To the side, Solfis rose to a stand. The bodyguards paled.

Viv found herself drowned in the intensity of the man's gaze.

"I will hold you to it. I WILL hold you to it. This is vital. Absolutely vital."

He blinked.

"Sorry about that."

"It's alright and I have taken your warning to heart."

"Right. Yes. I need sleep. I will retire below deck until we reach the next port."

Viv let him go, turning to Solfis who merely clicked back into compact position.

"You alright there Solfis?"

**//The betrayal of the council requires a swift and decisive punishment.**

**//However, we do not have the capability to carry it out.**

**//I am distracting myself from this frustration by writing the code that I will gift to my first child.**

"After this fiasco, I'd be surprised if the council isn't reshuffled."

**//It does not matter that they are punished.**

**//It matters that we inflict the punishment.**

**//And warn the rest.**

**//Nevertheless, I admit that you set a good example.**

**//I shall have to be satisfied with it.**

**//I am also staying here because your newest recruits find my appearance unnerving.**

"You mean to say that the skeletal mage killer golem appearance scares them a little? How peculiar."

**//Sarcasm detected.**  
**//You slew Elunath in glorious combat.**  
**//Yet I am the one they are afraid of.**  
**//It strikes me as a deficiency of the meat mind.**  
**//A similar shape fosters foolish trust.**

“You’re just mad because you can’t preach the greatness of Harrak to them.”

**//Perhaps.**

Viv noticed a rather peculiar moment. The last group on the deck was made of a smattering of young mages around the tall, grandfatherly figure of Abe. Despite the gray skin and red eyes, he had managed to make himself less threatening by sitting relaxedly on a barrel under the distrustful gaze of Lana, the only one who had not succumbed to his smooth charm. One of the girls sniffed quietly, her shoulder under the protective paw of the servant of Enttiku.

“Of course, you have not recovered yet. You have fought through a long storm and you have survived a terrible ordeal. For this, you deserve praise for there is no harder fight than to stand in the face of hopelessness. And now, you face a wave. Waves will come and go, child, for the sea remembers the storm. Sometimes, the wave will be low, just a painful reminder of the storm. Sometimes, the wave will rise until you feel submerged, until you feel like you are drowning. You are not. It is just a wave. It will come and go and when it has passed, you will be yourself again. They will always return, child, but they will always pass. And if you open your eyes, you will see that many other rafts face those waves, and that you are not alone. We are here with you.”

The girl sobbed a yes. They fell into a group hug.

It gave Viv the warm fuzzies. At least, she’d done that. She’d given them a chance. That counted, here on Nyil.

Also, Viv thought, they now had a psychothera-lich.

She didn’t know how to feel about it.

“Ah, Viv, did you want something?” Abe asked after they split.

“No no, just checking in on everyone.”

“We are fine. And safe. Now how about dinner? I am famished.”

\*\*\*

The next day, everyone was rested and Viv shared her plan, which was immediately shot down by Sidjin.

“Nothing beats teleportation in terms of speed and we should not remain on this ship any longer than we have to. No force on the continent would be willing to face us head on but believe me when I say that they have plenty of ways to sink a ship that we cannot even begin to imagine. I have free access to the teleportation network I set up for the builder’s guild and they happen to have branches all over northern Enoria. We will stop at the next quarry, hire one cart, teleport to Losserec, and then travel south using your witch gates.”

Viv relented. It was a bit shameful to realize that high mental stats did nothing for lazy planning. The ability to think fast did not make one think critically. It was a painful reminder she’d needed. After that, she let Sidjin organize the rest of the trip. Their passage through Losserec was too fast to generate much of a response but once they hit the first witch gate, they realized they had a problem.

“It’s destroyed,” Lana said, stating the obvious.

Someone had meticulously demolished the gate. There were no traces of who had done it but from the cracks, it could not have been recent. The culprit had left an imprint in a nearby rock: the new royal seal of Enoria. A hawk over a forest.

“It looks like King Sangor objects to the leader of another nation traipsing freely over his land,” Viv observed.

**//That does seem wise.**

“Yeah. Well. That complicates matters.”

The truth was that Viv was transporting half a country’s military worth of arcane firepower without warning the local boss and that was considered a serious diplomatic faux-pas. As a proponent of the ‘ask for forgiveness, not permission’ school of getting away with things, Viv was faced with a difficult decision. She could give Sangor enough time to corner her into a meeting on his terms or she could double down.

She opted for doubling down. She’d already committed, so the ‘fuck around and the find out’ would not be much worse if she got caught anyway.

“Arthur. I need you to carry me.”

“Squeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry but unless you want to go ahead by yourself, we need a way to move faster.”

Arthur grunted. During the battle, Viv had switched from her claws to her back but Arthur categorically refused to be ridden unless circumstances demanded it. They argued until the scaled menace agreed to carry Viv under her like a grumpy fuel tank.

Thus began a game of 'island hopping'. Viv would set up a gate, then fly to another location and build its twin. The mages would then walk through it and set camp, disabling the previous platform. That method allowed them to mess up tracking. To Viv's immense surprise, they crossed Enoria like this in less than a week and without accident. The sight of the Deadshield woods filled her with intense relief. From then on, it was the matter of only a couple of minutes to use the still-active witch gates.

The portal opened to show Kazar and the fertile strip in all its glory. The colossal purple tree overlooking the walled city served as an imposing landmark in rolling hills of green peppered with elevated villages. Laborers crowded the fields, planting seeds for spring. It was a massive improvement compared to the first time she had been here. Now, the deadlands were merely a cover of clouds far in the distance, still present, still dangerous, yet pushed back through effort and dedication. Viv smiled.

She was home.

City guards rushed towards her, hands on their spears and bows. Most recognized her immediately.

"Your teleportation was not scheduled! State your— oh. Lady Bob? Is that you?"

"In the flesh! I'm back and better than ever."

The officer was young and flustered. His eyes searched over her new companions. He was not ready.

"Oh great! I can send a messenger to Lady Azar. Or Voice Farren? The Lady Azar is in Sinur's Gate. Oh, Mage Rakan occupies your old tower. Do you want to meet them?"

"Slow down," Viv said with a laugh. "We'll go to the tower first, and travel deeper inland afterward."

It looked to Viv like it was going to be a long series of meeting people and catching up. That was fine. It was also inevitable.

Viv walked through the gates of Kazar, attracting a crowd. She smiled and shook hands and held the babies. There were a lot of newcomers, mostly passing through. They could be recognized by the fact they were afraid of her eyes and left flabbergasted by the familiarity people were treating her with.

"Who are we fighting this time? Is it the Enorians?" an old veteran asked.

"Come on, it's not that bad," Viv replied with an embarrassed laugh.

“Did you topple another government?” a baker asked her with a frown.

“Err. Maybe?”

“Good, show those arrogant c—”

“Lady Bob! Can you tell my mom she should let me have a sword?”

And so on and so forth. By the time she reached the base of the tree, the square was packed full so she used the opportunity to make a small speech. Mostly she said it was great to be back, that exciting stuff was on the horizon, no it was not another invasion, and to welcome the people she'd brought with her. Rakan opened the door and let everyone in. He looked good, Viv realized. Tan and healthy. He stood straight with most of the leaking mana swirling into the staff that hosted it. More importantly, there were children with him.

“Hey, Viviane. Welcome home.”

“Your home now. I've moved to the palace. And you have pupils?”

The children hid behind him. To be honest, they were more teenagers than truly children, just on the cusp of adulthood in that gangly and awkward phase many had. They were mage trainees. That much was clear from their auras. Interestingly, two of them had a strong affinity for black.

“Yes. Children here have shown a strong affinity for the arcane arts. Before, they would have been sent to Enoria with a caravan but the people have seen it fit to stop. Wonder why.”

“I don't,” Viv chuckled.

“In any case, we have a budding new generation and I do my best to lead them on the path to greatness.”

The teens collectively blushed.

“It's a long road for sure.”

They groaned.

“But I have faith. My mastery of all primary hues allows me to train any one of them. Besides that, my duties also extend to repairing the wall wards and going on expeditions to clear more land with the One Hundred. I have studied your obelisks and I have successfully replicated the first one two weeks ago.”

“That is great news! Who are the One Hundred?”

“Ah right, you don't know. I will let Ban explain it to you. In the meanwhile, let me introduce our promising new prospects.”

There followed a very long series of meetings. Viv was not annoyed because it was an essential aspect of rulership, as her dad had told her multiple times. Nothing enforced loyalty more than seeing the ruler and feeling valued by them, given time and attention, and so she smiled and nodded and offered commiseration and promises that were vague enough to be believable. Merchants complained about taxes, influential folks about their neighbors. Viv received them all and listened with a placid smile. Lana and her mages used the opportunity to walk around town to buy necessities but Abe stayed by her side. He had a calming effect. So did Solfis but not for the same reasons. As for Arthur, she flew off to nap somewhere after eating a bowl of eggs.

In the midst of conversations, she gathered nuggets of valuable information. Who despised whom, what looming conflict could upset the peace of the city, and so on. There were tensions between newcomers and the original Kazarans. The merchants had formed a guild to oppose Lady Azar but she'd stymied them at every turn. Crime was on the rise since some who came had been exiled for good reasons. A prison had to be built to contain them. Public spending had massively risen and so had taxes. There was some bad but as someone who had been in Afghanistan mid-insurgency, this was all pretty tame. Just normal tensions in a city undergoing growing pains.

And then came the temple, led by Farren. The angelic young man now looked much more confident than he used to. He was also backed by the temple guard which made Viv's eyebrows rise. Lorn, their leader, appeared embarrassed. Koro the Amazon was just super excited to see Viv and waved when she thought no one could see her. Farren was obviously tense.

"Are you alright, Farren? You seem... upset."

"First, forgive me, I must assure you are who you claim you are."

Viv nodded. That was a reasonable decision considering the existence of gods like Gomogog who could shape flesh. Farren prayed until a golden light filled the receiving room she was using as her temporary throne hall. She used to have tea there with Varska, too long ago.

"Neriad's light shines on duplicity. His wisdom reveals that you are who you say you are,"

"That's great."

"He, uh, has a message for you."

"Oh, that's bad."

"He says to heed the warning of the man with a mind like a steel trap."

Viv rolled her eyes.

"I already trust General Jaratalassi. And why so cryptic? 'Listen to Jar' would have sufficed. Why do they always try to act so mysterious, I swear."

Farren didn't seem amused by Viv's cavalier tone.

"You should be more careful when dealing with gods, especially the patron of HARRAK. At least I know this is really you."

"Sorry," Viv said.

Emeric and Neriad had shown some remarkable patience with her but that was no reason to piss off their entire clergy.

"That leads us to our next important question," Farren continued. "Why is there an undead among your followers?"

The atmosphere grew really, really tense in the cramped room. Viv noticed the temple guards gripping the handles of their weapons with grim fatalism. They knew that if they were to fight, they would die. Just Solfis would be enough to dispatch them.

Viv admired their courage and sense of sacrifice. They were respectable morons.

Abe de-escalated the conflict with a winning smile. He closed his eyes and the cowl mark on his forehead shone like a star-struck night sky.

"Enttiku as my witness, I am no abomination come to destroy the living."

He stretched his arms, palms open.

"I am on your side."

The guards relaxed. No one could fake divine power, at least not to that level.

"The cowed one offered me a deal to bring peace to the many remains of the deadlands, and to support the living as much as I can."

"We were under the impression that, huh, Enttiku disapproved of undead."

"They do. They also considered that I was still, to a reasonable extent, myself, and that it would be better to drag me to the side of good rather than letting me succumb to insanity. I agreed. And besides..."

The room grew dimmer.

"No one can forestall death forever."

Light returned with Abe's smile. He invited the guards to relax, which most of them did. Viv made some small talk until Farren mentioned the last reason for his visit.

“Look, your absence left things in a state of flux. We face many uncertainties and uncomfortable questions about what, exactly, we are.”

“We are Harrak.”

“No we are not. Not yet. Harrak was an empire. It needs to be one again.”

The Voice of Neriad leaned forward in his seat. Viv could feel his conviction like a drill pressing against her soul.

“You need to be crowned.”

“We are too small to be an empire.”

“We claim the entirety of the deadlands as our own, and yes I include myself among the citizens of your nation. It matters not. People follow flags and leaders. Either you step up and fill the role you have designed for yourself or the others will tear themselves apart trying to fill it in your stead. You need—”

“Legitimacy. I apologize. You are right. I am merely getting cold feet.”

“You should not apologize in public either.”

“Oh, bollocks. You’ve known me since I was a half-dead witchling just getting here.”

“You need to cultivate an image of gravitas.”

She raised an eyebrow, and he seemed to remember that she’d been baby hugging for the past two hours.

“Oh, very well. Do as you wish, so long as you get yourself crowned before the inevitable next calamity descends upon us. The one that general mentioned, I suppose. What now?”

It was late afternoon. Viv considered gating to Sinur’s Gate but gave up. She’d need the whole day to get everything sorted anyway.

“Send a messenger to Lady Azar that I will rest for now and see her first thing in the morning. In the meanwhile, let’s have a feast!”

And so, they had a feast.

It was good to be the boss, sometimes.

The local cooks outdid themselves with monster meat aplenty, a rarity in Helock. There were also a lot of mushrooms thanks to recently reopened mushroom farms under the rolling hills before Kazar. All of them tasted strongly of black mana which meant they were extra delicious for Viv. The next morning, she teleported to Sinur’s Gate. Due to safety reasons, the arrival spot was set outside of the walls, just in front of the path snaking up to the fortress

so a group couldn't just land inside the walls and mess everything up. Viv was the first to go through and she stopped for two reasons.

First, the city had changed so much it was breathtaking.

When she had besieged it with the Harrakan army, the path had been dust and drab stones leading up to an ominous, dead fortress vomiting hordes of revenants and worse. They'd fought in deserted streets, ambushed at every corner under a gray sky of roiling clouds.

Now it was sunny. Gloriously so, with the early morning light coming from behind the walls, granting the ancient city a warm, golden aura. Tufts of green grass clung to the cliffs, along with creeping vines carrying tiny white flowers. The sounds of life came from the fortress. Smoke rose to the horizons, only to be dispersed by the wind. It smelled of soil, cornudon shit, and sweat and that was much better than death and decay.

Also it smelled of sweat because of the second reason: the army.

From the gate to the city, thousands of men and women in arms stood at attention, in perfect silence, their eyes set on the witch with curiosity and excitement in equal measure. Curiosity from the newcomers. Excitement from the veterans who knew that since Viv was back, things were about to become 'interesting' again.

Lady Azar was there in front of Viv along with most of the military staff. She recognized the three most important figures. Ban, who led the heavies and had been at her side since before there were heavies. Poacher whose real name Viv still hadn't learned and who led the witchpact crossbow folks. The last one was Rollo, the leader of the handful of knights here in Harrak. Or at least this used to be the case. Now, there were almost thirty of them on their horses, wearing embroidered and colorful tabards over their dark iron armor. They looked quite imposing.

Lady Azar looked very proud as she signaled a group of musicians. It was all very pompous and official until Arthur crossed the portal and spread her wings wide. Being all new to Kazar, the musicians faltered. She was now very, very clearly a dragon.

*Oh is this all for me?*

*Thank you, my minions!*

"Arthur!" voices came from the middle of the formation before a NCO could make them shut up. In answer, the dragon took to the sky and flew over the tight ranks at high speed, roaring and doing aerial acrobatics. The soldiers answered with cheers and whoops that spread like a wildfire. Heavies drummed the earth with the butt of their spears with a deafening rumble while the marksmen let out their strange ululating cries. Azar shook her head and laughed when the musicians recovered enough for a belated blow of horns. Viv walked to her with a smile.

"She's stealing the show."

"I have tried to instill your people with a sense of decorum but I suppose there is no accounting for dragons," the Baranese countess admitted.

*Mother.*

*Your underlings finally accepted me as their rightful leader.*

*There is hope for the species yet.*

"Don't let power get to your head," Viv said, but Arthur was off again parading all over the place. That gave Viv an opportunity to let everyone get acquainted. The meeting was brief, everyone knowing there would be a troop review and that it would take time. Strangely, Lana and the mages were quite curious. Viv prompted her about it as they walked on.

"Many northern cities allow women to walk the path of warriors but I had never seen such a vast number before. It appears you told the truth."

The first group to be reviewed was the knights, as was tradition. It was Rollo who introduced them. Their visors were open but the knights stubbornly looked front as if nothing could faze them.

"You know of my... proclivities," Rollo finally whispered in a low voice.

"You know I dated a woman, right? I don't care that you are gay."

"I have spread the word among my friends that Harrak would respect us and our choices, that you would not force us to live lies so long as we served the crown faithfully."

He stopped as if to test Viv.

"Yes?"

"I hope you will not prove me wrong."

"I said what I said," Viv replied, finally realizing why her gaydar was blaring at her. She had the most homoerotic knight group in all of Param. Perhaps even in the world!

"Just hire straight people as well please."

"Naturally. Jarvis here hopes you can heal his wife and daughter. They were blinded by a political rival."

"I'll regrow everyone's everything once we have settled. No worries."

Rollo seemed satisfied and the inspection continued. Arthur joined them when her curiosity overrode her pride. She didn't ask the knights if the armor was hermetically sealed for optimal flavoring which Viv took as progress. The next group on the list was the heavies.

They had grown remarkably in numbers since she last was here. They had also been split in several companies, each one led by an officer. Ban introduced them as they passed by.

“Those are the Hightree Company. They are mostly new arrivals and veterans from other militaries. A good group. Solid and reactive if less unified than the others.”

Viv observed that those heavies had swords, short spears, and maces, not just the usual full steel pilum she was used to. They were the most diverse group as well in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity, basically a representation of the entire continent. Viv recognized many of the veterans she had healed, and they'd kept the weapons they were more familiar with. All of them bore the tree of Kazar as their emblem.

“... because that's the first thing a refugee sees when they arrive. Next we have the Mountain Sons. You know where they're from.”

Mountain people bearing red scarves waited at attention. Viv recognized many of them from the first battles against the Enorians. They had filled up now that food was abundant. They were also the second most homogeneous group.

“Next we have the Children of the Scale, who will have latrine duty for the next month for breaking decorum.”

*Oh! Oh! Oh! My servants!*

Arthur waddled among the ranks while the soldiers beamed. They bore insignias in the form of a white dragon and Viv realized she recognized many of them. They were graduates from the Arthur fanclub.

“Youngest company, that's why they wear mail instead of full plate. They do not have the physical stats to operate normal gear yet but I thought it would be good to train them to Harrakan standards anyway. Some girls have joined. I didn't stop them so long as they could pass the physical contest.”

“It was a good idea.”

They stayed until Viv convinced Arthur to stop inspecting 'her' soldiers. When she walked on two legs, she towered over even the tallest soldier. It was very strange.

“And now we have the One Hundred. Best of the lot. Toughest fuckers this side of the ocean,” Ban said with pride. “I have recruited them from the best and drilled them mercilessly. We take monthly runs in the deadlands with a life orb, trigger it, then fight off the revenant tide for three days.”

“Wow.”

Armored to the teeth in runic armor with plates, grim, unmoving, the One Hundred were an intimidating force to behold. Their pennants and tabards were white and unadorned. Viv inspected one at random.

[Harrakan Imperial Guard. Third step.]

Yeah, Viv had to get crowned. It would be a shame not to. Napoleon had done it before so it would be fine, right? She just had to watch out for the pitfalls of hubris. That would be easy. Just watch Arthur and stop before becoming like her.

Viv's satisfied inner gloating stopped when she came across a surprising sight. Among the One Hundred, there was one, exactly one, woman. Viv blinked. Ban leaned to whisper in her ear.

"We call this one Brick," he began.

"You can speak normally. I used a sound barrier."

"Ah, thank you. We call this one Brick because she is as dumb as one. She forgot her name."

"What?"

"I am serious. We are not sure where she comes from but I highly suspect she took the acceptance test by accident. I also suspect she didn't realize she could give up."

"Huh. Solfis knows several exercises that help with mental stats, especially when they are very low."

"We tried that. Now, she can complete tasks in the most imbecilic way possible with unerring accuracy. She will not forget any of the steps. She just won't do them in a way that makes sense."

"Okay."

"But she does well in the shield wall. So."

He shrugged. So did Viv.

"As long as she conforms to your standards. Shall we move on?"

"Yes," Ban said with pursed lips. "Poacher will tell you about her own... troops."

"Poacher?" Viv asked.

She turned to the gray-haired lady. Poacher might have a better suit of gambeson now but she still had gaunt features and the dodgy air of someone who had never worked a legal job in their entire life.

"Your name is really Poacher?"

"It wasn't until you started calling me that."

"You didn't have a name?"

"Nah."

"But... how did people call you?"

"Hey, you! Or 'Damn mudling' or 'that bitch over there'."

"I... see?"

"Let's go see my louts."

The next section of the army gave almost an opposite feel. While the heavies stood in tight formations, the marksmen lounged, leaned, and just hung around in loose squads. They also wore face paintings, mostly in the shape of human skulls though they were also bears and other creatures. It reminded Viv of the Dia de los Muertos.

"Koro's idea. It's a southern tradition to wear the skull or painting in the shape of the strongest prey you have killed. It promotes competition."

The marksmen wore darker clothing and gambeson with bits of mail added in. The bling came from their yries-made crossbows, each one unique and fine-tuned to their owners. Many of them also brought close quarter weapons and Viv spotted a few shields, targes worn on the back.

"Those louts are the Sisters of the Eye. The first company."

Viv recognized many of the women from the battle with Lancer. The sisters were the only entirely female contingent here and also the most defiant one. They looked a little cocky, Viv thought, though that might just be because they were next to the One Hundred.

"Most of our best marksmen are here. They're also good at hunting."

"And causing trouble," Ban grumbled. "Half of the disciplinary issues come from this lot."

"You're just a sour old man," Poacher retorted.

"Hey hey, no open conflict in front of our people," Viv said, and they both simmered down.

"You got them to stop bickering? Tell me your secret," Lady Azar added with a wry voice.

"Moving on," Poacher interrupted. "Here are the Fingers."

Viv recognized many of the scouts from the old Kazar days, including their leader who had married a Hadal woman. They were a mixed group. Most of them had bows instead of

crossbows. Viv recognized a few Enorian siege bows as well. Kazar's original scouts and the veteran marksmen were here.

"The Hadals who joined the army joined this group. They are not here today. They hate standing at attention."

"Understandable."

"And next we have the Bitter Hearts."

The last group was... a surprise. Contrary to what their names implied, their numbers consisted of older people, mostly women who lacked the hard edge of the other soldiers. They were more subdued as well. Most avoided looking at her.

"Those are widows and widowers who have lost everything. Or people who have abandoned their paths for one reason or another. Not our best. They are... the glue that keeps us together. They mend, they teach, they listen."

"They are also the last company to leave any battlefield, not until they've found everyone. We've lost a few of them to revenants because of that," Ban said with grudging respect.

"They train hard," Poacher continued.

Ban nodded in agreement.

"Good people. Reliable."

Viv ignored Lady Azar's delighted surprise. The Bitter Hearts were in good shape and clearly more disciplined than their wilder counterparts. She remembered that wars were won through disciplined troops, not just supersoldiers.

The next contingents were different. There were temple guards, though they were few in numbers with most of the group stationed in Kazar. City guards stood at attention as well. Those were police, technically, and their skills reflected that. They would still man the wall in case of a major battle. The last group was the one that filled Viv with pleasure.

Yries.

And tanks.

Well, technically they were portable shield arrays on metal frames. There were also the more classical takes with catapults and ballistas. The Yries manning them wore armor and their signature crossbows. They also wore war paints on their strange, owl-like features, something she had never seen before. Viv greeted them with a smile and promised to spend more time making sure everything was working as she intended. It was the last group as well. Beyond them waited the path up to Sinur's Gate.

“We call them the Shril,” Ban said. “They love testing new things to throw at people. Fire wasps. Poison jars. Stone. Strange gas. Fucking fire ants. They always try the weirdest things.”

Viv’s only concern was that they followed her orders without objections. The yries were quite strange. By nature a peaceful people, they had no limits once tickled enough. A bit like the Canadians.

All in all, it looked like the army had developed into an array of competing groups bickering and squabbling for resources, each more prideful than the other, each pushing the others to greater heights. Except the Bitter Hearts who were just mothering everyone. It was just perfect. Viv forfeited a speech this time. There would be opportunities later.

There were more people on the path up, civilians this time. Less than in Kazar yet the inhabitants of the surrounding fortified villages had come in droves. Viv noticed that there were a lot of maimed people present. Many seemed hopeful.

“I decided to move them all here for your convenience. That way, you may rule and regrow their limbs at your convenience. I have notified the Hadal hunters that monster meat would be required.”

“Excellent.”

Once again, Viv resorted to baby holding and hand clasping to get to know the people of Sinur’s Gate. Many of them were new arrivals, mostly craftsmen who benefitted from being close to each other. She passed the double gates to find the city transformed. Colors had returned to this vertical place. Vines and blue roses clung to the towers, falling from its many bridges in bright curtains. Stalls sold food and trinkets while smiths worked their forge, their duties suffering no interruptions. There was still plenty of room so the city was not as cramped as it might have once felt. Blue enchantments kept the water flowing in the many small fountains.

“We have not yet cleared the sewers. All the entrances have been shut, I have been unwilling to send your men in without mage support,” Lady Azar said.

“Probably for the best,” Viv agreed.

Her online friend Gevaudan was always complaining about sewer monsters. At least, the place should still be relatively odorless since they had not been used in three hundred years. There was hope yet.

The group made their way to the palace, having picked up a tail of soldiers and civilians with their many petitions. The main entrance had been cleared and Viv was delighted to find that the inner courtyard now hid a fragrant garden. The throne room with its overhead dome still felt a little cold and impersonal even though the resident lich’s belongings had long since been cleared.

“We have prepared your room upstairs if you want to rest,” Lady Azar said.

“No, I will hold court since I am back. We have the entire day for that.”

“Very well. Many of the topics should be inconsequential. Many of the newcomers will want your confirmation that their relatives can be healed. There are also a few more important matters including, and I am sorry to say so, a meeting request from the Manipeleso bank and exchange.”

“The bank?” Viv asked. “What could they want?”

*The bank?*

Viv winced. She’d hoped Arthur might have forgotten.

## Chapter 149: Economy of Scale

Radiant light filtered through the dome skylight. Aides had assembled long benches for the expected spectators. Viv had been offered a chair, thought it was too small and turned part of the dais into an eldritch horror of scales, tentacles and spikes blooming from a center in which she sat.

She promptly stood up again and demanded a pillow, which was offered. Lady Azar stood by her side.

“Would you not prefer to sit?” Viv asked.

“Traditionally, an advisor stands by the side of a ruler’s throne. If you do not mind, however, then yes I would use the chair we prepared for you. Just make the throne a little higher so you dominate the room even while sitting.”

“Sure thing.”

Soon, Viv was ready. The One Hundred had a squad on hold as her personal guard though they were probably not even trained for it. It probably wouldn’t matter much. They were meant to stand around looking menacing and that was a task they excelled at. And besides, Solfis was here. He was worth a thousand men.

“Right. We’re ready. Open the gates.”

Hesitantly at first, citizens trailed in, some sitting in the benches after curtsying, others forming a line under the direction of a master of ceremony, actually one of Kazar's original clerks. It took less than a minute for a queue to form though. Just as ordered, the first were bankers.

Tom Manitaradin had been one of the first people Viv had met in Kazar. The impeccably dressed and styled man stood aloof, his assistant standing by his side holding a package. Viv gestured and he came up, bowing smoothly.

"Greetings, Your Grace. Welcome back to Sinur's Gate. As a representative of the Manipeleso Bank and Exchange, I would like to extend an invitation to discuss deeper matters of cooperation. However, I fear a public setting might not be the best place to do so. Would you consider joining me some time this week?"

"It is a matter of some urgency," Lady Azar whispered in Viv's ear. "It relates to private loans given to our citizens and, to some extent, the throne."

"Wait, we're indebted?" Viv asked.

"Of course we are. I leveraged our finance to start several projects, including new ironworks and the renovation of the city. We'll get our money back within a year. And this is not the time."

"Right."

Viv turned back to the banker who was still waiting with a winning smile, a smile that felt more predatorial the longer Viv looked.

"Of course. Would tomorrow morning work?"

"Fantastic. We will come here, unless you would prefer to visit our branch?"

"Here is fine."

"Then we will reconvene at that time. In the meanwhile, please accept this Northern garment made for you as a gesture of our appreciation."

Tom bowed smartly and left, his sashaying assistant following closely behind. Viv checked the gift. It was a nice, close-fitting dress in black and white with golden filigree. Very nice, though she would let Solfis have a look at it before wearing it, of course.

"It's pretty good."

"Oh, they can afford it," Lady Azar grumbled. "Although you keep a better relationship with them than most rulers I have ever met."

"Yeah we'll see how long that lasts. Next?"

The following petitioner was a farmer who begged for help finding his son, who'd never returned from a trip to the mountains. Irao surprised everybody by basically popping into existence and offering his services, which satisfied everybody. Then the parade began.

The first to appear was an old man, rarities on a continent where war and monsters could always be counted on. He was, in fact, positively ancient. Those who reached that age usually had stats to back it up but he felt terribly weak to Viv's mana perception. She frowned, then frowned even more when Azar facepalmed. Viv signaled for him to come forth and he did so, bowing stiffly until his mop of white hair almost touched the carpet. Snickers erupted in the assembly.

"Your Graceship, I come to you because old Gogen she told me, she told me I couldn't get into the kitchen and I said, I said, why your son can and he ain't even a cook! He ain't I know he because he's a forrester down south near the the edge so I said to her—"

Viv listened to the man rant without much structure for another minute during which the room grew gradually more amused. By the time the old man stopped to catch his breath after a particularly inflamed tirade on the character of local dogs, there were jeers and mutters everywhere. Finally, an opening for her to exploit.

"Silence."

Viv decided to use leadership rather than intimidation this time and to make sure people got the message, she cast a colorless quiet on the entire assembly. There were no casters around so no one resisted. Citizens turned from hilarity to fear in an instant. She moved forward on her throne and pulled her wings out, finding she was more comfortable that way.

The display of power and alienness served their purpose. In the ensuing calm, she leaned towards Azar who was now the very picture of controlled fury.

"What the fuck was that."

"Crocus the senile. I specifically told the entrance guards not to let him through. When this is over, I will hang them from the ramparts by their feet."

"You can do that in your free time. For now I'd like to salvage my first official reception."

Viv returned her attention to Crocus who was waiting, a vacant expression painted on his face. He was drooling a little bit.

"Right. This appears to have been a rather eventful morning for Crocus. Let a guard accompany him to the refectory so he can drink something hot, yes? Now."

The next person moved up in an atmosphere like a classroom after the usually gentle teacher had a screaming bout. He was a merchant offering scented candles, an expensive rarity since it required wax. Viv thanked him and sent him to her bioweapon division since they liked wasps and might be convinced to work on a less lethal, honey-making variant. The person after that was dressed in a long tatty mage robe with stars sewn on it, along with a

hat that had seen better days. The hat had a large moon symbol on it, the magical glyph though it was incomplete. She feared another disaster and inspected him quickly.

[Researcher: one who follows a path dedicated to the understanding of magical and natural laws.]

“Your Grace, I beseech your help and patronage in one of the grandest endeavors of scientific discovery of this era, nay, of all eras, a tremendous work that will revolutionize the way we see the world! A ruler such as yourself—”

“The short version, please.”

“Yes, yes, of course. Forgive the theatrics and my excitement. My purpose is to prove... that Nyil... is a sphere.”

“A sphere? The planet Nyil is a sphere?” Viv asked just to confirm.

“Yes! Yes, a sphere. Not a flat surface as some have argued.”

“One moment please.”

Viv leaned towards Lady Azar.

“What’s the consensus on this issue?”

“It has been a matter of some debate among researchers, a question made more complicated by the, ah, lack of funding and ‘qualified’ personnel dedicated to such endeavors. Most centers of learning are more interested in how to stop the next monster invasion and how to cast better spells.”

“I see. You there, how do you intend to proceed?”

“By climbing the tallest mountain and, taking precise measurement using a magical box I have, ahem, yet to develop, to demonstrate a curvature of the horizon over the Endless Sea.”

“Right. Hmm.”

Viv searched her memories. Was it... Eratosthenes who’d done it? Yeah. What was it again?

“Right, errr, have you considered, hmmm, measuring the distance between two cities on the same meridian, that is the north south axis, then planting two perfectly vertical straight rods in the ground at noon on a summer solstice and measuring the respective angles made by the shadows, thus—”

“Your Grace. You are assuming that the light of the sun comes to us as parallel rays.”

He shook his head.

“But it cannot be so, for it would imply that the sun is extremely far while we know that it cannot be so, this celestial body moving so much in the day and night cycle. Your Grace, you are clearly a person of great intellect but you should probably focus on magic and let me handle the science.”

Someone coughed in their sleeves.

Solfis would never let her live that down.

“Right. We may consider helping you in your endeavor if you make yourself useful for our cause. I believe we have need of archivists?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” the ‘mistress’ of ceremony replied. “Urgently so.”

“You may obtain our support if you work for us. You will also be compensated, which will allow you to fund the expedition and research yourself.”

“But... science suffers no delay,” the scientist replied, dejected.

“It can most definitely suffer delays and difficulties,” Viv replied drily. “Help us and receive help, or do not. The choice is yours. Next?”

The next three persons were fairly uneventful. One was a knight who offered his services, requesting land in return which Viv was only too happy to agree to. A local mayor requested assistance with his mana-conversion stone, something Rakan could have handled but the man had apparently not been aware of it. A smith requested more ores for his brand new smelter.

“We will have to reopen our side of the mines. We have delayed long enough as it is.”

Lady Azar nodded in support. Her expression soured when she saw the next visitor. It was a child. A girl, to be precise. hunched forward, eyes filled with scorn and teeth bared. She was also missing two fingers on her left hand. Practically feral. Viv had barely made a gesture when she spoke in a heavily accented Enorian drawl.

“Ya know what I want. Give me my damn collar back!”

Her vitriol was not aimed at Viv, at least not entirely, but to Lady Azar. The countess leaned towards Viv with obvious annoyance.

“I have forbidden children from participating in those awful beastling hunts. It was getting absolutely unacceptable.”

“The baldies can still do it, so why can't I? Huh? At least give me back my stuff. You got not right to keep it.”

“Why did you stop it?” Viv asked in a low voice. “Were there deaths?”

“That girl lost her fingers because it was gnawed off by a beastling and still, she wants to get back to the fray? There were no deaths but there have been many wounded. The Hadal’s definition of ‘safe’ needs to be reconsidered! And do you know that they’ve burnt beastlings alive? And tortured them? Children have no limits. They must not be exposed to this level of savagery at a young age or they may bear the marks of those conflicts for their entire lives.”

“The hadals keep doing it! How is that fair?”

“Right,” Viv thought. “Hm. Perhaps beastling hunts should be codified rather than entirely banned. I’ll set a lower age limit and forbid the most heinous war crimes, including torture. No hazing either. Those who don’t want to participate will not have to.”

“That’s always been like that! Raiders and builders and gatherers so we have grilled acorn pancakes! Until that harri—”

Viv silenced the girl with a gesture and before she could fully insult her prime minister to her face. Although that was a French tradition, Nyil took a dimmer view on such things.

“And what is it I hear about a pendant?”

“Young Trill here gathered one made of pierced beastling canines, a grisly trophy I confiscated as it had no place in a civilized nation.”

Viv had a quick glance at the bone abomination made by a civilized nation in order to off political rebels on the other side of a battlefield.

“I will have to side with Trill here for two reasons. First, we have no laws against morbid prizes. If we did that would mean confiscating Solfis’s collection.”

**//Extremely inadvisable.**

“And second, we will have no ‘ex post facto’ laws here thank you very much. You can’t retroactively punish someone for hunting beastlings when it was not illegal to do so. Where is the necklace now?”

Viv assumed it was destroyed but Lady Azar pushed out an answer between gritted teeth.

“I gave it to the Temple for purification. They might have kept it.”

“I’ll ask! Thanks,” Trill said, and she was off.

During a short recess, Azar asked for a moment of privacy.

“I just want to make sure we are on the same page. Is there a problem between us? Reversing my decisions weakens my position here,” she said.

“There is no issue between us. I am applying Harrakan law in a rather... tolerant manner that may reflect my own culture. Rather, working as a kind ruler, strict ruler pair might help in the long run. We merely have to get more used to each other’s working methods.”

Lady Azar nodded. Viv decided it was time to butter the old leader up a little.

“Look, I appreciate everything you’ve done so far enormously. I am still not sure why you are lending us your talents, I just appreciate that Harrak would not be the same place if you’d not held the fort while I turned part elemental.”

“And I appreciate you listening to most advice with attention,” the old countess replied.

She sighed, suddenly looking more approachable. More human rather than just the immaculate noble.

“You were not my first choice, if I have to be honest. I tried advising my daughter and then a young up and coming duke fighting to reclaim his family’s past glory. They fought me at every step, curtailed what I could do until I felt that I was a dangerous rival to be hampered rather than a hand extended in friendship. I am still unsure as to why you, an outlander, tolerate me so much without constantly doubting my motives.”

“I’m pretty sure you just love building a kingdom.”

“Yes! Exactly! Is there a nobler accomplishment in this world? A more difficult one? I think not, and yet I will manage it not once but twice, Enttiku willing. So you do understand. Was that why you never doubted me?”

“I do not doubt you because I know that if you have to choose between us and your daughter sitting on the throne of Baran, you won’t pick us. In the meanwhile, you’re possibly the best advisor on the continent so I’ll just count my blessings. And as to why I’m not afraid... Black mana elemental archmage? Between Arthur, Solfis and I, we have enough raw power to fend off pretty much any power grab anyone could attempt.”

“No one will make a power grab,” Lady Azar said with absolute confidence. “No one can compete. It might come as a surprise to you so I will remind you of the obvious. Citizens find that being led by a proven spell-casting war leader with a dragon child and the loyalty of an ancient war machine is, in fact, rather ‘cool’. Much more so than some inbred idiot whose sole merit was being born in the right family. I would be much more concerned about foreign attacks if I were you.”

“I’m working on it,” Viv grumbled.

Trill didn’t return. The next supplicant asked for help after his field was ravaged during a battle between heavies and a large undead bear they had to put down. A brief discussion with Lady Azar confirmed that the state didn’t act as an insurance in case of an accident so Viv sent the man away, even reminding him that the bear would have done more than tear a field apart. She couldn’t afford to just say yes to everybody.

The next woman came to the stand munching on what looked like a juicy apple.

“Good morning, Your Grace.”

“Do not talk to me with your mouth full.”

“Oh sorry, the wait just made me hungry, haha.”

Her mouth was still full.

Viv eyed the nearest window. Solfis dutifully stood up to open it.

“Wait wait wait sorry, Your Grace, I came to offer the results of my labor, those pila fruits. If you like them, I simply request assistance in setting a well near the orchard I intend to develop. Please.”

“We need more water to feed all the new farms,” Azar explained. “There simply isn’t enough rain yet to let things grow. We have been digging wells left and right. It has not been enough. Many of the villages need regular supplies of water.”

“It looks like I have Lana’s first job.”

“A mage of her caliber might resent being tasked with such mundane work.”

“You mean like me building obelisks left and right?”

Azar nodded.

“I will remind her that you lead by example.”

More people followed after that but none as exciting. The visitors were either demanding compensation, advertising products or simply being sycophants. Others came to swear allegiance to her, mostly because their paths demanded it. Courtiers and knights both, they were an interesting mix of the desperate, the ambitious, and the stupid. One of the warriors offering his service was dying from an improperly healed heart that would need to be regrown and that was going to require finesse. Another was a courtier escaping forced marriage. Viv welcomed them all anyway. The only real surprise to Viv was the lack of request for judgment, except for Trill’s interruption. She prompted Azar on that topic.

“I would like to remind you that Neriad is your Patron God and truce is within his purview. I have delegated the... judiciary work to them. Since they don’t pay taxes, they might as well make themselves useful.”

“They know the laws of Harrak?”

“Neriad’s churches always work with local law. The god of righteous battle tolerates differences in laws and customs, after all.”

“Got it.”

The flow of people only weakened as the sun came down. For a population of less than ten thousand souls, Harrak certainly had a lot of people come to visit, though Viv supposed there was a backlog. Nevertheless, the experience had made her more popular and given her the opportunity to put a finger on Harrak’s pulse. The ‘empire’ reminded her of her own country after the revolution, a place where the social structure was yet to become rigid and where the competent could carve themselves a path to success. A night council gave her the opportunity to give some orders, especially to the mages who had just settled in the various towers across the city. She wondered if there was a natural affinity between mages and towers.

Abe wanted to work as a judge during the day, undead hunter the rest of the time and that was fine by Viv. The ladies were also open to building wells, fortifications, and helping reopen the mine. Weirdly, they thought doing so for people was more exciting than doing so for guilds. Viv hoped the novelty wouldn’t wear off too fast. Once those orders were given, however, came the problem of budget allocation.

Saying mines should open was all well and good. Dispatching the mages was relatively cheap, just as encouraging people with mining skills to go there. Unfortunately, she still needed to hire an overseer, people to maintain barracks. The mine would need tools and supply trains to carry the ore to smelters. Fortunately, the treasury was doing well right now.

“We expect a massive payout in fall, after the harvest. Plenty of new products such as mushrooms will be sent to the markets in Enoria and beyond, and we expect a large payout thanks to high black mana levels that make the goods both nourishing and resistant to corruption. Your portals have made a world of difference. Unfortunately, it is spring now. We have half a year before we reap those benefits and I still have to pay hundreds of soldiers, the staff, and possibly fund more urgent work. I borrowed from the bank at a competitive rate to make sure we would have enough coin to face all the spendings with some leeway. As soon as the harvest is completed, we will be doing quite well.”

“Yes we have quite the bloated military. How is that holding up?”

“They have some frankly incredibly low pay considering their quality. We are doing fine because they have full rights to what they find in the deadlands, and also because the yries provide most of our supplies against regular food deliveries. The crux of the matter is that we are growing fast but we need to watch out not to develop too fast and invest too much or we will go bankrupt. Hence the importance of tomorrow’s meeting.”

Viv considered the question. Lady Azar didn’t know it but Viv was rich. Really rich. Between the limb regrowth pay, the cores she found in Elunath’s mansion and what she’d accrued before, her fortune was over a thousand and a half gold talents. That was absolutely massive, and the Manipeleso bank held most of it in reserve. By contrast, the crown owed six hundred gold talents to be repaid over two years while Harrak as a whole owed close to five thousand.

There was something to explore there.

Viv ended the council quite late. This had been a busy day. There would be more like that before things settled.

Viv found herself missing her practice with Abe. Magic was now an integral part of her life. By comparison, ruling felt more like a means to an end. It was interesting and necessary. It just felt more like a job. She just hoped things wouldn't get too interesting too fast.

She sighed, looking out of the window of her new palace.

"Fuck it."

Viv flew to the farmer's field, the one she had denied during the day. She turned the corpse of the large undead bear to ash, repaired the collapsed walls using the change meaning then draining the black mana out. Once she was done, most of the damage was cleaned up. There was only a demolished shed left to rebuild. She headed back feeling much better.

That night, Viv invited Sidjin to her brand new bedroom for some relaxing fun together. She had the bankers accompany her the next morning over breakfast, which was provided by Gogen the cleaner and her army of cooks, maids, servants, and warehousemen. Somehow, the old woman had put herself in charge of everything and no one had bothered to stop her. That was fine by Viv.

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"This dress really suits you," Tom said with pleasure as he sat at the breakfast table.

His assistant did the same, then a servant came with plates of wraps, fresh bread, fruit, and monster meat in cold cuts. Viv helped herself to a cup of kava then sat back. Tom was right. The northern dress fit her like a glove now that she was mostly back to normal, the shoulder paddings giving her a regal profile.

It was Viv, Tom, his assistant Lan and Lady Azar in the small room midway up the tower. The sun shone on green fields rife with opportunity. From the window, they could not see what was left of the deadlands so the vista was only hope and profit, not the daunting prospect of decades of relentless effort.

Tom started with small talk and Viv obliged. She was in no hurry to get to the heart of the matter on an empty stomach. Tom's delay soon proved to be a tactic, however. The opening salvo of the business discussion proved immediately deadly.

"Lady Viv. Your Grace. I would like to inform you that as of now, Harrak and its citizens are indebted to the Manipeleso Bank and Exchange for an amount of two thousand five hundred and sixty gold talents."

Viv froze with a fruit halfway between her lips. She put it down back onto her plate.

"I'm sorry?"

“This includes private citizens and quite a few new ventures ranging from tanners and ore smelters to tailors and even a luthier. Nevertheless, our exposure has reached a critical level and my administration wishes to make sure the funds are well allocated. And that the projects of private individuals bear fruit. As such, we would like to make a few mutually beneficial arrangements. Please take your time to consider them... carefully,” he said with a soft voice.

Lan produced a nice, white paper with a short list on it. Viv knew what was going on even though Tom refrained from using any social skill on her. A written proposal was always more impersonal than a voiced one, thus making offensive content slightly less likely to cause the offended party to blow up in one's face. Viv went down the list.

The bank wanted to put Harrak under tutelage.

Oh, they voiced it nicely but that was it. Tom would be named finance minister along with a list of executive powers including the ability to veto budgets. There were a list of other measures including production restrictions on illegal goods, something that she didn't intend to do anyway. The Manipeleso bank would also retain a monopoly over Harrak to 'make sure the citizens do not get into too much debt by double dipping'. It was as ballsy as it was vile. From the way Tom's aura pulsed, she could tell he was terrified though calming by the minute since Viv had not killed him yet. And she wouldn't.

When a duke defaulted on another bank, the bank risked a collapse. When a duke defaulted on the Manipeleso bank, those fuckers sent hit squads. That was why they'd endured for so long on a continent ravaged by wars and monster tides. Viv had no doubt she could survive most assassination attempts. Her people, however, could not, and that was before mentioning sabotage. She had much to lose and nothing to gain by opposing them directly. On the other hand, they could not be allowed all the conditions or they would simply push Harrak so long as it was profitable, all while milking them for every iron bit they could reasonably squeeze. Viv would never allow it.

“Failing that, I fear that I am no longer allowed to extend new loans. You understand, I am sure.”

Viv understood that investments would stop. Refugees would find themselves without the resources granted to those that came before. Many new projects would need an extension, or some more cash, and they would not find it.

Unless, of course, it came from Viv's pocket.

Branches didn't have a unified accounting system because there was nothing like the internet here on Nyil. For most branches, it didn't matter since transactions mostly took place between members of the same country. Or the same guild. Viv had traveled a lot and she had become fabulously rich... on the other side of the continent. Tom might simply have underestimated how much money she had saved. Or he believed that she could last one season but no more.

It was quite likely that he expected her to negotiate the political cost down, hence why the initial offering was on the outrageous side of things. He would concede several points, calming her anger while still getting what he wanted.

There was one way to deal with the situation that didn't involve becoming adversarial: delay, counter, change the situation. After all, the bank had been quite useful so far and she was more than happy to poach Tom's skills for her own cause.

"This is a very serious decision. I would like some time for thoughts before I come to a decision."

"We understand, of course."

The bankers stood, dismissed.

"Oh, one last thing," Viv asked. "I'd like a withdrawal. All I have except for a hundred talents. That's the limit for the VIP account, yes?"

"Why yes," Tom replied with pinched lips. "Just be aware that it might take some time if the amount goes beyond two hundred gold talents. I will be contacting Helock then?"

Viv was pretty sure, from Tom's face, that it was an expensive endeavor.

"Yes, please."

"Very well then. Goodbye."

Viv spent the rest of the morning visiting Solar, whose son was all small and chubby. The blade master seemed relaxed and happy now that he has less responsibilities and Viv noticed he was carving toy swords of increasing length so he would have something to play with.

"I have not forgotten the blade, mind you, and I still take students among your most dedicated soldiers. You will find quite a few experts among the Hightree company. I merely wish to take a more contemplative approach to what it means to cut, now that I am back at the summit of my skill."

"And still modest," Viv smiled.

"Throw a spell at me," Solar said with a smile as he stood away from the wall where they rested, his cup of klod left there.

"You sure?"

"Nothing too bad. A push spell perhaps?"

"Sure."

Viv weaved a colorless kinetic spell that would send Solar sprawling ass first into a nearby ditch. She hurled it at his chest.

The blademaster lifted his hand, palm open, then made a cutting motion. It was a simple gesture, smooth and slow. His entire body followed as if moving a great weight.

Viv's spell burst apart. She felt the strands break, cleanly sliced by something incredibly sharp.

"Oh wow."

"Yes. I am on the verge of understanding, and I partly owe it to you. Thank you for not pushing us away. And for not pressuring us into service all the time."

"We have quite a few people who come here hoping to live a normal life."

"Like the hadals," Solar agreed. "I spar with Irao on occasion. A good man, if a little strange. The last time we met, we fought without exchanging a word for an afternoon straight. He left me a lake fish afterward. We had soup. It was nice."

"A lake?"

"In the forest, I would presume."

Viv left shortly after that. When she returned to the city, the bank had left her over three hundred talents in gold as well as a request for a delay while they gathered more metal from nearby branches. Viv snickered at the thought. She grabbed the chest and walked out of Sinur's Gate, making her way down the path and greeting citizens on the way. She stopped around halfway, where a small fort had been turned into a guard station. Next to them, what used to be sheer rock now showed the opening of a grotto, the entrance like a gaping maw in the surface of the cliff. Trill stood around with a cudgel hanging from the hip.

"No entry till the boss lady says you cawawawawawa—"

Viv dragged the tiny guard by the ear until they were eye to emerald star in an endless void.

"I appreciate bluffing as well as any politician but I do believe you're pushing it. Why are you not training to be a witchpact?"

"Poacher says I'm too small!"

"Hmm. I'll ask for a derogation if only so that you stop aggravating everybody. A word of advice, attitude can only carry you so far."

Viv left the pipsqueak behind. A main cavern extended in front of her with a passage to the left. Enchanted light bathed the place in a reddish glow. She followed the path to a smaller room. It was split in half by a large stone desk. In front of that desk sat a middle-aged couple showing hope and terror in equal measure, and behind that desk, was Arthur.

*Mother!*

*I was finishing my agreement with mister and missus Telus.*

*Their business plan is sound and the plot they have selected appears suitable.*

*All that is left to do is to sign the contract.*

*I was explaining the finer details of loan repayment.*

“The northern bank. They refused me plan,” the man explained fearfully while his wife huddled against him.

“The dragon lady said she’d help us. We’ll work hard, we promise!” she said.

Yes.

*Sign here if you are ready.*

Arthur pulled the stopper off an ink bottle. A black bubble levitated over a piece of parchment, then, with careful gestures, Arthur directed it to form letters until a contract was drawn. She repeated the terms and Viv saw that the contract was exactly as advertised. The dragoness believed in the importance of reputation.

“Do... do I sign with my blood?”

Arthur’s tail whipped left and right. Viv could tell she was annoyed.

No.

*You sign with the ink and feather I have provided.*

*If you cannot write, a print of your thumb will do.*

“Alright!”

The man pressed a calloused finger to the paper, sealing the deal. They left with a small pouch of gold provided by Arthur. Once they were gone, the appearance of confidence disappeared from the dragon and she bounced around the cavern.

*My first loan!*

*It worked!*

*Now the humans will toil and give me gold every year, more gold than I gave them...*

*And I do not have to lift a wing!*

*I checked everything, even the market price of the tubers they plan on growing for the past five years.*

*And if there is a flood or a draught, I will help them with my magic.*

*It will work, yes?*

“I hope so. By the way, I believe a few changes to your den might be appropriate.”

*Too intimidating?*

“No, not grandiose enough. Where are the pillars? Where is the name of the bank written over the entrance in bold letters? You need to see things bigger.”

Yesssssss.

*I will do as you say, mother.*

*Let the humans know I am in business.*

“Speaking of, the Manipeleso is trying to strong arm me into giving them unfair terms.”

*Mother warned me against monopolistic practices done by someone else.*

“Yes. They are relying on two things. First, that we do not have enough gold to avoid defaulting without them, and second, that no one would have the courage to undermine them once they have clearly stated their claim. After all, they do have assassins.”

Arthur stood on her hind legs. Her wings opened, two white standards on a field of black stone. The temperature inside the cave increased while a low rumble shook the very walls. Viv saw mana and matter bend around the young dragon in waves, ready to obey her command.

*They can try.*

“Yes, my point exactly. I believe the time has come to shake that monopoly a little. I need better terms. Now, I know you are good at this and we are both taking a risk but I have faith in you, and I believe this is a risk worth taking. So...”

Viv placed her chest on the desk. It opened, revealing a familiar shine that reflected in Arthur’s crimson iris.

“I’d like to make a deposit.”

By the time Viv left, the simple entrance had turned into a marvel of Cthonian design proudly advertising the Golden Scale Bank, and people had lined up for new job openings.

The next morning, Tom came to visit again. He was much more direct than the day before.

“Well, congratulations. I’ve never seen the Elders backtrack so fast on any project. We will have a new offer ready by tomorrow, so bear with us in the meantime. Of course, we would still want some concessions before we keep taking risks, however I believe you will find the terms much more generous.”

“I hope you are not too disappointed, Tom. I would still love to employ your services as an advisor.”

“And I believe I will gratefully accept. I expected you would hold a grudge, to be honest.”

“I can hardly blame a member of a family for showing loyalty to that family. That plan was the Elders’?”

“Yes. They wanted to capitalize on your temporary vulnerability.”

“And the bank sending me money just as we fled Kazar for the iron mines three years ago?”

“That was my own initiative. For the record, I disapproved of the grab because I fully expected you to find a way to throw us off. I honestly believed you would use your golem’s memories to dig up yet another treasure.”

“Oh I’ll do that as well. It’s just time-consuming.”

“Yes. I also found it easier to convince the Elders by mentioning your track record. You left... a very strong impression in Helock. You have proven to be a faithful ally and a calamitous adversary.”

“Finally, people are learning.”

“Why yes, though I expect some will need a reminder. Not us, though. And with this, I must bid you goodbye. I fear the next few days will be quite busy.”

Viv accompanied Tom back. She didn’t mind having two banks compete, even though she had a vested interest in the success of one of them. For now, Harrak was stable and growing. Her next two big projects would be turning her forces into a coherent army and coronation, but first, there was an urgent task that needed completing.

Viv sighed.

She had to go clear the sewers.

## Chapter 150: Important business

Ban carefully unlocked the grate, then pulled it open with a grunt. It broke. The maw yawned open to reveal the darkness within.

Ok, so it went down two meters ending in a small landing but not everyone could see perfectly in the dark.

What was left of the door clanged on the ground, hinges rotten to reddish flakes. The rest was covered in a sort of white, calcified gunk. The expected fetid waft never reached Viv's nose through the makeshift mask she insisted on wearing.

Those were sewers.

Abandoned sewers.

She knew the drill. Get in with a company of hardasses, then get picked off over the course of an entire movie fighting some subterranean insect species. Or get in and then return with some freshly unearthed turbo ebola pathogen that happened to turn humans into shambling horrors. A zombie apocalypse in the middle of another zombie apocalypse sounded like a shit idea. That's how you got superzombies.

**//Your Grace?**

Couldn't look hesitant in front of the squad of One Hundreds.

"Move out."

The objective was simple. Get into the sewers, explore them, map them, and clear them of any threats. She'd shared her concern about epidemics with Solfis. He had given her an answer she both hated and agreed with.

**//If there is indeed a disease waiting to happen under the city.**

**//Then now is the best time to release it while we have an overabundance of priests compared to the rest of the population.**

**//The longer you wait and the more the population grows.**

**//The more it grows and the more keenly the need for sewers will be felt.**

**//And the more public hygiene will degrade.**

**//If there is a trap, it is best triggered early.**

Viv hoped that was the right approach.

For this operation, she'd insisted on going with a group of elites like Irao or Solar. However, Solfis had disagreed before she could even ask them.

**//You will go with a squad of the One Hundred.**

“They might be in danger. It will be worse than if—”

**//It will be.**

**//Which will provide a great training opportunity for you.**

**//Your task will be to keep them alive.**

“I thought my task was to keep myself alive.”

**//That will be my task.**

**//I shall come with you.**

**//And extract you should the worst come to pass.**

**//The operation will also prove your trust in them.**

**//The symbol is important.**

**//They have put a lot of effort into becoming worthy of the empire and you.**

“You’re right. Ok, I’ll make sure to cover them.”

**//And for them to cover you.**

**//There is no denying you are an extremely proficient duelist.**

**//Perhaps the best in your class.**

**//If you intend to join them at the head of your ‘tercios’.**

**//Then you must develop new skills.**

“I am convinced.”

Or so Viv thought but walking behind the towering forms of Ban’s eleven handpicked warriors, she was having second thoughts. The only other nervous person was Poacher who had insisted on coming as well because they needed a scout.

The rest of the squad, plus Brick, looked like stone walls with muscles on their muscles. They would have been intimidating if Viv had not fought a necrarch before.

Viv cast a light enchantment as they reached the first landing. It was a small open space, now completely empty. The local mana was low concentration brown and black, exactly what one would expect from a place like this. Blue mana would return with the water later. Hopefully.

A passage led to an adjoining room which they explored first. Nothing was left inside except for empty alcoves and the corroded remains of a metal ladder going up.

**//This would lead to a sewer gate.**

**//An emergency exit for the crew, in case something happened.**

“Sewer maintenance people, you mean?”

**//Precisely.**

**//Many Harrakan cities share the same design when it comes to sewers.**

**//This would be a changing room, armory, and emergency safe room in case of a monster.**

**//All sewer employees would know how to defend themselves.**

**//However, special teams would always be called for anything more dangerous than class 3 threats.**

**//It was not the maintenance crew's duty to fight.**

**//We should find more such rooms across the complex.**

"Good, then we can hide there," Poacher said.

**//Naturally, none of the doors will remain intact.**

"Nevermind."

Poacher leaned and took her mask out of the way to spit. Viv was actually reconsidering the whole mask thing. The place was dry as hell, and surprisingly not dusty. As they descended further, they reached the first corridor Viv associated with actual sewers. The long, branching tunnel centered on a deep central canal where the dirty water would have flowed. Overhead arches collected refuse from overhead grates and, she assumed, private quarters as well. All of them had been walled off for now. The central canal was empty except for a thin layer of white fossilized matter. Out of curiosity, she took her dagger focus and prodded one of the layers clinging to a nearby column. It clinked with the sound of metal on stone. She removed her mask then. This place was neither dusty nor did it have any smell. If there were really pathogens in the air, that basic piece of tissue wouldn't block them.

"Ok, let's start left."

"Do you need paper, milady?" Poacher asked while Ban gritted his teeth.

"No, I've got a perfect memory. Keep an eye out and let's go."

"Aye."

The exploration was slow going. After the first intersection, Ban requested a set of three lights to cover the blind spots. The One Hundred had brought torches but they preferred to have free hands if possible, and Viv agreed. Her light blue radiance turned the entire level into a strange cathedral of crystallized architecture caught in time. Viv had an extremely strong suspicion that the crystal in question was, well, fossilized excrement, but hey.

She started to relax as they finished patrolling the first floor. Viv was very thorough, checking every nook and crannies for anything out of the ordinary. The only strange thing was that everything had corroded to an impossible degree, even more so than in Harrak. From the sluice gates to the doors and even fully metal-made ladders, nothing remained but rusted-through scraps. Viv wasn't sure why but she suspected magic. It did make the inventory of remaining stuff easy.

The clonk of reinforced soles on stone accompanied the group wherever they went. They first came across a large chute going down into an empty pool far below and no one suggested climbing down the vertiginous walls.

**//There will be an access tunnel nearby.**

The plan was split into sections, forcing the One Hundreds to pass through empty archways when going from one section to another. Viv remembered where they were and hoped they would not have to use them. As Solfis had promised, they found circular stairs diving into the abyss. It was narrow enough that only one man could walk at a time, at least with those massive sets of armor. Once again, Viv was in the middle of the formation where she would be protected. She found herself relying more and more on her mana perception to track possible danger before it could jump on them. The narrow walls worried her the most, as they would give a brown caster an overwhelming advantage. For now, there was nothing unusual besides the low shimmer of her guardians' enchanted sets.

They delved deeper.

The next level started with all the chutes ending in a large open cave dug into the very stone. A large basin waited there, apparently designed to collect the 'black water'. Viv had to increase the intensity of the light to reach the farthest reaches.

"Can you keep this up, Your Grace?" Ban asked.

"Yes, though everything will know we're coming."

"Most of the stuff that lives underground doesn't like light much."

**//That is correct.**

"If the spell fades though, you'll be completely blinded, even with torches."

"It will not fade," Ban replied with conviction. "We will make sure of it."

"Alright."

Viv was genuinely impressed by the strength of his conviction. His men, plus Brick, continued with unerring discipline as they covered all angles and remained in a state of constant vigilance. It suddenly occurred to her that what they perceived and what she perceived were radically opposed impressions.

From her perspective, she was in a constant state of winging it through the many curveballs luck threw at her. All of her preparations served the singular purpose of giving her more options when shit hit the fan. The bank heist had been such an experience. The rumors Solfis returned spoke of one of the greatest deeds any thief had accomplished in that magical city. They'd put a fucking bucket on a golem's head to block its field of view! That was so bad, it was almost cartoonish.

While she didn't take herself too seriously, it had become abundantly obvious that her soldiers did.

And she could not let them down.

Feeling calmer, Viv continued to move with the rest of the team. Poacher kept telling her what she saw, which was nothing, while Solfis explained what they found.

**//This reservoir should lead into a series of increasingly small filters and cleaning vats.**

"Using enchantments?"

**//Yes.**

**//Sinur's Gate was rich.**

**//Keeping this system working required little effort to them.**

**//Unfortunately, most of the purification work was done by strands of mushrooms selected by specific brown and life mages.**

**//They will have long died out.**

"A shame."

**//The city's mage population can make up for inefficiencies while we come up with a solution.**

"They won't like that," Poacher commented.

Viv had to agree. Mages were high in the social pyramid while sewer cleaners lurked at the bottom, metaphor intended. If there were any issues, she would reactivate the enchantments themselves. How could one be considered inferior when they kept the city clean and promoted general hygiene? How could a worker be considered the lowest of the low when there were people who made loud phone calls at the restaurant? She would lead by example.

They kept moving through smaller series of reservoirs, rune circles still visible on the walls and ceilings. Once again, the sluice gates had melted and the only remaining signs of spell circles were rusty deposits in hollow recesses. Viv only gave the circles a passing glance. They could be reconstituted later. They needed to finish the delve first.

They came across another safe room on the way, just as Solfis had predicted. The passage did not lead up but to the side, the exit probably somewhere on the cliff's surface. It took them another ten minutes of careful exploration before the purification basins finally led them to the final piece of the treatment process. A large passage with a very wide canal led forward to a cavern of awesome proportion.

Viv intensified the light until it touched rows of stalactites in the far end of the opening. From there, the natural formations seamlessly melded into a more rectangular cut wall to form a hollow pyramid pointing up, half natural, half excavated. The base, the entire bottom of the

cavern, hosted a reservoir that would rival an olympic swimming pool. A stone column emerged from its center in a vertiginous climb towards the apex of the room, only to break midway, leaving behind a disappointing gash like a broken tooth. The mana here was stronger. The air also smelled musty. Whatever enchantment Viv had felt when looking upon that great work faded immediately.

“Wait. Something ain’t right,” Poacher said, echoing her concerns.

Ban made a fist and the soldiers tightened their ranks, spears aimed forward towards the reservoir which, at first glance, contained nothing but the same white, crystallized remains as the rest.

Which made no sense.

Wait, no, Viv realized, if the spells had faded before the waters could be purified, it would make sense that some of the gunk would end up at the bottom before being cleaned.

Would it?

“Back up,” she whispered, and the formation walked away from the edge with small, careful steps.

But then, where were the undead? Sewers clearly had an ecosystem or there would not be so many countermeasures designed to stop it. Surely there was at least something alive down there before the cataclysm. So where were the undead?

Unless, of course, something had consumed them.

A glint attracted Viv’s attention to the white gunk covering everything. It was the same residue everywhere. Again, that was weird.

Unless, of course.

“It’s not human excrement,” Viv realized.

“Movement, ahead,” Poacher replied.

Something pulsed once, cracking the surface of pallid crust in a quake. A second turned fissures into deep ravines. Black goop erupted from the wounds in pungent eruptions. As if an abscess was pierced, the smell of corruption escaped from the open sore and assaulted Viv’s nose in a revolting tide, an atrocious stench to overshadow even the most necrotic wounds. It was an odor that revolted the brain until the only possible option became fleeing. Already, someone was throwing up and it was all Viv could do not to join them despite her will and constitution.

Something broke the surface. The creature reared up like a flaccid snake, tossing purulent pieces of rotting matter across the room. Decaying gray flesh in bulbous assemblies supported a headless maw filled like a pit with hundreds of inward-facing brittle fangs.

## //Depth worm.

It was undead, Viv felt, and so she did her best to fight back. Had to cover the One Hundred while they recovered from the shock. Her danger sense and perceptions screamed at her and she let her experience guide her mind.

“Yoink!”

It was surprisingly easy to drag back the black mana this time. Viv felt a fugacious, deceitful flash of hope in her heart before the link she’d hit disintegrated.

The head smashed onto the reservoir below with a screech, still alive. From the bisecting wound, hundreds of putrescent maggots erupted, spewed all over them in a doom rain.

“Oh my GODS! Blight! Werfer!”

Viv coated herself in black mana to stop the stench, then she her fastest area denial spells in quick succession but it would not be enough and—

“Hah!”

Against all odds, Brick smashed her shield on the stone, then stood her ground.

A strange pull sent Viv back into the realm of clarity.

Right. This was a monster. Fight the monster.

Her soul rose, reigniting Ban’s mind with the fires of leadership. They had no need to speak at this point. They knew what to do.

Her spell tore into the thickest mass of creatures, voiding them where they flew. The blight continued its path towards the twisting remains of the depth worm’s lower extremity as it still vomited torrents of ravenous spawn. She inspected one.

[Undead depth worm hatchling]

Not too dangerous. She had to focus on the head now crawling towards them.

“The side!” Poacher said.

Hatchlings were climbing through the empty canal towards the passage they were standing on.

“Back up,” Ban ordered, and Viv agreed.

The squad stayed in formation while Viv obliterated most of the hatchlings. The rest swarmed over the heavies and the soldiers... cut them apart.

With cold efficiency, the back ranks placed their pilums over the head of their companions and punched creatures from the air before they could land. Other hatchlings bounced against runic shields, or they were smashed down or pierced midair by expert spear lunges. The One Hundred fought methodically, systematically, with the well-honed precision of a deadly machine. The display calmed Viv down and let her focus on the head still making its way towards her. The first young spell failed. In answer, she floated a bit above the air to give herself a better field of view.

“Hyperbeam.”

A concentrated ray of annihilation carved a narrow path through rotting flesh. Viv used the tiny opening to connect with the worm’s head.

It was powerful, but nowhere as powerful as a necrarch. And now that Viv had found what was left of the brain, the creature’s resilience worked against it. She cut off the toothy top of the head, leaving the rings flopping aimlessly on the ground.

Meanwhile, the squad was still falling back. Poacher used a saber to cut at all the hatchlings trying to climb from the sides, though they were few now that they were away from the main corpse. Once Viv was certain the main body was no longer a danger to them, she turned her attention to the swarm.

A summary blight purged the canal from one end to another, then a second casting spread over the disgusting main reservoir scathing it from end to end. The heavy gas dug into the crater in a greedy shroud. A few last castings and spear thrusts disposed of the last wriggling survivors. The battle ceased due to a lack of combatants. Silence returned to the despoiled battlefield. Viv removed her coating and regretted it in the same instant. With the threat of imminent death no longer needling her on, her willpower finally succumbed. She leaned forward and regurgitated her entire breakfast.

“Oh no, don’t—”

Poacher joined her mid-retch. None of the heavies stooped so low as to join them.

“Oh that was—”

Viv’s second attempt didn’t fair much better than the first. Solfis picked her bodily, then the squad walked out of the reservoir where the air was comparatively fresher. To be fair, a public toilet at the end of a rave would have smelled better than this.

“Let’s... let’s never, ever, ever mention this battle again,” Viv hiccuped.

No one objected.

**//A sanitization team will have to be dispatched.  
//They must be made aware of the circumstances.**

“You do it. I couldn’t give it justice without swearing for a solid ten minutes.”

Poacher summoned some water from thin air to clean her mouth, something Viv couldn’t do. Ban discreetly did the same for one of his men who had faltered at the beginning of the battle. Viv felt extremely sorry for the One Hundred because she could guess they would be trained to avoid such a problem in the future and she would rather lick a cactus than submit herself to stench conditioning.

Then they waited.

They waited for Viv.

“Hm, so, I think we’ve mapped out everything. We can return now.”

“As you say, ma’am. Formation, march!”

“A word, if you please?”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

Viv walked next to Ban while the squad headed back as if nothing had happened. From their expressions, it was just another day at work. She used a sound spell for privacy.

“So, Brick. She just stood there and that grounded me, somehow? Is that a special ability?”

“We don’t know, Your Grace. We just know that Brick does not run. Let me say that again, ma’am, because this is important. Brick. Never. Runs. And because she doesn’t move, others will not move either. We saw terrible things in the deadlands. I remember... I remember a dead woman with her stillborn child...”

He shook his head, chasing away traumatic memories.

“We’ve seen the worst of the worst. Trust me. She never falters. I don’t even know if she can.”

“Have you asked her how she can stand her ground like that?”

“I did. And she looked me right in the eyes, and she said: because you didn’t order me to move, sah!”

Viv pondered that for a little while. She’d met an entity more terrifying than herself, once again.

**//Finally.**

**//The perfect infantrywoman.**

“It isn’t so.”

**//If you insist, Your Grace.**

\*\*\*

Sidjin and Abe volunteered to work on restoring the sewers. When Viv thanked them profusely for it, they admitted that they'd been working on a colorless approach to water purification and needed a testing ground for it. This obviously annoyed Viv very much, however they placated her by agreeing to drink the first glasses they would deem safe.

Honestly, Viv wasn't sure she could ever touch anything coming from that hellhole without the haunting memory of 'eau de rotten worm ass' teasing her nostrils. Just the thought sent her reeling. Sidjin also begged her to explain what had gone wrong. She categorically refused. Nobody wanted to mention 'the sewer incident' again, especially Viv, not since she'd found a piece of ancient gunk sticking to her hair.

This also led Viv to an uncomfortable realization as she saw Sidjin walk up to the room he'd selected for himself.

She was taking him for granted. And being an ass.

"Hey, Sidjin, can we talk?"

"Of course, Viviane."

"In my room."

"Oh," he replied more seriously. "This kind of talk."

"Yeah."

Viv made her way to the royal bedroom. Solfis deployed and left to give them the illusion of privacy. It was a nice bedroom she had, possibly the most luxurious quarters she'd ever had. The canopied bed, dressers and chests were still rudimentary and yet the care put into each object, each tapestry and each ribbon gave it a loving, cared for presence that Viv didn't quite deserve yet. She'd been moving a lot and never settling. Maybe it was time to make a home for the foreseeable future. It was also very safe, with wards and solid doors. The two sat next to a short coffee table Viv hadn't had the time to use. Sidjin boiled them two cups of klod.

"Look, first, let's talk about the job part. I want to get it out of the way. You've been helping people around and I haven't even paid you. Or given you a title. And let's be honest, you'd be overqualified for my job."

"Oh, no, the role of ruler requires sets of skills I am no longer willing to employ. And besides, I am having far more fun coming up with innovative technologies with Abe. Even Solfis grudgingly agreed that we have surpassed some Harrakan standards."

"Hah! You pair of... obsessive people."

There were no terms for nerds on Nyil. Maybe she ought to create one.

“And yes if you do want to give me a job, I’d happily take one.”

“Are you staying for Harrak? Or are you staying for me?”

“They’re one and the same, darling. This used to be the frontier town of Kazar, along with its narrow fertile strip. Now, it’s a growing kingdom built on your vision. You even let folks pick their own representatives! How very, very subversive of you. The power of the people...”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Oh, but it is. Trust me. We are pushing back the deadlands. We are feeding families. We are regrowing arms, curing people, changing lives for the better when everywhere else, those in power would not give them the time of the day. I have repaired the wall of the orphanage in Kazar. The children, the way they looked at me. They were not afraid. They were dreaming. This world is gray, Viv. So long as you struggle for good, I’ll be by your side if you’ll have me. Don’t worry. I know we’re not perfect. What matters is that we all try. And keep trying even if we fall and fail.”

“Well then, I kind of want you to be the, uh, first archmage?”

“Really?” Sidjin asked with a knowing smile. He could read her pretty well.

“Oh, fine, I want you as Prince Consort. However! I... I no longer know you.”

She deflated. The first time, she’d pushed Sidjin into the relationship but now, it felt strange for her to do the same when she’d been the one to stop it. They had drifted away after the arena fiasco and Rakan’s near demise. His scar, his hands, they were familiar yet foreign.

“We can take it slowly. Very slowly. The first time, you seduced me with great confidence. Allow me to return the favor. After all, in my culture, the prince courts the princess. Not the other way around.”

“Oh. That sounds pretty nice.”

“I will also act as your second staff on the field of battle. That means I will handle one of the shield arrays. I also have an idea to make your tercio formation even more effective.”

“I am intrigued.”

“Good, that is how it all starts.”

He kissed her on the cheek and left, leaving behind a perfume like clove and fresh soap.

“You smooth bastard.”

\*\*\*

Viv expected she'd have to put out a lot of fire but that was without counting Lady Azar's management abilities. With her growing army of helpers, the experienced politician handled most difficulties from trade disagreement to underhanded election tactics, leaving Viv to deal with the weird and unique. Essentially, Azar provided management while Viv provided vision. Harrak had managed well while she was away and it continued to do so now that she was here dealing with issues she was best suited to solve. The first was limb regrowth.

Just like before, many experts had joined her banner and continued to do so in exchange for the promise of affordable surgery. Contrary to before, the number of warriors had decreased in favor of a more diverse cast. One of the smiths had lost most of his fingers in a fire. A jeweler's elbow had healed badly after it was broken by a rival. More came because their families needed help, especially children. She healed a small girl disfigured by a dog attack on her second day and that had been a delicate operation. After a week of this, Viv realized it would be better with help.

So she taught Abe.

The almost alive person had a knack for black mana. He only needed the change aspect, which was granted to him in a limited manner after a divine insight came from Enttiku. Viv would never forget his eyes turning pitch black and his face twisting in a rictus of beatific ecstasy. Disturbing as all hell. In any case, Abe could not regrow limbs without the help of Enttiku's clergy since he could not manage the divine healing himself. He was still very slow compared to Viv but there was progress.

Day after day, Viv regrew fingers, legs, hands, toes, knees, even the occasional eye and left people crying with joy in the arms of their relatives. There were hundreds of them coming when called to experience this miracle. It was possibly the most gratifying experience she'd had in her life.

The other gratifying experience, though a little tedious, consisted in building more mana-conversion pillars. Some of her staff suggested moving the pillars deeper into the deadlands but Viv fiercely opposed that idea, stating that should parts of the perimeter fail, black mana would pour through the gap corrupting humans and crops alike. Making new pillars was not particularly taxing and they were designed to recharge themselves anyway, so she could just leave the old one in place and they would reactivate if needed. Viv was much more concerned about sabotage and failure than she was about her time. Redundancies existed for a reason. It also took a while for life to return to a recently cleared section, which meant that she had to place pillars first and then the land would become arable weeks, sometimes months later.

"It is possible that the conversion speed will decrease the farther we are away from the Deadshield woods and its life-enhancing effects," Sidjin observed one day.

“One more reason to work fast while we are not too busy.”

A model was left to the new mages just so they could learn how to do it but Viv got a dose of realism when it became obvious that the girls had suffered a lot under Elunath’s tyranny and it would take a long time for many of them, and much therapy from Abe, before they could just go and plant obelisks in the deadlands.

It took Viv over a month before the influx of patients and most of ward work slowed to a trickle. By then, summer would happen soon and with it, the harvest. During the harvest, many soldiers would ask for leave to return to help their families. Viv had limited time to train them before this happened so she decided to make the most of it.

“We have a problem,” she told her staff the night before. “We lack a general.”

They looked at each other, then at her. Sidjin nodded thoughtfully.

“I’m not a general,” she said. “It’s not my path. I receive training in tactics and strategy at the Academy and I studied warfare on Earth but I know very little about maneuvers, logistics, everything else that matters. Hell, even fortifying a spot is beyond me. We need a general.”

“And unless we get an unexpected defection, we won’t have one.” Sidjin said.

Farren grabbed the map of Param and placed it on the table between them. The angelic young man took a serious countenance.

“I believe you are mistaking the roles of general and strategist, Viviane the Oulander. A strategist belongs to a very specific path that has become quite rare following the fall of the empire, simply because it works best, nay, it requires directing an army and is therefore very specialized. A general leads the men. Remember Constable Tarano?”

Of course Viv remembered. She’d shoved an excalibur through his chest.

“You do. Well, he didn’t have a general path yet he still commanded the loyalist army, and he did so pretty well. Nous-granted skills are not what usually makes a great leader though social skills help. It is, in fact, a combination of many factors.”

“That makes sense.”

“The most important of which is that your people follow you and you have us as well. We will have to work together for success and we will. If a strategist does show up, all the better. In the meanwhile, nothing replaces drills.”

“Alright.”

\*\*\*

The army gathered on the plain outside Sinur's Gate, on the undead side where little would grow. Even here, at the foot of the cliff, some revenants still found a way to wander within view. The army ignored them so long as they were not in range. Viv opened with a sound enchantment, eager to begin.

"Soldiers of Harrak, we have been tested before and we have come up the victors because we were superior. Superior in discipline, in equipment, in preparation. Superior in motivation. There is only one aspect where we cannot compete, and that aspect is numbers.

"Every drop of Harrakan blood we shed must be paid dearly. Every life we have lost must be remembered and avenged. Your lives are precious to Harrak, they are precious to me, and so I have come up with what I believe will best leverage our strength to achieve the only acceptable result: overwhelming victory."

"Harrak eternal!"

Viv waited for the exclamations to calm down. Once again, the Children of the Scale had led with their enthusiasm, no doubt buoyed by the very smug presence of Arthur at Viv's side. The dragoness left her bank to motivate her minions for at least an hour. They were overjoyed.

That annoyed Viv just a little bit.

"We will fight the way we have always fought: by backing and protecting each other. By combining our strengths until they become something greater. We will be forming a Tercio. The heavies shall block the enemies and fight them directly. The marksmen and women shall deliver death from afar. As for the casters, we will protect you with our portable shields and unleash arcane destruction on our foes.

"In order to do that, we must first train until we are not soldiers but a well-oiled machine of war: an army. It will be tedious but I assure you, when ranks of our foes fall upon us and fail, you will remember this day fondly. Let's begin."

The idea behind the Tercio was simple in principle yet difficult to execute. Tercios were created by the Spanish Habsburg Empire at the apex of its military might. Ranks of armored pikemen would form a square while mobile groups of arquebusiers, later musketeers, would shoot from within. The tercios enjoyed the staying power of heavy infantry and the range power of firearms which the formation protected well. They were also highly capable on offense while able to defend assaults from any direction, especially if deployed in echelons of several formations.

Viv would replace pikemen with heavies and arquebusiers with witch pact and hoped it would work. The only issue was that armies at that time had unreliable artillery while Nyil had mage formations. It would be easy for them to annihilate expensive and precious Harrakan heavies. Viv's solution was the portable shield array.

Yries metal constructs were not, in fact, tanks. They were metal wagons powered by mana engines. The Yries thought they'd keep the method secret but Viv could read mana easily,

too easily, so she knew they functioned on cores. Each wagon was about as long as a Hummer, though narrower. They also kept a rather high profile. The back of the tank was dedicated to the engine, the front to a driver seat, and the top to whatever the yries wanted to fit on there. They moved off four large metal wheels.

The yries usually fit catapults and ballista, however they'd built three shield arrays according to Viv's design, powering them with the large black mana cores she had found during her necrarch hunt. They functioned by themselves but they worked better with a mage around who could recharge the core.

The most basic exercises consisted in having the soldiers simply form around the tanks. Viv elected to take the center one with the One Hundred in front simply because they were the most powerful formation. She picked the Children of the Scales to make up the rest of the square because that was, she believed, the safest spot. For the range company, she picked the Sisters of the Eye since they were the best marksmen. The right flank was traditionally the most dependable so she gave it to the Mountain Sons who had proven they were highly coordinated along with the support of the Bitter Hearts. The left flank had the Fingers supporting the Hightree Company. Both bodies boasted the most versatile fighters gathered from veterans. She was certain they would be the most responsive and adaptive block of her army. Lana joined, to Viv's surprise, and went with the right flank while Sidjin took the left with easy confidence.

The first part went well. The soldiers learned to go from column to squares in good times. Viv just showed the officers what needed to be done and they made it happen. She climbed in her tank and activated it, out of curiosity, after they'd formed squares. The construct lit up beautifully and a huge, transparent circle formed a dome over the assembled troops to their delight. A few stragglers walked in as they were a little too far to be covered. Out of curiosity, Viv infused the shield with black mana. It took a lot of energy to feed the large construct but she managed it for a few seconds without problems. The issue was that no one could see anything.

Lana and Sidjin activated their own which turned a little blue and quite shiny, respectively. The machines worked. The mood improved as a result.

"Alright, now let's start moving!"

The rest of the day was spent simply marching in formation, then holding. Just as she'd planned, the three Tercios were echeloned with her own being slightly forward. By the first day's end, they were able to move forward and fall back while keeping the formation functional.

What surprised Viv the most was how thoroughly disciplined everyone was. She'd expected some sort of issue but each company was attempting to outdo the others in terms of performance, and they really took the exercise seriously.

The second day was much the same but with lateral movements which ended in disaster the first few times. Then, Viv had the Tercios move independently. At the end of the day, she

tested the shield's power in front of everyone by sitting inside her own tank and having Sidjin and Lana bombard her. She invited others to try and this turned into a game.

Stones and spells smashed into Viv's shield first by the soldiers, then more joined from spectators coming from the city. By the time night fell, all of the girls including a giddy Rakan and his students had gathered to throw everything they had at Viv who merely bothered to look cool while using the Aspect of the Guardian skill to beef up her shield. The diversion worked well to alleviate boredom and the next days kept going with the same patient determination as the others.

Once Viv was confident people could move, she tried to have them charge forward for the first time. The first few attempts actually succeeded, although the shield could not follow. The tanks didn't have enough acceleration. Viv could only offset this by having the shield move forward before the charge started. It wasn't a perfect workaround, however.

"We will improve next designs. We promise," her yries pilot assured her. "More death. Faster. Add spikes in the front."

Viv glared at the yries who remained the very picture of owlish innocence. She recognized him as the same lad who'd piloted the drill, the one that pierced the walls of Kazar during her very first campaign. He was just as unhinged now as he'd been back then. She suspected the bioweapon yries group were a gathering of murderous whack jobs by their society's standards. She wondered what that meant.

"Ok? So long as it can keep up."

"Yes, keep up, and smash into humans."

Viv glared harder.

"The bad humans."

"I have my eyes on you."

\*\*\*

"We regret to inform you that the Manipeleso Bank and Exchange will not assist you in recovering Elunath's money, nor make the attempt, for the simple reason that you have been stripped of all rights in Helock and branded a criminal."

Viv shrugged. She suspected as much but it was worth a try.

"Make no mistakes, we have already refused their attempt to seize your belongings. For the same reason, we cannot request them to comply with their own laws because, in the end, the interpretation of their laws is their prerogative. It would be a waste of lawyers' fees to try to convince a government to work against their own interests for the sake of 'honesty'."

"I figured it might set a bad precedent."

“It would set a terrible precedent to reward an aggressor for being clever. I can only congratulate you on your victory and hope you took everything that wasn’t nailed down.”

“I did my best.”

\*\*\*

After two weeks of constant practice, the army could do as she wanted so she started shuffling formations, changing one company for another. It turned out that not much changed so the time came to test the army in the field. They gathered some rations, then Viv distributed her brand new invention.

Portable radios.

Those were actually communicating devices mounted on helmets and, if she had to be absolutely honest, okay, not her invention. However, though the Paramese already used communication in the field, those were mostly made using spells and horn signals. The ability to communicate complex orders should help. It took a bit of getting used to but eventually, she had a system in place where officers could listen in on orders and activate the secondary module to reply.

Feeling rather confident, they traveled north, stopping regularly to practice deploying in places where there was simply not enough space to fight normally. This forced the squares to become more compact, or to temporarily disband while going through a chokepoint. After that came the real test: actual battle.

Using a life beacon, Viv attracted a rather large force of revenants to attack her people. Using her square as bait allowed the two other formations to charge to cover her back. Viv made sure to kill revenants before anyone could really get hurt. It also revealed a new flaw in her formation: the lack of thickness.

One of the issues they had was almost a parity between lighter, shooting troops and heavies. This meant that the squares were relatively fragile if the marksmen were given enough room to move around. To remedy this situation, Viv had the Tercios practice heavier sides. That took a long time to get right. It was also at this point that Sidjin perfected his innovation: deployable forts. His idea was to create elevated platforms with crenelation from which the marksmen could shoot without having to do so over the ranks of the heavies. It was a great idea and they practiced its implementation. Although Viv could not do it as well as the others, eldritch walls still served the same purpose.

When they returned to Sinur’s Gate, they had an army capable of maneuvering albeit one that would still need to be tested in battle and improved upon. That was fine with Viv. She was in no rush to go to war.

The first message upon her return came, to her surprise, from Irao.

“King Sangor of Enoria wants to come visit.”

“Ah. And I assume he is not very pleased.”

“You assume very well,” Irao replied, sarcasm going over his head. “He is coming with two thousand men.”

“Wait, is this war?”

“No. This is intimidation.”

“Doesn’t he know? I’m an intimidation expert.”

## Chapter 151: Sovereign meeting

“So, he is warning us.”

Viv stood in the council chamber of her palace with Enoria’s official letter in front of her. The room overlooked the deadlands and offered a perpetual background of roiling clouds above the distant, shambling shapes of revenants. It was not a pleasant view. She kept it that way on purpose.

People leaned over the nice parchment. It did look nice. It was polite, too.

*“To Lady Viviane,*

*It shall be my honor to visit you in your territory on the fifteenth day of the month of seeding, along with my retinue.”*

The rest was the typical signature and honorifics the Paramese nobles were fond of using in their correspondence. Viv immediately nodded a few important points. Meanwhile, Farren had an opinion.

“If he’s announcing a visit, he will not attack. The Temple of Neriad would consider this a grave violation of the sacred laws of negotiation. The presence of so many soldiers is a display of strength.”

“No,” Viv interrupted. “You cannot think that.”

“Pardon me?”

She pointed at the letter.

“Sangor never mentions Harrak or even Kazar. That means he doesn’t recognize us as a people. That’s one. Two, you cannot rely on rulers following treaties because everything is a question of cost and opportunity. If Sangor decides it is better to reabsorb us and face the

consequences for years rather than let us exist, he will attack. And three, regardless of the likelihood of an actual attack, we cannot afford not to react in kind. If there is even a sliver of chance his army will strike us, we must be ready for it.”

Sidjin nodded in approval. Farren looked disappointed but not exactly combative.

“I concede your main point, which is that we must prepare for war regardless of Sangor’s intentions.”

“He might fabricate a *casus belli*,” Lady Azar added. “It has been done before, at least in Baran. Duke Sotti recently slew a recalcitrant baron at a party using the excuse of insubordination. He made penance, paying weregild to the man’s widows. He still regained control of the barony in the end because his actions were legally justified. We are not recognized by the Paramese alliance for now. Sangor can do with us as he pleases with only a slap on the wrist.”

“Right,” Viv said. “Then we are in agreement. I will meet him as he requests... with the army.”

“And the levies?”

“That won’t be needed.”

Lady Azar considered the question.

“The space before Sinur’s Gate would be a decent place for a meeting. It has room for all of their soldiers. It would also let them see our prosperity so that they speak of it when they return home. Kazar was always considered a frontier. Now, the deadlands have been pushed back.”

“We will do no such a thing. I’m not letting them take a single step on our land where they’ll get a chance to get rowdy. Never will we be at the mercy of a superior opponent if we can stop them before they can reach us. We will meet...”

She pointed at the halfway lake, the only safe stopping place on the path through the Deadshield Woods. Viv had split the teleport path in two there specifically to act as a sort of airlock, with one gate leading to Aneston in Enoria, and the other to Kazar.

“...there.”

“There is barely enough space for a couple hundred men!”

“Not to worry. I will make the room.”

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Viv emerged from the witch gate into the depths of the woods, where one may lose themselves forever. Going from the expanse of tamed land to the pulsating, vivid heart of the

forest disorientated her. Dense mana covered every tree, seeped through every crevice in their urge to make things grow. There was a life there that even dragons could not quench. There was death as well, death in the soil and in the claws of the many predators haunting the boughs. Towering corpses surrounded the lake on all sides. The only signs of civilization were the black smears on the grass, remains of recent fires. Of the catastrophic damage the blaze drones had inflicted on this patch of land during Lancer's attack, nothing was left. The Deadshield Woods stood eternal and the nations of men ought to be grateful it was content with what it had.

Sidjin emerged from the gate at her side, grumbling about witch magic and the lack of respect for traditional spellcasting. Arthur arrived a second later through her own portal because she wanted to show off.

"Right, darling. Only two days before they show up. How would you like to proceed?"

"First, we get some intimacy."

Viv gestured and the far witch gate deactivated, the path closed until she decided otherwise.

She could simply stay like that. It was likely Sangor didn't have the material or supplies to cross the woods which had always been a perilous affair until Viv's generous contribution. But she wouldn't. Because it was not about being difficult. It was about sending a message.

"There, we won't be bothered until I say so. Second, we make space."

"And how would we do that?" the Red Mist of Glastia asked with a knowing smile.

"We burn it all down to the fucking ground."

'SQUEE!'

And so the terrible work began.

Tactical spells designed to turn companies into paste tore through majestic trunks and heavy branches with undeserving fury. Trees buckled. Rocks flew. Sometimes, unlucky harriens and colorful birds were caught, too stupid to understand the destruction coming for them. A rolling wave of force, fire, and death shredded through square kilometers of land without respite in a great din that sent the wildlife stampeding away to safety. At some point, Rakan came with his pupils and decided it was a great exercise. Abe also came with the ladies and decided that a cathartic exercise in deforestation was 'a refreshing task that unlimbered the legs and promoted the free expression of one's magical might in a safe environment'.

That turned out to be a little untrue when a mighty roar shook the very earth. A titanic being crashed through the undergrowth, a hunched creature covered in growths and rocks like a moving ridge. It glared at Viv from small beady eyes deeply embedded in a craggy face barely discernible from its surroundings. Lianas and stones floated around it, seeking a foe. Viv inspected it.

[Antalis Queen, dangerous, natural brown caster]

She looked angry.

“Did you expect we would attract such attention?” Sidjin asked without much concern.

“Expect? I was counting on it. I’ll make you queen of my dinner, you legged knoll.”

The Antalis queen was strong, yet against the combined power of Viv, Sidjin, Arthur, Abe, and Rakan, that strength did very little.

After they killed it, Viv stared at the hole she had dug in the creature’s face. She had used the hyperbeam spell, the one that offered the best penetration at range. It had not quite killed the creature in a single hit.

The beast’s fallen mass served as a reminder that it was just one of the many predators inhabiting the forest, and although they were deep, it was still nothing compared to the true heart far north of here. There would always be a bigger fish, but for now, they remained in control of the field.

The next part was much less fun so only Sidjin and Viv worked on it, and they did so for hours. Cutting and burning was all well and good. It would not create a flat space suitable to stand on. The eldritch wall spell proved to be a good alternative to brown mana in getting a flat, serviceable surface.

The two worked for the entire day, then through much of the night. Irao arrived the next morning confirming Sangor would arrive the day after, shortly before noon, along with his two thousand men.

“They have three hundred and twenty-six knights and six hundred and fifty-eight archers. I counted them myself.”

“Thank you.”

“You are welcome. I am leaving now. Goodbye.”

“Take care!”

The timing would be fine. At dawn, Viv called for the army which was camping in the plains of Kazar. They showed up eager and excited. The deployment was made with a festive mood, even with a non-negligible risk of war. In fact, they seemed to be looking forward to it. Witchpact companies outdid each other with war paints while the heavies made sure their spear pennants were fluffy and clean for maximum floating-in-the-breeze effect. The best part was when Sidjin approached Viv with a nice chest.

“What is it? Ooooooh my old armor. Very — OH MY GODS THERE ARE TINY HOLES FOR MY WINGS!”

*Not true wings.*

“Hush you. Sidjin, thank you so much. I was just thinking that I have returned to my normal height. Excellent. I’m never pulling the wings back in again. It’s just so comfortable to have them hanging around.”

“You do enjoy things that hang around.”

“Silence,” Viv hissed. “Not in front of the child.”

*I know what mating is.*

“They grow up so fast. Anyway. Let me put this on.”

Viv’s old armor was half enchanted robe and half fashion statement. The enchantments were made of silverite, the second half of what she’d gotten from Solfis’ hangar. It was very precious and the work of Helock’s best tailors. Between this and her skinsuit, she felt properly dressed.

“Maybe I should buy enchanted boots.”

*Boots are stupid. Feet are stupid.*

“Maybe I’ll make them out of insolent white dragon scales.”

*Noooooooooo!*

\*\*\*

Sangor hated the ‘witch gates’. He hated them because they’d popped on his land without his knowledge or approval. He hated them because they made such things as borders, forts, and logistics less relevant. Mostly, he hated them because they were a powerful tool in a rival as unpredictable as she was frustrating.

And now he would have to use one.

The strange circle lit up when Yrlin of the Thorns touched it. His paramour gave him a smile that showed her canines, her usual, before stepping in along with a detachment of knights. She returned a moment later.

“It’s working. Oh, and she’s expecting us. Try not to let it get to you, hmm? We do not want to gawp in front of the social climber.”

Sangor could read between the lines.

“Captain, stay here and make sure the men understand they are carrying the dignity of Enoira as they go through the gate. We will be deploying in defensive formation against infantry. I expect the highest standards of professionalism.”

“Understood, sir.”

Sangor had brought some of his best along with capital troops from the south, in theory loyal but untested as they were on the other side during the war. Besides Yrlin, the only high-ranking member of his retinue was Edwin Milderry, from Green Edge, who had insisted on coming to see how ‘that ballsy young witch’ was doing. He offered a nice counterpart to Bishop Reno who had the the privilege of being the representative of the Church of Maranor and the highest-ranking asshole Sangor couldn’t afford to have publicly flogged. At least, the witch gates would make the trip shorter. Silver linings.

Sangor breathed in when nobody could see him, then he walked through.

The feeling was disorienting but brief and he soon found himself in the middle of the Deadshield Woods’ path to the Old Empire.

Despite warnings, it was all he could do not to appear affected. His leadership guided him into the appearance of a confident sovereign riding down the slope on a mighty warhorse, barded in armor. The very symbol of Enoria. Elite knights surrounded him as he took in the surroundings.

It was a vision of the apocalypse.

Where he expected a maze of trees and leaves, the land was flat for hundreds of paces in every direction, broken, ravaged. Black smoke rose through the late spring air in ominous columns where the fires had not yet died. The ground was dark and twisted, flat, tamed and clawed by powerful destructive magic. It was a display of destructive power that should have cost enough mana to raze a fortress and they’d done it as a warning. And in the middle of all that devastation stood the Harrakan army, and he knew, in this moment, that he would not take the deadlands by force.

Rows of heavy infantry in black armor stood in grim formations, white pennants floating in the wind the only signs they were not statues. Masses of crossbowmen and... yes, those were women, grinned at them from behind the lines or from the top of earth barricades built with magic, their features hidden behind morbid face paints like southern savages. War machines occupied the back ranks and the core of the formation. All and all, over a thousand five hundred combatants waited in well-prepared positions, slightly up the slope. They watched the Enorians line up on the plains and they seemed... eager. Eager and amused. He inspected them to confirm what his instincts told him.

An old woman with a goofy smile.

[Bitter Heart Markswoman]

A skull-faced girl with a massive crossbow decorated with silver patterns.

[Elder Sister of the Eye]

A bearded man with scars and a two-handed longsword on his back.

[Hightree Heavy Linebreaker]

They already had military traditions. Neriad's bollocks, that wasn't bad for such a short time. Out of curiosity, he concentrated on the war machines.

[Shrill catapult, fire wasps]

What the fuck?

Just as he focused on another, a shape in a black cloak appeared out of nowhere near his target. It was a bald man with strange yellow eyes and an axe on his back. The man glared at him, made a throat-slitting gesture, then disappeared again. A Hadal. The reports were true.

Right, no more inspections.

The witch was waiting for them.

In the middle of the clearing, someone had erected a large tent. A group of knights in black armor formed a half-circle around it, as was tradition in negotiations. The witch was waiting for him on a comfortable, slightly saggy couch along with a few people he didn't recognize. There was a northerner in mage garb, a severe Baranese woman with prim gray hair, the horrendous bone golem, and the young dragon who had, and he had to double check, golden ribbons on her black horns. The witch waved when he looked. She was one of three people who actually moved out of the hundreds of glaring people. The second was a stout lad cutting meat out of the belly of a colossal dead beast sporting wounds that would have destroyed a fortress gate. The last one was one of the ugliest women he had ever seen. She was grilling meat skewers, fanning them and rubbing them with oil. He had to compose himself not to be taken aback by the outrageous display.

"The hills behind us are trapped with black mana constructs," Yrlin chuckled. "Do try not to aggravate her too much?"

"Can you disarm them?"

"Yes but she will feel it and it will be an act of war. The man by her side is the fallen prince of Glastia, Sidjin the Red Mist."

Right. Do not provoke the witch. Easy.

As he approached, he noted the more alien elements of her appearance. The armor already set the tone but the monstrous eyes and shadow limbs confirmed she was now an elemental archmage of the black color. The first in recorded history. It didn't take a mage to feel the power radiating from her, even at a distance. He watched those emerald circles in her black sclera and felt an alien amusement, an intellect both unhinged and soaked in the

otherworldly knowledge she spread around like a peasant spreads seed, eager to see what would take root.

A cynical part of him harped on that he should have killed her when he'd met her, that outlanders were always a mess. He had not, because he had not risen to power by killing the unknown. He had harnessed it. She had been... less important at that time. He had been on the verge of triumph with Tarano trapped like a rat in Green Hedge. There was no reason for him to care about her anymore when he had finished a war that had started while he was just a child. Now... some things had changed. None for the best.

The witch didn't stand up to receive him, though she smiled invitingly as she gestured to the seats. The ugly old woman brought another two from somewhere behind the ranks of black-clad knights. Sangor recognized Rollo, a famed Baranese champion renowned for his jousting prowess as well as his love for another man. Truly, Harrak had embraced different norms.

"Welcome, welcome. Take a seat, all of you. Thank you, Gogen. Nice to see you again Milderry! We started on the skewers before you arrived. They're best when hot. Tea?"

"With pleasure," Sangor replied.

It would be rude to refuse. It would also play in her favor. He sat on a straight-backed chair of decent enough make since it didn't groan under the weight of his armor. Yrlin sat daintily by his side, hand caressing her pregnant belly. Milderry crashed in his seat with a roaring laughter while Bishop Reno refused the invitation altogether.

Sangor expected it. Maranor favored power and until she was recognized, she would remain a traitor and a revolutionary in Her eyes. Of course, all the witch had to do was welcome the clergy of the Goddess of Power in her domain but so far, she'd neglected to do so.

The witch glared at the bishop, a reptilian gaze that said nothing. She picked a skewer and bit it, teeth digging in the juicy flesh of an apex monster. Now, she was seated and comfortable and eating in front of a man who remained at parade rest, an insult and a show of control. The bishop bristled. Sangor felt like sighing. The clergyman was reaping the consequences of his decision.

Sometimes, dogma went in the way of situational intelligence, he observed.

"Antalis Queen! It is good for me, beloved," Yrlin said.

A breach of protocol. The two women were thoroughly enjoying themselves needling the poor bishop and Sangor's own patience.

"Have some more!"

The Gogen woman placed a large platter in front of the dragon, who picked a nice piece of meat on a stick between two delicate talons. Serrated rows of fangs that could bite through plate armor closed on it while the creature fixed her crimson, malevolent gaze on the bishop.

Alright, that was enough.

“Thank you for having me here. I believe this meeting was long overdue. This is my paramour and archwitch of the thorns, Yrlin.”

“We had the pleasure of meeting back in Green Hedge after you freed me. Congratulations are in order, I assume?”

“Thank you,” Yrlin replied. “And I see you still follow the Path of the Sun with... a lot of enthusiasm.”

“That was the war witch tradition, yes? I suppose I do then. On my side, please meet Baroness Azar, my chancellor.”

The prim lady nodded, her eyes calculating. Sangor knew who Azar was because she represented everything Enorians disliked about the old guard: smooth and cunning pursuit of power for its own sake. He had no idea what the witch had promised to get this career dire viper slithering in her bosom but he hoped it wasn't worth it.

“And this is Edwin Milderry, Duke of Green Edge.”

“That's some good meat! If you ever want to retire from the evil overlord gig, I have a position as a monster hunter available.”

“Oh, there is only enough room in Green Edge for one monster hunter. It's good to see you again.”

“Hah! And no matter what the others say, nice going with Tarano. That overinflated ego had a good twatting coming, he did.”

Sangor listened to the song of Bishop Reno's teeth grinding against each other.

“And here is Bishop Reno, of the Church of Maranor.”

“This is my daughter, She-Who-Feasts-on-Many-and-Creates-Much-Wealth. You know Solfis. And this is Sidjin, archmage and advisor. And my paramour.”

“Her name really is that long?” Yrlin asked with some curiosity, yet another breach of protocol.

*My claws are very long as well.*

*And my fire is very hot.*

“My apologies, I did not mean to criticize.”

“Could we have some intimacy?” Sangor interrupted.

“Of course,” the witch replied.

She waved and the air changed in quality. The sound of the wind died down. They could speak freely. Well, mostly freely.

“Let me get to the point. You have placed portals on my lands. This is a violation of my sovereignty and is therefore entirely unacceptable. You will cease.”

He gave her a pointed look. She shrugged.

“My safety was at risk. But sure, no problem.”

That told Sangor a few things. Either the witch didn’t intend to travel north again or she had ways to travel that didn’t need portals or she was confident she could hide them. Or any combination of the three, really. This was going to be a long day.

“Speaking of portals, General Jaratalassi suggested that I could create a network between our land and the Baranese frontier for the fast transfer of troops. I can build portals that others can activate with enough mana.”

“You have been invited to the Paramese alliance?” Sangor asked with disbelief.

“Yes. Jaratalassi requested reinforcements within the next few months. He has... concerns.”

“He always has concerns. How do you know old Steel Trap?”

“He was my teacher at the Academy and I served under him during the last Hallurian incursion.”

“I see. I was under the impression the incursion was repulsed.”

“Jaratalassi expressed doubts on account of the fact that only a single warlord attacked us.”

“Hmmm.”

Sangor considered his options. The witch casually dropped significant pieces of information as if she didn’t know what they implied. The Paramese alliance was a loosely aligned gathering of nations tasked with fighting off the Halurians with one implicit clause: if a member of the alliance was actively fighting on the frontier, the others would stop any conflict for the duration of the participation. Truces were not strictly enforced but violators would see themselves barred out of international agreements, not to mention attracting the ire of Neriad. The Righteous god seldom expressed his anger. When he did...

If Sangor pushed too hard, the witch could appeal to Baran through her pet court animal. It would be a disaster.

“Perhaps an arrangement can be made,” Lady Azar suggested. “Witch gates can be used by anyone and they can be easily maintained if Her Grace has access to them. Witch gate networks can be extremely profitable for trade since they allow the travelers to save weeks of transit, not to mention less risk. Moreover, any mage can activate one. I am certain a man of your talent would see the remarkable potential of a new means of transport.”

The bishop took a deep breath. The man could feel when power changed hands. That offer was of tremendous value, and the implications were significant. Yrlin warned him that it took an understanding of reality only few could grasp to replicate the spell. So far, only she and Sidjin could build such gates. It gave them an enormous bargaining chip.

It also meant that the first sovereigns to bow to the Harrakan witch would gain an enormous advantage at the cost of submission to what was essentially a monopoly on cheap logistics.

Sangor considered the question. Enoria’s mage corps was decimated. It would take decades to rebuild it. Meanwhile, the northern province already boasted an active gate system.

He had little choice in the matter.

“I assume you have conditions.”

“We would be interested in a trade agreement, a fair bargain, I assure you. Here are the terms,” Lady Azar said, and she passed him a sheet.

Those were lists of approved goods as well as tariffs. The gates would cost twenty-five gold talents a season per gate to maintain with rebates in case the witch used it for her own purposes, such as by moving her army. He would, of course, collect a toll on anyone trying to use the gate which meant merchants would bleed money into his pockets for several times the amount the witch was asking for. It was a fantastic deal that would make both sides rich.

He still nitpicked on the price of precious metals because he could not afford to agree on the spot. The bishop grumbled.

“Sir, I would advise against... premature decisions. With this...”

Pain in his fucking ass.

Sangor didn’t have to intervene, which he was still reluctant to do. Instead, the bone abomination everyone called a war golem but Sangor suspected was just a little bit more than that surged to its feet. Deployed, the creature was a gaunt, twisted entity taller than the tallest man with fingers ending in sharp knives. A voice like a snarl emerged from the engraved skull.

**//Diplomatic immunity does not cover clear insults.**

**//Watch your tongue.**

**//Or I will extract it from your broken jaws.**

For an instant, the dichotomy between the polite gathering and the presence of the golem became too much to bear for his fraying composure. A voice screamed in his mind that out of the five 'people' facing him, only Lady Azar and Sidjin were technically human. The witch's upsetting eyes and strange shoulder blades demonstrated that the rest of her features were just a mask. He could feel the mage control sphere, the space around them where they could control mana with as much ease as within their bodies, from across the table. And all of this was only the second most powerful tool in her arsenal.

The most powerful tool was how normal she made it seem.

And she didn't realize it.

Rollo, a knight who could have found employment anywhere in the northern cities, stood guard while Sidjin, one of the continent's best war mages, lounged comfortably in his seat. They were calm. And that was crazy, absolutely insane to him. For decades, Kazar had been a dot on the map, and afternote in books on the deadlands. And now an army of several different races using long-dead techniques and war machines the likes of which Param had never seen assaulted the deadlands for its plunder, pushing the curse back and turning the liberated soil into farms. All of that under the rule of an outlander elemental who might just be a little insane, whose ideas challenged everything they believed about governance. And they didn't question it. They didn't question how implausible this all was, and how if he'd not seen it with his bare eyes, he would never have believed. More than ten thousand refugees had crossed the forest in the past year alone and still more waited in Anelton for the witch gates to clear again. And some of those people could vote for actual representatives and those representatives themselves voted on things like taxes and this was accepted by her. It was actually a thing that they believed in and it worked and this was absolutely, completely out of this world. A dragon was the bloody heir to the bloody throne! What was next? Merl soldiers? Kark? A dragon minister? He didn't know and he was afraid that this was all. Absolutely. Possible.

Suddenly, Sangor just wanted to go back home to Losserec and leave the witch problem to someone else.

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Viv watched the group of four debating the merits of Lady Azar's sweet, sweet trap. Sangor seemed intrigued. Yrlin looked over his shoulder, skimming over the list while a hand remained protectively over her belly. The bishop still seethed in his armor while Milderry gobbled more meat, obviously bored out of his mind. She took another bite as well, the delicious juice titillating her palate.

She was feeling great.

They were falling for one of the oldest tricks in the book.

She would simply make it far too costly for others to invade her.

If Enoria had a trade network that relied on her, older means of transportation like caravans would disappear due to a lack of profitability. Resources would be transferred elsewhere. Caravan hands would operate in smaller groups. Maybe guards would transfer somewhere else. And then, attacking her would mean that the network would fall into disrepair when the spell inevitably weakened. That would paralyze the entire Enorian trade industry for at least a while, until they rebuilt the caravan network. Add that to her improving army and the alliance and she was becoming too painful to erase.

Her attention returned to Bishop Reno. He was still glaring daggers at her. And testing her patience.

“The clergy of Maranor doesn’t hold you in great esteem,” Sangor said without looking.

“Why? Is it because I’ve killed some of your priests? Don’t take it personally, I’ve killed a lot of priests. From Gomogog, Octas, Efestar, you name it.”

The Bishop was now on the verge of apoplexy. Viv had only named dark gods.

“And Neriad,” Sangor added drily.

Viv and Solfis replied in unison.

“He perished in the mine and the cause of death was determined to be mole monsters.”  
**//Her perished in the mine and the cause of death was determined to be mole monsters.**

“Squee.”

“YOU HEATHENS!”

“What the esteemed bishop means is that you have caused considerable damage to the cause by slaying champions that Maranor held in high regard,” Sangor added.

“During a negotiation,” the bishop forced out between gritted teeth.

Viv got a very strong feeling about the whole interaction.

And that strong feeling was that Sangor didn’t want to be here. The only person who apparently wanted to be here was the bishop. It was an interesting tidbit. Most of the time, someone sympathizing with her didn’t mean they would actually act on those sympathies. It was up to her to exploit this opportunity.

“This arrangement seems profitable to us both, especially if the Baranese agree.”

“I have an unofficial agreement with them to do so.”

“I agree in theory though I will only sign tomorrow after I have had time to consider the question.”

“Would you consider attending my coronation as well? It will happen very soon.”

“Not a chance,” Sangor replied with a pointed look while the Bishop reflexively flexed his blade hand.

Viv knew this was a tall order but she’d hoped.

“To be perfectly honest, we will only recognize you as an independent entity if we are the last ones in the continent to do so. No amount of money or teleportation will convince the wounded pride of my more conservative supporters. The humiliation that came with the deaths of Lancer and Tarano still lingers. I already shove arrows into invasion proposals every month. Do not push your luck.”

“The gates might turn opinions in your favor,” Yrlin said. “Walking can be so tedious. Especially for me!”

“The opinion of goodmothers might not sway the entire land,” Sangor told her in a tactful, low voice.

“Well my goodmother opinion better sway yours,” the archwitch of thorns replied.

Viv waited while Sangor came to the painful realization he’d walked right into that one.

“Hm. I don’t suppose you would be interested in a reunification?” he finally said though it was clear he didn’t believe it could be done.

“Is this a marriage proposal?” Viv asked. “Just kidding. Please do not look at me like that, Yrlin, I am not poaching.”

“Oh I would refuse it myself even if the nobles could tolerate a witch on the throne. The expectations they have of their wives! Dreadful.”

“Just so, though I anticipated you might ask and so I have prepared a little something.”

Viv gestured for Lady Azar to give them a sheaf of paper. The old baroness had a twinkle in her eyes that Viv knew she shared. Sangor read the first lines with much curiosity before his face fell into an expression of tired suffering. He passed the document to Milderry who went into a full belly laugh.

“The condition under which Enoria will be allowed to rejoin the Harrakan Empire,” he finally forced between two chuckles.

The discussion went on for a while after that though the tone was more casual. They smoothed a few aspects of the agreement, then Sangor requested a particularly heinous criminal to be turned over which Viv agreed on provided the clergy of Neriad determined he was guilty. The King of Enoria left shortly after, taking great care to help his paramour stand up. Milderry complained that they couldn’t stay for dinner until Viv invited him for a visit any

time he wanted. The Enorian expedition left the plain over the following hour. The Harrakans watched them leave with various degrees of satisfaction.

"I believe much better terms could have been agreed upon with better knowledge of Sangor's situation. We must consider a spy network with all haste," Lady Azar noted, thoughtful.

"It went pretty well," Viv replied.

"Is that so?"

"Nobody died. Therefore, it went pretty well."

Sidjin stood up at that.

"Having seen Viv in action, I regretfully say that I find this statement accurate. Viv darling, will I get points for helping you stand up?"

"I don't think so."

"Then allow me to carry this situation using other means."

With an amused smile, Sidjin picked up a rolled parchment from Yrlin's seat. He unfolded it with great care before presenting its contents to the Ascender.

*"Please meet us in Arleton tonight around midnight, behind the blacksmith shop. Be discreet."*

"Aha, looks like we might get better terms after all," Viv said.

The last of the Enorian knights crossed the portal which closed without issue. A great clamor rose from the ranks of the Harrakan army. Screams, jeers, and the ululating taunt of the witchpacts filled the smoky air with vindictive merriment.

"See? They agree with me," Viv continued. "It went very well."

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The portal popped and Viv took a deep breath. A week on foot crossed in an instant. Above them, the stars were clear while it had been cloudy in the forest. The air smelled different and the mana was much weaker. Solfis stopped by her side.

**//We have arrived.**

"Who are you? Oh, Lady Viv?" one of two sentinels asked, spears extended.

Viv sighed and raised a hand.

“I solemnly swear I harbor no ill intentions and do not intend to harm anyone in anyway during my visit tonight.”

With her other hand, she grabbed for a purse and removed a few silver bits.

“I’ll also make it worth your while if you keep my visit to yourself.”

“You are trying to bribe us?” the first guard asked, passably offended.

“I am trying to compensate you for something you’ll do no matter what,” Viv replied with a pointed gaze.

The second guard elbowed the first.

“For the love of Sardanal, shut the fuck up and take the money because her next argument’s gonna be the golem.”

**//Very astute.**

“Right. You can go, we won’t tell. Just... don’t mess things up, alright?”

“Naturally.”

Viv cloaked in mana infused with the shadow meaning. She and Solfis raced to the palissade surrounding a newly rebuilt Anelton with good speed. They stopped at a section of wall between two sleepy sentries and scaled it, and by that, Viv meant that she grabbed onto Solfis and he crawled up like the world deadliest centipede. The two dropped down behind the inn and moved up before a drunk patron might come across them on his way to the loo. Like two skulking shadows, they jumped over fences, scaring the occasional dog.

“I feel very naughty about the whole thing.”

**//It better not be sexual.**

“Why is everything always leading back to sex with you?”

The golem only growled in reply and Viv enjoyed that rare and fugacious ‘gotcha’ until they reached their destination. The back of the smith’s house was empty, crates piled up on dying grass. Viv immediately noticed the mana exuding from a nearby shed. She dropped her own spell first.

“We’re here. Come out.”

The shed fell apart, the wood turning into spiked branches before being absorbed back into the earth. Viv had to admit, it was a neat trick that required excellent control. Sangor and Yrlin stood in the clearing, looking a little red. Sangor cleared his throat.

“Right. Yes. No one knows we are here so let’s make this short. About fifteen years ago, I married my first wife and we had a child together back when I was but a squire in the duke’s army.”

“Okay?” Viv said, slightly taken aback.

“My wife died in a southern raid. I sent my son to Mornyr, the City of the Gods in the north, to be apprenticed in the temple of Maranor. He has not come back yet. All my inquiries return that he wants to dedicate himself to the order. His letters speak of my need to comply with the scriptures.”

“Ah shit.”

“You see where I am going with this. He is my heir and my son. So long as he is their ‘guest’, I am at their mercy. I have pushed back as much as I dared but in the end, it cannot last. We need to get him out of there.”

“We?”

“I am under surveillance by an old and powerful order, one with a vested interest in the fate of Enoria. My nation has always worshiped Maranor before every other god but the latest developments have shaken that faith. The temple is doubling down. If you do want a peaceful eastern border, you will give me a hand.”

“I... I will consider it. After the war with Haluria.”

“If it happens, you will be called to Mornyr for the next Paramese Alliance meeting.”

“I am not opposed to helping you. It just might be... unfeasible. Your son is probably indoctrinated.”

Sangor wordlessly took a folded letter from his coat’s breast pocket, opening it with great care. Viv had a look. Several letters were circled and she noticed they were all slightly thicker than the others as if the ink was deeper. Together, they formed a single word.

*Help.*

“Well, I’m in. But you will recognize Harrak.”

“Done. Hell, I’ll give you a formal defensive alliance. Just... be careful. The Church of Maranor is moving. There are even reports that Oleander still lives in the Shadowlands.”

“Oleander? The traveler who reached Harrak?”

“Yes, him. He’s a living legend. He’s also Maranor’s greatest living champion. If he ever returns to this continent, you will have your work cut out for you.”

“One calamity at a time, please.”

“This might not happen for a very long time. Just be aware that you will need more than your current army if you want to survive. I am extending a hand in friendship. Please, do not bite it.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll save your son. And then you can finally return to Harrak in a glorious union.”

Sangor was still groaning when Viv jumped the fence.

## Chapter 152: Coronation

“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 as 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.

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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. Nour 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 wreak.

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 sores 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 unfailing 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.