

Viv kneeled in front of the ward stone. It was one she had recharged herself before, she even recognized the chipped top as if some monster had cleaved it. The glyph on the surface was the exact same as the one she had recreated in her notes.

**//Your memory was correct, as I told you.**  
**//Glyphs cannot truly be misremembered.**  
**//They are the language of Nyil, the world.**  
**//If a glyph is wrong, you will know it intrinsecally.**

“Just wanted to make sure. Most people in my world can’t do that.”

Solfis stepped aside, his long gaits at the edge of the uncanny valley. For some reason, the sight comforted Viv. She trusted the strange being more than most others on the planet. It was, she thought, amazing in a way. He was a true AI.

**//It appears that humans sometimes need to see and double-test.**  
**//A normal consequence of your fallible nature I presume.**

Though sometimes he could be a dick.

“Now that I have ascertained that my reproduction is correct, it’s time to do some tests.”

**//Carry on then.**

Viv ignored Marruk returning triumphant with a new pair of boots she had just ‘liberated’ from a nearby revenant. The ward stones were designed to both keep the black mana at bay and turn it into fuel. The constructs were inefficient in the sense that they starved themselves of the resource they needed to work, but they were also stable and resilient. She studied the different parts which had been clearly separated then linked together by simple binding glyphs. She had to admit, now that she understood all the components, that it was an clean piece of work. Whoever had designed that had made it so that even a beginner would be able to understand and operate it. Perhaps even do some basic repairs.

Obviously he had not taken into account intellectual property theft.

Viv passed her hand over the absorption construct and activated every glyph, then the entire circle as soon as she was sure she had it right. The glyphs glimmered in the afternoon light as she called their names. She did the same with the conversion construct, the one that removed the taint from its surroundings, and then with the battery itself. When she was done, she activated the entire obelisk at once and fell on her ass.

“Ow.”

Before her, the ward stone hummed. Even her underdeveloped senses could feel the veritable vortex of power greedily gulping the black mana.

**//You appear to have overcharged the construct, Your Grace.**  
**//Well done.**

“Will it damage it?”

**//No.**

“What’s the likelihood that I can reproduce this, you think?”

**//With my assistance.**

**//99.7%**

“Wow. You seem certain.”

**//Your statement is an appropriate interpretation of the aforementioned probability.**

He sounded condescending.

“How about replacing the battery by a core?” she asked.

//It would make the construct easier to reproduce, as well as more efficient.

//Although anyone doing that would have their core stolen within four hours.

“In normal circumstances, yes. Enough for now. Let’s return to camp.”

Viv walked up the slope at a slow speed. Everyone would get tired before this was all over. Between the crying toddlers and snores, she had issues falling asleep despite her exhaustion. The only good thing was that between the horse meat, and use of perishable product before they could go bad, they had all eaten well the past two days. It also helped that the swarm of kids and teenagers had sacked the nearby forest for anything edible like a swarm of locusts. It had stopped now that they were in the mountains. It took her almost an hour to arrive at the camp, and she immediately realized that something had gone wrong.

“We got your back, miz Bob, don’t you worry!”

“Yeah! We’re with you!”

“Errr, thanks?”

Viv blinked as the two villagers nodded to themselves, their expressions determined. Everywhere on her path, people showed signs of support, including the rare mountain tribe folks hanging around, easily recognizable by their red clothes. She made her way to the commend tent and found Farren in deep discussion with the inquisitors.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“Ah, Viv, so good to see you,” the branch master said, “we had a little kerfuffle.”

Denerim frowned and Orkan grunted.

“More like a mutiny!” the Hallurian spat. “That crabby asshole Corel tried to rile us up to exile you.”

Viv’s mouth fell open.

“Exactly! You know what we do to mutineers back home? Mentor, let me tell her...”

“My dear student, please nothing too graphic before dinner, thank you. Suffice to say, he failed to convince. He took about twenty guards and left. The others would not follow. Tars is head of the city guards now.”

“Wow.”

Viv could not believe her ears. Exile? For what? The crime of trying to help?

“Not everyone handles pressure the same way,” Farren explained, “we are only doing fine for now because the food is fine and people felt that they won by escaping. The moment things become harder, folks will start fighting each other.”

“Let’s just make sure everyone is safe before it can happen. Only a few more days,” Viv said with more confidence than she felt.”

Farren remained quiet for a moment. Viv felt measured in a way that the meek administrator had rarely done before.

“You know, your speech a few days ago, the one on what makes a city. Is it something from where you come from?”

“Yes.”

“Hmmm. And could you... elaborate a little bit? Make it longer?”

“What? Why?”

There were plenty of better uses of her time.

“Short version, it helps keep the people together. Long version, we need a leading figure.”  
“Not me then, I’m an outsider.”

Farren sighed, drumming his fingers on the small table holding their only map of the surroundings.

“Look, remember who was at the head of the banquet during the spring festival? This was a rhetorical question, I know you do. Those were all the people who mattered in Kazar. Resh died, but even if she hadn’t taken her own life, she was broken by the situation. Corel always was a follower, too dour and procedural to instill the kind of fire we need right now. And he left. I’m part of the church of Neriad and absolutely cannot take over a village unless there is absolutely no choice. We are forbidden from doing so except in the most dire circumstances

and this is not it. Your paramour has fallen. You are now an influential figure and the city's resident caster by default."

Farren showed the kind of annoyance reserved for slow employees or relatives who had to be explained everything. Everyone's fuse was running short.

"So I'm a leader by default?"

"Yes. There are rich citizens who think themselves influential, but they are not. This is the frontier. People are distrustful of words. They only believe in actions."

"Yet you send me out there to talk."

"You proved yourself against monsters first. It gives you legitimacy. Listen, you are a natural at spells, yes?"

"So I was told."

"And I am fairly decent at managing crowds. Go out there and talk."

Viv sighed and stepped outside.

God this was so embarrassing.

A few people gathered, looking at her with curiosity. They were, she realized, bored. Tired and bored. Unable to sleep because of all the noise and things they would have to do later, an effect made even more relevant by their magically-enhanced bodies. A dangerous combination.

Viv found a rock and stood on it. Five people gathered, one of them thoughtfully dragging on a pipe. The acrid smoke tickled her nose.

"Alright. We're sort of in a bad spot now. We have a plan, but it will only bear fruit in a while. As I said, it's going to be worse before it gets better. Some of us will die to monsters. We'll have to work hard with little visible results for a while. Food will awful."

"Yeah" a woman said, "we're going to run out of klod. And herbal tea."

"That's right," Viv said, "and when people suffer with no obvious solution, what usually happens?"

"They leave?" a newcomer said as a group of cooks sat nearby, wiping their brows.

"They leave. If they can. But that's not the first reaction, is it?"

"They say bad things!" a brave kid said before being laughed at by the rest of his band.

"Yes, actually, that's the start. You're right. They say bad stuff."

The group had grown to thirty and more people were gathering by the second, pulled in by the vortex of herd instinct.

“They say, we say bad stuff,” Viv continued as the bullshit filled her mind. To her surprise, she felt her thoughts organize themselves and realized that her efforts were backed by a skill she had never used. It was polymath. It helped her draw from disciplines she knew to be sociology, anthropology and more, but were all originally placed under the umbrella of philosophy.

“And we do bad thing,” she continued. “It will happen as we face more and more hardships. We can’t help it, it’s in our nature as humans. There will be a moment when you are faced with the possibility to do a crime and will ask yourself: why not?”

She shrugged in an exaggerated fashion.

“Why not do the thing? No one will see me. The guards are all busy, and I’m in pain. I deserve to treat myself. So, obviously that would be bad for the group, but at that time we won’t care. So let me remind you why you shouldn’t succumb to temptation. In fact, you already know why deep inside your souls. You just don’t have a word for it.

“So let me start by asking you. We don’t steal our neighbor’s bread from his window, is it because we are scared of the law, of the guards?”

“I ain’t scared of no one!”

“It’s because we have principle, not like those Enorian twats!”

“Oi, I’m Enorian. Don’t put me in the same bag as the royal bastard.”

“Alright, alright,” Viv said, using a spell to make herself louder, “this guy got it right. It’s because we have principles. Not because we are just scared of the law. If it were that, we would still try to cheat and lie as long as no one is looking. It would be hell. The reason why we do that is that we understand the good of the many, that by not being dicks to each other, we all benefit. And this belief in the legitimacy of the laws we follow as a community is called a social contract. So when you get tempted to steal that thing or punch your neighbor, remember that you are not an animal or a monster who only respects authority out of fear. You are a human who is here because he or she believes that the laws of Kazar are just, legitimate, good for everyone, and that as such, they are worth fighting for. Now, the social contract...”

Viv slowed down when she thought she was losing them, and used examples to illustrate the more abstract points of her demonstration. She also engaged the spectators as often as she could. Her performance would have been described as amateurish in any civilized place, yet here it was sufficient to keep people going a little bit longer. She suspected that, more than her eloquence, it was just the feeling that they mattered which brought people here.

Arthur watched.

Her human was doing that borgle borgle thing again. She understood that those were signals. She understood what most of the signals meant, for example 'dinner' and 'no' and 'how can you be so cute and majestic'.

She also understood that the humans were unable to convey concepts directly as is proper, choosing to resort to that inefficient means of communication. It was flawed. Roars of anger meant anger so that was fine, but anything more complex? One human had to think, then turn it into borgles, then another human would hear those and turn them back into concepts. That was so bad, usually, but not now.

Tendrils of undyed mana snaked from her human to the mass while others shaped her tale. It was not just a concept translated, it was a concept told. A story. And the humans loved their stories. And so they had amassed to listen and feel and gain something. There were so many of them and her human was creating a common purpose. With so many humans gathered with a single purpose, how many spicy meat snacks could be created at once? How much gold could be turned into shiny, shiny pure ingots?

The possibilities were staggering.

She had to be able to borgle as well but her mouth did not allow for it. Nothing to it, she had to keep absorbing the gift of the world through her magnificent new horns as she had had for the past months. The grey could move the air in just the way the humans borgled, but without the need for their pathetic teeth and tongue. The grey was flighty and illusive, just like the black was chaotic and destructive, but she was familiar with both. After all, wasn't she a dragon?

Viv sighed.

"Whatever the fuck am I doing with my life? Nope!"

Pungent bile hit the extended shield with furious hiss before disappearing to somewhere physics did not apply. A few black wires extended, taking out the hardier revenants.

"What's the matter? It's the second time that thing spits," Marruk gumbled. She smashed a weak revenant to the side with her mace as she spoke. Two took its place. Viv kept casting.

She, Marruk, and Solfis stood on a promontory, using the demolished remains of a small tower as improvised fortifications. The single path crawled with revenants. Some of them even fell down as they were pushed aside by hardier specimens. Viv made sure to focus on

the odd elite. By now, killing a revenant per second had become some sort of automatism. For all of its silliness, the yoink spell was an incredible tool. Shame that only she could use it as anyone else would be poisoned.

“That gut spiller is strangely canny,” the witch replied, “it spits then hides. Don’t worry, I’ll get it next time it rears its ugly head.”

Far above, a terrible screech started, then continued in a crescendo that ended in a meaty smack as draconic claw met horned skull. The claws won.

“Skreee!”

“Well done, Arthur!” Viv yelled between two blasts.

Viv and Marruk kept their two-women dances with increasing tension as the flow of revenants thickened. There were two hundred of the buggers. Only their natural fortification and Viv’s ability to disable the creatures permanently allowed them to be like Spartans at the hot gates. That, and they had an insurance.

**//Be sure to pace yourself.**

“I’M TRYING!”

**//Trust your bodyguard.**

**//She will let you know if she is getting overwhelmed.**

**//Slow down or you might not last long enough.**

Viv knew that Solfis was right. It was an exercise of patience and self-control. She had those qualities, but they were being tested. Really hard. The revenants moaned in an unpleasant cacophony that her own silent spells could not silence quickly enough. They also smelled musty.

Gritting her teeth, Viv took a small breath (it stank) and continued fighting.

Danger perception: Apprentice 4

“Yoink!”

A dead bird desintegrated in flight and Viv ducked to avoid its bones as inertia sent them at her face. Solfis slapped them out of the sky before they could distract her too much. Above, Arthur shrieked her rage as she was locked in combat with a group of enemy fliers. Viv spared a second watching the dragon swerve gracefully to avoid a diving foe, then close in on another and ripping it apart. She would be fine.

Viv kept casting, breath slow and deep. Her awareness of the battlefied was as important as her casting.

“Kind of... need a break over here,” Marruk said as she crumpled yet another enemy.

“Blight.”

In a well-practiced maneuver, Viv used the opportunity given by a shield bash to unleash her slow and devastating spell. Marruk breathed deeply to recover. The battle was fierce, and she was using a lot of energy to keep swinging without stopping.

Blight's cloud of utter darkness faded and the accompanying hiss stopped. It left behind nothing but twisted metal. Not even the stone was spared.

The revenants kept coming.

“Alright, round two!” Viv said.

The fight went on. Twenty minutes later, Solfis replaced a spent Marruk and Viv relaxed completely. He was just standing there, unmoving, except his right hand that slapped down incoming creatures one by one with deceptive laziness. It was almost pleasant to watch.

Another two blights and they were done. Arthur landed and sniffed her way through the battlefield, searching precious metal. She managed to find one golden tooth, which joined the two ingots in the tiny purse around her neck.

Willpower +1

Black Witch 4/5

“I’m probably going to have to order an aerodynamic model for her.”

**//I would not be too worried, Your Grace.**

**//Dragons use grey mana while flying.**

**//If she decides that the wallet does not hamper her, it does not hamper her.**

“Huh. Ignoring physics again.”

**//It must be a very strange and rigid world you lived in, Your Grace.”**



It took a solid half an hour for the looting to end. They filled a bag's worth of money in silvers and irons, and even found a few damaged chainmails and an enchanted sword. It was a decent haul.

"Every little bit helps," Viv said. "Do you want the sword?"

"No, I prefer mace or axe," Marruk answered. "Back in the steppes, swords are mostly used by the Pure League. We Kark use hunting weapons, like bows and spears. I picked up the axe when I was traveling through northern Enoria."

"I see. I hope we can get you a superior one soon."

And a proper tower shield that had not started as a larder door, Viv thought to herself.

Night fell and stars blinked from behind the thin cloud cover as the group left the deadlands. Viv, once again, was amazed at how life could be so boring and stressful at the same time, so exciting and exhausting. It was the third 'cleaning' operation she had done in a bit over a week and she was spent to all hell. It was always the same thing. It was never the same thing. She walked the edge between life and death, but only when she forgot that Solfis was there.

Sometimes, her brain froze and she suddenly took a distance from this whole situation. Half a year ago, the army had shipped her ass to Bamako as part of operation Serval. Her main worries had been her little brother finishing his master degree, whether to pursue a career in the military and not being splattered by an IED. Now she was leading a ragtag band of refugees to a self-regenerating iron mine and she could stop the undead apocalypse by saying yoink. Life had taken a turn for the weirder.

Once more, her thoughts went to the people she had left behind. Her new circle had not replaced them, they were their own people with their own spots in her heart.

God she hoped the planet had not blown up or something.

She hoped they were doing fine, even if she wasn't there anymore.

Viv's ruminations stopped when she reached the cordon of guards, the unlucky fuckers covered in black leather now that they had passed the last wardstone. Saturation was low on the slope, where the camp had been set, but the guards were at the foot of the mountain and therefore a bit unprotected. A sergeant saluted Viv as she passed him by, eyeing the bags of loot.

"Any chance for a roast cornadon in there?"

Viv recognized him. He was the affable bearded guy who had welcomed her to Kazar the first time. He had brought her a mug of klod while she was having her nervous breakdown.

"Sorry, just silver and steel," she answered.

“A shame, the captain says that we shouldn’t get steel in the stomach.”

He laughed at his own good joke while the sentry by his side groaned quietly. Viv shook her head and went in, dropping her prize at the quartermaster tent.

“I’ll have the chainmails distributed,” one of the civil servants told her. Viv thought that they should be repaired and adjusted first, but the truth was that they had a smith but no opportunity to set up . They would get to the mine with the gear they had.

Tomorrow.

No one stopped her as she crossed the camp. There was barely enough room to walk between chariots and improvised tents. The stench of mankind was getting stronger now that they had to ration water, and tensions were running high. The most curious thing, to Viv, was that people had accepted the presence of Solfis more easily than she thought. The support of the church had made a difference there. If the inquisitors were fine with it... it was just fine. People had other concerns... like their neighbors.

Viv opened the flap of the command tent and went in. Her cot was there, to the side, after the inquisitors insisted that she slept in a secure place. The ‘council’ was here and they were slurping liquids from cups and mugs. Only the inquisitors looked fresh. They probably had Endurance in the forties or something.

“We had a few incidents today,” Farren says tiredly. “Four people left after stealing money and food from one of the cistern wagon. A young couple and a pair of troublemakers.”

It had happened before, and was also why the common food stocks were now guarded, but people had also brought their own larders and animals, and so there was plenty of supplies to steal.

It was both amusing and depressing that they had cartloads of food and it would still not suffice.

“We had one small brawl over a broken wheel and a rape attempt,” the administrator continued.

The council had decided to apply the laws of Kazar, but prison sentences had been replaced by lashes. The perpetrators were healed immediately, but the exercise was painful and — more importantly — humiliating. The whole town watched, after all.

“That’s it. We are good otherwise. Brenna?”

“We have run out of fresh greens, sadly. From now on it’s congee every meal.”

People groaned across the table.

“Hold on people, we have the materials to build an oven when we arrive so at least we will have fresh bread for months. The bakers already gathered everyone with a bit of red mana Volunteers taking turns to keep to keep it and the smithy operational.”

“Is that possible?” Viv asked, surprised.

“Possible only because people will have nothing better to do. The added benefit is that it will keep people busy. Same with water. Any other questions?” Brenna said. “No? Lorn, it’s your turn.”

The old knight scratched his chin, where his beard was turning scruffier by the day.

“Koro killed a small rathclaw that had come sniffing around our cattle. Not much meat on it, sadly. I will have her on guard tonight and tomorrow I’ll take the guard and secure the mine’s entrance and its surroundings. Will it be fine, tars?”

“Yes, we will hold the line as always,” the newly minted guard captain answered. Her new scar gave her a fierce look. “Nothing important on my end. Lady Bob?”

“We cleared a lot of revenants. Got some loot too. I left the iron behind.”

The others nodded. Silver was good as the Yries and mountain tribes still valued it a bit, but iron bits were too heavy to carry for now. They were too overburdened. Viv only grabbed the weapons because the guards could use them on the spot.

“When we arrive tomorrow, I will escort you to... to...”

Viv’s face fell as she remembered an important detail. Enhanced stats were incredibly useful to focus and remember things, but they did not turn her mind into a perfect thing. At least, not yet.

“The entrance is obstructed by stones. We have to excavate it. I forgot about that, dammit!”

“It can’t be completely blocked...” Brenna said.

“There is a passage, enough for one person to come in at a time. It will be fine, we can leave the supplies outside. By Neriad’s bravery. I forgot as well.”

They had a blockade to remove.