

Viv decided to just give him an abridged version, which took about five minutes with one instance of teary eyes and three of copious swearing. Then Viv asked the valiant knight the question that had been burning her tongue.

“So, will you return to the city?”

“I’d rather not or I’ll be liable to do something that everyone will regret,” the old inquisitor grumbled.

“Aw, and I was really looking forward to a warm bath,” Orkan added, dejected.

“Orkan. Tact.”

“Sorry.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“We discovered the lost iron mine of Min Goles recently, the facilities are intact but not really secure. It’s still better than staying out in the open or fighting the mountain folk for their land. I think we should go there first, then advise. I have a few ideas.”

“Ideas for what.”

“For retaking Kazar, of course.”

Denerim watched her with an expression of polite disbelief.

“And, pray tell, how do you plan on doing that?”

“First we need to see if it is at all possible. The good news is that I managed to take a prisoner from a squadron of cavalrymen who left to pursue us. I was thinking about interrogating him.”

“Oh yes, we can help with that.”

“Good, he should still be at the edge of the camp. Oh, and are you familiar with the concept, errr, good guard bad guard?”

“No?”

“It’s when one interrogator acts nice while the other threatens.”

“Oh yes, we use it sometimes. Why, do you want to be good guard?”

“No. Let me demonstrate. Solfis?”

The hunched form of the battle golem emerged from the shadowy recess where he had hid himself not to ruin Viv's groove. Fully deployed, he was almost twice the size of Denerim, who himself was not a small man.

"By Neriad's balls," the old knight said in a hushed voice.

//I can do threats.

"I have no doubt. Tell me golem... are you a danger to us?"

Solfis' yellow glare landed squarely on the inquisitor. Viv hurried to speak.

"Solfis is on my side and he is not a vulgar monster. He will not commit any heinous act or anything. He is protecting me, that is all."

"And if he decides that killing us protects you?" Denerim asked in a deceptively low voice.

Viv had grown familiar enough with the golem to detect when he was his own inorganic, slightly psychotic brand of amused.

//You should pray to your god.

//That it never happens.

"Oi. Solfis is rational, he's been in Kazar for as long as I have and he didn't go on a secret murderous spree, did he? Can we focus on the matter at hand?"

Denerim glared one last time, before signaling Viv that he was ready to go. They found the surviving cavalryman under the surveillance of a few angry guards. He was showing signs of desperation.

"I should have died with honor, like my men," he said to no one in particular.

"Well, it's too late now. For the honor part, I mean," Viv tells him.

The guards move aside and the officer does his best to avoid Solfis' glare. He perked up when the inquisitors came into view.

"Sir, sir! This madwoman, you have to stop her! She controls a monster! Please, free me from those evil people!"

Denerim smiled. The intense sadness in the old knight's expression surprised Viv. It was not a kind smile.

"Do you have any idea how many corpses I have seen? Not of soldiers mind you, though I have seen plenty of that as well. I am talking about villages raided by bandits or bored nobles playing their little games. It's always the same kind of people staring at me from the ground with confusion. They have so many questions too. Why me? I'm just following orders. This family I rode down had been declared outlaw or criminal or some such. I'm just carrying

my duty. The little boy whose bones I cracked under my hooves was a rebel, like his peasant dad, so I didn't do anything wrong. They don't understand that what is legal and what is right are too entirely different things. You don't either. And I'm not wasting time on explaining it to you, so I'll give you a choice. You can answer my questions..."

Denerim pointed at Solfis' form, still smiling.

"Or you can answer that thing. While I watch."

"You don't have the right to do that," the officer said, "you're an inquisitor of Neriad! You have to help m — "

Denerim's iron glove closed on the man's mouth, muffling his complaints. He had moved faster than Viv could perceive.

"You lot always forget that Neriad is the god of righteous war. Somehow, you always forget the war part. Time is up. Me, or the golem."

"You. You!"

The old knight turned his eyes to the clouds above, sighing.

"How predictable. If you were truly wise... you would have picked the golem."

Gold light exploded from the inquisitor's kneeling form. His hair stood up as if under the influence of electricity, and his eyes were now two orbs of molten gold. The sight terrified Viv. She felt judged and measured, even while standing in the side. The effects on the man were far more terrible. He screamed, a low keening sound that grew sharper as the light gained in intensity. Denerim's voice fell like a thunderclap.

"Know what they endured."

Just as it had started, the phenomenon faded and yet, behind the slightly malodorous smell of the camp, Viv smelled the rarified air of a mountain, crisp and frigid. Denerim looked sad and drained, but the officer looked much worse. He was a broken man, mewling and begging.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know!"

"Answer our questions."

"Yes, yes, of course."

Viv watched with amazement and a bit of disgust the cavalryman spewing everything he knew at the smallest prompt. There was something fundamentally wrong with the whole process that Viv understood, even without feeling the strange mana scouring the person's... soul. Torture was an inherently evil process. This was worse. The man had been brainwashed in an extremely violent and unforgiving way. It suddenly occurred to her that

Denerim and Orkan were inquisitors, or that's how her skill translated their title, and this inquisitors were not nice to begin with. She leaned towards the junior member of the pair as Denerim listened to the number of troops the prince had brought.

"What is going on?" she asked.

"He made him feel what his victims endured. It's a very draining and traumatic experience for the inquisitor, or so I've been told. I can't do it yet. You think this is bad? Rapists and murderers get it much worse."

"Lady... Viv?" Denerim asked, articulating her name.

"Yeah?"

"If you have questions..."

"Oh yes. How long will the prince stay?"

The cavalryman blinked his tears away.

"In Kazar? Hmm, I'm not sure."

"But he is set to leave soon?"

"The plan was to return promptly before the summer campaign. The core of the army would stay here up to two weeks to pacify the surrounding village while His Grace transfers the ownership of rebel holdings to the loyal citizens who came with him."

"The loyal citizens eh?"

"Yes, the ones who sacrificed their wealth for His Grace's noble cause. Their loyalty will be rewarded."

He actually believed it. How infuriating. The Prince had to be smooth as maple syrup to turn that eviction into a righteous act. It angered her to no end, but she pushed it down. Those emotions were of no use to her right now.

Viv took a deep breath and outrage faded in the background, the low embers still there, smoldering.

"And what is the plan now?"

"The plan? Ah yes, now that things have gone awry because of... I am sorry..."

"Focus. The plan."

"I don't know I swear! With the granaries empty and the crops still growing, we don't have enough food. I don't know what His Grace intends to do!"

“Alright,” Viv said, taking another deep breath, “alright, he has to show up for the summer campaign? Against the noble separatists?”

“Yes!”

“When must he absolutely leave or risk being late?”

“Oh, at the very least a month from now.”

Good. Then... it could work.

“The Bridgers, the soldiers he brought with him, will he leave some behind?”

“I think so? The third company was supposed to stay here until they are relieved later this year.”

“Do they have a caster?”

“Yes, an earth-shaper. I’m not sure if he will stay though, on account of the rebel mage killing the first company’s caster.”

Varska, she took one down with her. If Viv had been there then perhaps... but no, no. It was done.

“I see.”

Viv stood back up and moved a bit away. The city guards had given her some privacy as they stood vigil farther away from the camp, at the very edge of the deadlands. Denerim joined her.

“You’re thinking about taking the city back after the brunt of the prince’s goons have left.”

“Yes. Kazar is remote, which is both a weakness and a strength. That royal prick cannot afford to stay there forever, and he cannot afford to leave a strong garrison here either, or at least I don’t think so. The city is still poor. He will also need an escort back to Enoria.”

“The logic is sound, but things will not be that simple. He may decide to stay for the iron mine.”

“I don’t think so,” Viv replied, “he doesn’t know where it is. Only the members of the expedition could find it, and they are all here with their maps. There is also the fact that the mine will need money and time to be operational and that guy is clearly going for short-term benefits. I think he wanted to sell the location of the mine, not the mine itself. That or he just wanted to keep it for later.”

“Yes. An iron mine is a significant discovery, or a rediscovery I suppose, but it’s not the only asset in the Enorian kingdom. Not by far. Hmm. You might be right. He is pressed for time.

With that said, you heard the man. There will be a hundred professional siege specialists plus whatever militia the newcomers can bring to bear. I'm sorry, but you don't stand a chance. You would need numbers you don't have. Siege equipment..."

"What are the chances that the fort garrisons and the temples could help?"

"None at all. Remember, this is a shit assignment. They just want to go home. It doesn't matter to soldiers who holds the town. As for the church of Neriad, most temple guards will have their hands too busy with the civil war to intervene. Nobody will come to help in months and you do not have that much time."

"I figured. Alright, first we get the people to safety, then we look for solutions. By the way, are you alright? You look... drained."

The inquisitor had pockets under his eyes. More importantly, he had signs Viv associated with deep fatigue, like bleary eyes, stooped shoulders and the occasional wince. A certain lost air.

"You know," the man said, "you are the second person ever to ask me that since I became an inquisitor. Nobody really cares about us as people."

"They're scared, I suppose."

"Yes. They only see the worse in us. The first to ask was my paramour, my Simishe."

"No offense Denerim, but I'd rather keep our relationship professional."

He chuckled.

"Hah. You are an extraordinary woman, traveler Viv, but you are not Simishe. In any case, I appreciate your concern. That spell I used is a divine one. I receive a fragment of what the target goes through, so that I do not use it lightly."

"Wow, shit man, what if he's a murderer?"

"Then I am reminded of the importance of my task. No need to worry, I will rest for a full day once we have arrived at that mine of yours."

"So you will stay with us?"

"Of course! I would never leave you in such a predicament. Your cause is noble, and now it is mine as well. Besides, there could be monsters close to the entrance of the mines. You can definitely use professional monster hunters like us."

"Yeah Denerim. Thanks. To you and Orkan both."

"Think nothing of it. Now, please excuse me, I need to catch some shut-eye."

Viv left and passed by her sled to find Marruk and Arthur fast asleep, which was good news as they would need their forces. She found one of the tribe folk tasked with guiding them through the mountains and informed him that the Prince might come to demand food of them, as he was low on rations. The man agreed with her analysis and dispatched one of the deadland walkers to carry word to the nearest village.

“Better safe than sorry. If our food is stolen, it will make the next winter difficult,” the man said.

One last disturbance awaited her on the way to her sleeping bag. It was... a freaking ninja.

The man stood by Solfis' side covered in tight-fitted dark clothes. A single saber hung from his back. His dark eyes were locked on Viv long before she spotted him, and he bowed as soon as she approached. He was carrying something in his hands.

//This man assures me that he holds no ill intention towards us.

//My analysis returns a high likelihood that he speaks the truth.

As soon as Solfis stopped talking, the man put down the chest he had been holding and slowly removed the mask covering his face, revealing the easily recognizable dark skin of a northerner. She remembered that Marruk had mentioned the dark blades, an order of assassins who served her tribe's enemies. This one did not seem hostile.

“Greetings, Lady Viv. My employer, Tom Manitaradin of the Manipeleso bank, Kazar branch, sends his regards. He has brought the withdrawal you have requested.”

“A withdrawal?” Viv asked, confused.

“Yes, of course,” the man said, giving her a wily smile, “twenty-five gold talents, the maximum authorized without coming in person. The rest will, of course, remain safe with us. You were wise to take some coin with you. I am sure that they will prove useful in the very near future. There is just a simple matter...”

He took out a sheet of paper. Solfis grabbed it and inspected it for a while, before giving it to Viv. It was a withdrawal order dated to the day before.

“You forgot to sign the withdrawal paper. A minor oversight. As you are well-known to us, we have taken the liberty of accepting the order anyway. Now, if you will?”

Viv read. It was exactly what the man said.

“Pray tell,” she said, returning the signed document, “why do me this favor? Not that I am unappreciative, of course...”

“The branch manager sees potential in you, and we disapprove of government-backed robbery, as you can imagine. Please consider this a mark of respect, and of hope for a possible future cooperation. On a completely unrelated note, nothing says that you cannot do good actions and get rich at the same time. And with this, I bid you a good night.”

The man bowed one last time and disappeared from Viv's perception. Only Solfis' glare tracking him confirmed that he was actually leaving in the direction of the city. When he was gone, Solfis checked the chest and opened it, declaring it safe. It contained the twenty-five gold talents, just as promised.

"Ok. It's a start."

//Yes.

//If only we had places to spend it.

"I have a few ideas."