

General Kobanis led his men north, back to the ancestral land of their clan. Or what was left of it.

He could see the writing on the walls. Arana clung to it because it was her nature to never let go of anything, but the Empire was done for. It was designed to function in isolation... and it was no longer in isolation. The foe had come ready to attack. There was never any hope for peace.

He knew his clan's position on politics. The elders said the clan had led the empire through the crisis and now it was only fair that they would reap the benefits. The citizens had proven they needed a strong leadership, and that they could not be trusted with independence. So the clan provided officials, soldiers, experts, and in return, why, of course it would get all the food and tools it could use.

Many of his men believed this strongly. They were owed the entire cake and whatever crumbs fell in the lap of others were only through magnanimous grace. They'd been told this from childhood. As for proof, the sorry state of every other village was ample evidence the other tribes were simply inferior.

Kobanis knew it was horse shit, just as he knew the other tribes were free, now, free and armed. When a tribe clung to power to the detriment of everyone else, they couldn't let it go. The history of the empire was filled with examples of groups going too far in the pursuit of power, and what happened with it slipped between their clenched fingers.

There was only one way this could end.

He needed to gather every able bodied person, load as much provision as possible on whatever cart they could find, then escape south before the others came for them to . There was land there they could take from the natives thanks to steel and good training. Maybe some ships would leave the port before it fell.

This was the only way.

As the army crossed yet another meadow, his second in command leaned towards him. He was solid but obviously worried. Kobanis wasn't worried. He was terrified. Terrified of what they would find, because if everything was burnt as they'd been told... his people would starve or get caught and purged from the surface of Param.

Kobanis didn't show it though.

"General, it has been over an hour since we came across the last refugee."

"I am well aware. That is why we are in formation."

A sturdy line walked across the growing field, trampling growth that they would never get the chance to harvest. Stress made them lean forward, hands gripping their weapons with too much force. It would tire them. Kobanis had already made a speech this morning about the importance of discipline but there was only so much his path could do when news of ravaged

farmsteads arrived with every new family gathering at their back. All he could do was stand tall and hope there was enough to salvage to start over somewhere else.

Far in front, at the edge of the forest, a man crested the incline. Cries of alarm rang across the squads as soon as his horned helmet came into view.

The man was alone for now but he wouldn't last. Kobanis recognized the slightly blue skin visible through the open helmet and the black steel armor from the many reports he'd gotten.

This was a New Harrakan zealot. Their commander, to be precise.

He would kill to know how they'd gotten there so quickly.

"I pity you, sinners."

The man's voice covered the plain and the defiant ranks of the army. He didn't yell, yet all could hear him. A skill, to be sure. Kobanis hated the way it positively vibrated with a conviction he had lost decades before. That man was a believer. Believers ought to be feared. There was an old imperial saying: The meeting of blind faith and reality never ends well. Kobanis reacted immediately, before unease could spread through the ranks.

"Wedge formation. Prepare to break through!"

He could not receive the line breakers passively. He no longer had the archers for it. The only hope was to counter charge, cancel some of their abilities, surround them, and kill them.

"I pity you because you will die never having experienced greatness."

The ground shook. His men hesitated. Kobanis himself hesitated.

This was not sorcery. He was old enough to tell when the mana in the air changed. No, this was something else.

Carts crested the incline, first one, then two, then four. Those were to carriages what puppies were to snakewolves, however. Even calling them carts was preposterous. They were steel beasts, armored like heavy knights and sporting strange tubes at the top. Kobanis couldn't see a single piece of wood in the entire damn thing. There was enough metal here to arm half a thousand men. Line breakers formed squads between the metal behemoths, massive weapons resting contemptuously on their shoulders. Small fires lit up in front of the tubes.

Kobanis had a bad feeling about this. His danger sense screamed to run, even though there was barely enough mana seeping from the constructs. They were powered by a core, to be sure, but they were not spell arrays.

Then what the fuck were they?

Was he still supposed to charge?

“I pity you because you stand here, terrified, at the hour of your failure while I do not. Although my flesh will decay, I know no fear. Although my sword shall break, I will not give up, and although my mind may crumble, my heart shall never falter, for yes, I am mortal, flawed, weak, temporary... but I serve HARRAK! And Harrak, oh, Harrak.”

The tubes... ignited. Flame tongues spat out from the armored carriages like the breath of dragons, turning the air yellow, hot, and suffocating.

“Harrak is eternal.”

All hell broke loose. Kobani yelled orders but they were not followed. They were not even heard. His path was too low to maintain order in front of... this. The tongue mixed and though they were slow compared to many spells, the men were packed together.

And then Kobanis' world was only heat, smoke, and screams. A shield wall formed. It was scorched immediately, the skill failing as steel melted along with the flesh underneath. The screams. The people he'd known for years, now blazing corpses dancing on a twilight realm.

“Run!” his second bellowed, ‘Run!’

But Kobanis didn't run. He grabbed who he could to reform, knowing if they fled here, it would all be over. He tried, but the carriages of death advanced and the line breakers sprinted.

Perhaps it was justice after all.

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Frosthawk was having an interesting evening, and by that he meant that it was the most exciting and tragic moment of his gods-accursed life. After decades of uninterrupted rule, Arana's power had crumbled like a rotten leaf.

The love of his life was dead.

Now he had to save what he could, namely, his idiot students. The wind carried him over the waves, past the large white sails of the imperial ships.

He would freeze those on the way back. Let the withered bitch try to flee on an icicle.

Power carried him all the way to the parapet. The old fortress overlooking Frostway was as familiar to him as the palm of his hand, having learnt the craft here for years. He knew every nook and cranny. Right now, the fortress was silent. It could change very quickly, however, he had made sure of it. Kneeling, he tapped on one of the stones of the battlement walkway.

A panel opened. Stone moved to reveal lines of text.

As expected, Phaerus had taken over, that bootlicker. He had expelled Frosthawk from every list he could find down to the admission one. If Frosthawk tried to enter now, the doors would trigger an alarm just by grabbing the handle.

Frosthawk smiled. He waved his hand once, entered a complex code, then reinstated himself as the administrator. Then, immediately, he prevented the system from tracking him. He couldn't expel Phaerus without giving him notice, unfortunately.

Had to do things the hard way.

Frosthawk flew to the other side of the keep, then off to a secondary tower. The door yielded before him. He slipped inside, then walked down a narrow staircase down to an empty corridor. Dim lights made the familiar place ominous.

Frosthawk called upon the meaning of the ephemeral as he cloaked himself in gray magic. His form grew misty and wraith-like. He made his way to his study, leaving no traces behind. The door proved to be trapped. Phaerus was no fool. It wouldn't be enough to stop him.

Rather than taking the risk to spring the construct, Frosthawk made his way to the laundry room. He floated above a hurrying servant on the way there. The cleaning room smelled of soap, as usual. A hidden panel opened a secret passage back to his haunt.

Phaerus had stolen his focus, as expected, but also his collection of infusing herbs. That was unacceptable. With one last grumble, Frosthawk reached for yet another secret panel for his secondary focus, as well as a revitalizing potion he gulped down immediately. Energy filled his frame.

"I'm too old for this shit," he grumbled to himself.

But the students needed him.

Thus ready, Frosthawk walked out, and found no one. The place was deserted. Another panel revealed why: everyone was in the great room. Frosthawk sighed. He hated theatrics when it was done in public, but... maybe it would give him an edge.

There were two members of Arana's retinue by the door leading to the main hall, some of the last surviving Eyes according to their gear, either guards or trainees. The one on the left frowned when he approached in his ethereal form. Two waves of gray-blue energy expanded from his hands.

The guards took one rattling breath, their skins turning gray in the same instant. Their faces were expressions of frozen surprise. Frosthawk walked by the unmoving corpses and used another spell to listen to what was happening inside of the hall.

Phaerus was talking. Of course he was. He loved the sound of his own voice.

"Sedition will not be tolerated. Your duty, our duty, is to the empire itself, its people! Regardless of what you think of our governance, this is not the time to fight it. We must stay

united against the existential threat that endangers us all. Who could look upon our work and think we are not carrying the weight of civilization upon our shoulders?”

Oh, that was his cue.

Frosthawk destroyed the hinges with a quick gray blade, then he slammed his boot against it, sending it tumbling on the floor. The light of the main hall lit his figure when he strutted on with confidence.

Maybe the girl was having a deleterious influence on him. He was starting to enjoy theatrics as well.

“Frosthawk!” the portly mage bellowed. “Traitor! You return!”

Phaerus stood on the elevated platform at the end of the hall where the faculty usually sat. As for the students, they stood at attention under the watchful gaze of the remaining professors, though none seem very enthusiastic about the situation.

“Despite your pathetic attempts at stopping me, I have. I come to recover my students and get them out of here before Arana decides to ‘test their loyalties’.”

Frosthawk and Phaerus carved circles under them at the same time. Everyone else jogged away from the line of fire with grim fatalism. This was what the school had been reduced to: resigned practitioners of the art to afraid to make a stand.

That was Frosthawk’s fault, as well. He was the headmaster. He was the husband of his deceased wife. No one else had more opportunities to solve problems than he did, and he had failed them.

There was still time to save his students, however.

“I knew you were a prideful man,” Phaerus said, “but I never took you for a betrayer.”

“My family wasn’t made of traitors either, but now my wife is dead and my children half-starved, all while I stood there writing petitions to ‘her ladyship’. No more.”

Phaerus scoffed.

“More foreign lies poisoning your ears.”

“My children told me themselves,” Frosthawk spat, anger distracting him from the upcoming duel. “They told me how she slept and didn’t wake. They told me with their gaunt faces and their eyes that told me I WASN’T THERE FOR THEM. I failed them! I failed them. But I won’t fail my students, even if I have to slay you, my old rival.”

Frosthawk readied his nastiest curses, but instead of screaming at him, Phaerus lowered his staff. The runes faded.

“Lena is dead?”

“She died last winter. Months ago. The letters I received were falsified. I professed my love and hope to a corpse,” Frosthawk choked.

“What? But... they were supposed to be safe.”

“Arana lied. Shocking, no?”

“Are you certain?”

“I swear on Enttiku upon pain of death that it is the truth.”

Frosthawk shivered when something ancient caressed his soul. The fact he was left standing spoke of his truthfulness, or rather, that he believed his words with absolute conviction.

Phaerus dispelled his own circle.

“I am sorry. I didn’t know. Lena, no...”

Frosthawk was almost sorry he didn’t get to kill him. Bloodlust still filled his vein but he forced himself to breathe instead. The empire had suffered enough.

“We must evacuate now before Arana realizes her guards are dead. Everyone get back to their room and take what you need for a three day trip. No need for food.”

“I shall come as well,” Phaerus said with conviction.

It was true what the girl said. People were only convinced of the gravity of a situation when it directly affected them. Frosthawk could hardly blame Phaerus since he’d done the exact same thing.

“Very well, but you need to help me disable the fleet first.”

Phaerus nodded.

“Just like old times then.”

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“That’s the group that killed our tool caravan guards,” Rollo’s paramour said. “Let’s ride them down!”

Rollo took a deep breath, then turned to the dark-haired man. He watched the handsome and sometimes cruel features revealed by the open helmet. In there, he saw his own drive mirrored with just a dash of savagery.

“You will wait,” Rollo stated.

He surveyed the plain in front of him. Tall grass, but a few inspections and his own path skills detected no ambush, no matter how unlikely it would have been. There was just a large group of Remnants infantry — stragglers and some reinforcements — marching around a carriage overloaded with supplies. It was a Harrakan carriage. Stolen. That wouldn't do at all.

"Forgive me, ser," his paramour said, chastised.

Rollo ignored him for now.

There it was, a wide plain, flat, a spear in his hand, his lover by his side, and not a single fucking mage in sight.

It was just perfect.

"You will be disciplined later," he informed the man by his side with an amicable smile.  
"PREPARE TO CHARGE."

Rollo looked around long enough to see if the formation was correct before closing the mask on his own armet. The world was narrower through the eye slits but sometimes, one needed to abandon the broader picture and focus on the moment.

"The Rose!" he roared.

"And the Thorns!" his knights replied.

Their chargers accelerated towards the panicking mass of spearmen.

Life was good.

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Like trickles converging into a river, the tide of people gathered behind Viv. First, the villagers and troops she had gathered south, the fishing communities left at the mercy of monsters, then Cerus and his people joined them with the Kark. There were guardians, civilians, and even a few tribe members freed from the slaving villages who had decided to join anyway. Rakan teleported from the north with the angry survivors of the gulag, and Frosthawk joined with his own apprentices soon after. Rollo and the Bitter Hearts marched from the east at the head of a newly formed militia, eager to take revenge on those who had destroyed their villages. Finally, Lak-Tak and the other nastier members of Viv's retinue rolled from the north east atop siege engines marded with spikes. It was a sea of humanity that arrived on Frostbay at dawn, close to ten thousand people all included, there to witness the collision of two paths.

Viv welcomed all of them as they arrived, and she thanked all of her lieutenants one by one. There were debriefs and analysis because people could always do better, her included, but it

was important to acknowledge that New Harrak was not just her anymore. It was everyone. She'd just gathered them for the same purpose.

By contrast, the city was empty. Everyone from urchin to crafter had fled to the hills to wait out the conflict, at least those who had not joined Viv immediately. The only activity came from the direction of the palace, where something large was being propped up. She didn't really care much. It might be dangerous, but it wouldn't be as dangerous as a juvenile dragon.

Viv smiled.

Fate buoyed her. She couldn't really see it, but her soul felt the telltale sign of her spark of luck working overtime to complete something. She let it happen, not eager to break what she knew would come to her eventually.

On that dawn and facing Frostbay, she felt it come to her. She turned.

There were woods in the distance, but in front, there was no plain, only eager faces sticking to each other in clumps for the remnants' people, and well-ordered groups for the New Harrakans. Tension and expectation mounted as the crowd slowly moved into place. With so many people, it took a while.

A part of Viv panicked to see such a large group. Thoughts of stampede, concern about supply lines assailed her mind but she put them down. There would be no battle here. The teleporters were in place. The only thing left to do was to mark history.

Viv levitated herself above the crowd so all could see her. A sound enchantment would carry her voice far, though the pressure on her soul now was so strong she was sure she could be speaking French and they would understand her anyway. It was one of those moments.

She just had to seize it.

By ripping off important Earth documents!

"My people.

"Some of you are here today because you are New Harrakan, and what I will say, you already hold in your hearts as true, or you would not be here. Some of you have come to see the end of a tyranny that choked your entire lives, either impelled by fear, or by hope. Some of you may not be sure why you came, only that it was important that you did so. It is all of you I shall address now to put into words what brought us here.

"We are here because we believe the self-evident truths that mankind aspires to universal ideas. We believe that those ideals include Life, Safety, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness on whatever path the people may have chosen. We believe that those ideals represent the highest aspiration of mankind and that their accomplishment will lead to a future free of misery, tyranny, and ignorance. We believe that to be perennial and just, to receive the unwavering support of its people, a ruler must embody those ideals. A ruler and its people



united by those ideals shall endure any hardships, for they work towards a divine purpose that the light gods themselves would support fully.

“We believe that when a ruler becomes destructive of these ends, when they perform actions for the sole purpose of continuing an oppressive dominion over their subject, it is the Right of the People to rise against them and to abolish them.

“We are here to finish what we started: the unification of Harrak into a nation that holds those beliefs as true, and promotes them. Together, we shall be a beacon of conviction on Param and beyond. We shall hold to the belief that progress and success are not just possible through common effort, they are not just a possibility. They are our duty. My covenant to you is to follow those ideas to the best of your abilities. What I ask of you is to walk that path with me, no matter how daunting it becomes. I only ask of you what I ask of myself: to believe, and to give myself the means of making those beliefs a reality. Now, I ask you. Harrakans. Will you join me in this covenant?”

The New Harrakans did not hesitate a single second. Their roars filled the plains in a thunderous wave, the ground shaking with every hit of heavy gauntlet against their shields. Viv was concerned for a moment that she'd been too verbose for farmers and fishermen, but soul magic carried the meaning to their minds, as she knew it would, and they were prompt to join them. Soul power pushed against Viv like a tide, demanding an answer, demanding something concrete. A commitment that went beyond words.

She stretched her anchors and allowed it.

You have unlocked the third of four aspects. The last aspect will only unlock on your next step.

Aspect of the Paragon: the range and effect of your social skills is vastly improved and their effect more pronounced. Additionally, you can speak and wield the majesty of a pure ruler path on the same step. In return, your emotions and beliefs will fully filter through the link without any way to hide them.

You have progressed on the Ascender Path.

Viv smiled, then she reached for her backpack. Removing her silver circlet, she grabbed the item resting there.

It was heavier than expected.

Reforged Crown of Harrak (artifact). Carrying the hopes of a people, this unadorned spike

crown made of silverite carries defensive enchantments that can stop any blow. So long as the wielder holds authority over the empire, anyone will recognize and acknowledge them on sight. It is very heavy.

Yeah, she'd noticed.

Viv placed the crown on her head, feeling the spikes expand back to cover her hair. The weight seemed to settle on her neck, directly on her spine like a constant Sword of Damocles. It was a warning, and it came directly from the world.

"I will not forget," she whispered. "This is not an act."

Behind her, Marus' preparation were complete because she heard something clank. She turned and pushed the full power of her draconic intimidation over the city. In the distance, something heavy fell.

"I have already won, tyrants. Come out and face your end."

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Viv waited patiently until the stomps resolved themselves into the form of Marus, riding what could only be described as a... war walker, maybe? She was reminded of her childhood, of valorous knights piloting giant mechs with sword or gun but always with courage. This... wasn't it. At all. The walker was a poor attempt at reproducing a Harrakan guardian golem with reinforced joints and the core replaced by a bulky cockpit, only it wasn't balanced for it, so the already clunky frame had counterweights. It didn't walk so much as stumble forward. It also possessed a comically large chest that made it look like a toy robot, complete with a hammer arm and a claw arm. Exposed wiring near the back contracted with every step. It was partly painted gold though some sections near the top shone like natural silverite.

Well, at least now Viv knew where it had all gone.

Mutters and expressions of fear spread through the civilians. They could tell this was dangerous, and indeed it could be, but they didn't know how much. Viv understood she and Marus were so high above normal citizens in terms of martial power that it was hard to assess who might have the advantage. She allowed her aura to carry her confusion. It was fine.

A section of the cockpit rolled back, showing the Emperor's furious face. He had pockets under his eyes, and his lush black hair was messy and unkempt, but he was determined.

"You filthy rebel, you witch, you coward! We should have killed you the moment you came here with your seditious thoughts! You think you may have won but it matters not how many minds you turn. It will all be over once I crush you. I challenge you in single combat!"

Viv let the loud declaration roll over the people. Only after he was done did she let herself succumb to her emotion.

She guffawed.

“Haaaaaahahaha oh my Neriad, what the fuck is that thing? Let me guess. You killed the programming clan so you couldn’t make an actual golem. Is that it? Or were you just incapable of getting a proper core? Hoooooly shit it’s not even finished. You... are aware that you’re missing a back panel? Right?”

The people’s whispers carried her words forward like the dismissal it was. Marus fumed in his habitacle, but Viv was just too busy laughing her ass off.

“ANSWER ME!”

“Hahaha aaaaaah.”

Viv brushed imaginary dust from her armor robe. She cast off the [Aspect of the Paragon], leaving the sense of community to linger in the hearts of her followers like a cooling hearth fire. Her false wings extended as she rose higher.

Black mana erupted from her form, coating her in draconic armor that moved up to the crown of Harrak. The temperature plummeted, and colors faded. The laser green of her iris shone like beacons in the hungering void of her war form. She extended her fingers, each one forming a meter-long Excalibur.

“Right, enough of this. You’re a disgrace. I’m going to open you and that joke you’re driving from throat to groin like a fucking oyster and after I’m done, your mom’s next. Goodbye Marus. I can’t say it was a—”

STOMP.

Stomp stomp stomp.

The crowd muttered, then parted. They felt the remnants of Viv’s anger fade to be replaced by dread, and then, resignation. The entire valley grew strangely silent besides the curious stomping sound, like a pack of horses if the horses were the size of barns.

“Oh,” Viv said. “Oh. Shit.”

Sensing her alarm, the New HARRAKANS dragged the civilians out of the way. In less than one minute, they parted to leave a very, very wide lane for what was approaching.

This left a very confused Marus and a facepalming Viv standing and floating, respectively, near the city entrance.

Cresting the incline, Solfis led the entirety of the New HARRAKAN golems in a slow procession. Deep in the privacy of her mind, Viv cursed the absolute unconscionable asshole who’d opened the portals for them, and wondered if she could make them spend three days chained inside of Solfis’ special collection just so they could fucking understand who they

were dealing with. Then all thoughts of revenge fled her as reality came knocking with a metal mask that would never move.

**//YOUR MAJESTY.**

**//YOU REQUESTED I DID NOT COME UNTIL AFTER YOUR VICTORY.**

**//I CAME AS SOON AS YOU PROCLAIMED IT.**

This was on her, her and her stupid big mouth.

**//I WISH TO FEAST MY EYES UPON THE—**

Solfis faltered.

**//UPON THE...**

**//UPON...**

Frostway beckoned in all its 'glory'.

**//OOOOOH.**

Silence, this time absolute, filled the plain after all the golems came to an awkward stop. Themis was the first one to break ranks. The ethics and governance golem turned and kneeled next to the starving, beleaguered forms of the gulag survivors, the few surviving women among them sticking out in brittle defiance. Eris, the engineer, approached a nearby pigsty. She raised the unfixed thatch floor from walls of polished marble stones.

The wall collapsed anyway. Eris stopped moving afterward.

Thalia the sculptor never moved from her vantage point over the palace.

Clio, the librarian, walked by the frozen form of Marus, stopping before the former emperor's statue. More specifically, she inspected the sycophantic poem inscribed in its socle.

She turned to Solfis and shook her head.

Ares, his back covered in weapons, approached Marus, who hesitantly shook a claw at him. He stopped to look with baffled interest.

As for Vulcan, he walked to the foundry, picked the frame of a carriage and shook it a bit.

The axle snapped under his fingers.

Vulcan looked down at the broken pieces for far longer than necessary considering his processing speed. His faceplate turned to his father and it was weird to Viv how something with no actual feature could express that much bafflement.

**//IT'S SHIT.**

Solfis didn't immediately reply. Viv knew Solfis didn't create mana, so to speak, but he did have a soul Nyil recognized, and for the first time ever, she felt it. It was uncomprehendingly massive. And cold. Very, very cold. Something expanded from there like an iris slowly unfolding to let the emotion behind flow, and that emotion was predictably rage.

Blind, never-ending rage.

Rage so pure it was almost physical.

**//YOU.  
//FOR THREE HUNDRED YEARS I FOUGHT ALONE PRAYING FOR  
REINFORCEMENTS.  
//FOR THREE HUNDRED YEARS I HELD THE LINE.  
//I WATCHED OVER THE BODY OF IRLEFEN.  
//I KEPT THE EMPIRE ALIVE AND HOPED THAT BY KILLING NECRARCHS, I WOULD  
HOLD THE TIDE OF UNDEATH.  
//I WENT TO BATTLE EVERY DAY HOPING SOMETHING SUBSISTED.  
//AND THAT MY MASTER'S SACRIFICE WAS NOT IN VAIN.  
//AND I DID IT  
//FOR THIS?!**

Solfis' more human hands grabbed a loose stone and reduced it to gravel in a pang of hydraulic pressure.

**//FOR.  
//THIS?  
//YOU DESPICABLE, PATHETIC EXCUSES FOR AN INBRED BEASTLING.  
//YOU DISAPPOINTMENTS.  
//WHAT IS ALL THIS?  
//WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?  
//WHAT.  
//HAVE.  
//YOU.  
//DONE????????**

Followed a deafening scream that Viv could only define as a house-sized dial up modem being thrown into a blender. The Strike Golem sprinted forward in a wave of collapsing buildings right to the imperial statue, which he grabbed by the feet and pulled. The marble limbs were reduced to powder under the immense pressure. An instant later, the statue was sent flying into the bay.

It was the signal for the other golems to move. Marus was grabbed two seconds later and Viv floated away, dejected.

"Well, there goes the fucking city."

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Viv sat on a boulder, watching the fucking city go. She took a sip of nawa. It was a nice nawa, freshly made from a nearby canteen.

A piece of palace crashed against the fortress walls, this time taking a bit of crenelation with it. That was the fourth throw already.

“Some milk?” Sidjin said from behind.

“Aw, thank you.”

They settled to wait on the rock. Viv wished she had some biscuits to go with that.

“Sooooo where are Arana and Marus?” Sidjin asked?

“Oh, a bit everywhere. Except the heads, of course.”

“And the half golem?”

“The real golems harvested the silverite for their own use.”

“I see.”

“While Marus was still in it.”

“That must have been unpleasant.”

“It certainly sounded that way.”

Another crash sounded in the distance. Viv resisted the urge to set up a charging station. The ambient mana wasn't great here anyway. And they had enough energy as it was.

“I really thought we would be able to recover the workshops,” Sidjin moaned.

“Yeah, me too, but it's the people and their expertise that matter.”

“Is this... a giant metal vat on the statue's head?”

The golems had planted the broken statue in the middle of the bay, feet down this time, with an improvised hat on top of it.

“Yes, from the foundry. I think it's a running joke of theirs. A way to say they've been there and no one was able to stop them.”

“I hope they don't make a habit out of it.”

“Trust me, I know Solfis. It could be muuuuuch much worse,” Viv replied, taking another sip of nawa. “And no matter what, I take solace in the fact I'm not the person getting the most screwed over here.”

“I think I know who you’re talking about.”

Viv nodded to herself.

“It’s lucky I’ll go to the Glastian wall very soon.”

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Lady Azar, First Minister and head of the government ‘in absentia’ while the younglings went carousing south, looked up from a pile of reports on tar production. The yries had found some tar deposits and requested a clean zone to harvest it ‘for military purposes’. She frowned. Another one of Lak-Tak harrien-brained schemes, no doubt.

“Come on in,” she told the person approaching her door.

Her secretary carefully opened the door. Lady Azar recognized that face. It was the bad news face. She sighed.

“What is it?”

“The, ah, the empress reports that the conquest is complete.”

Lady Azar blinked.

“I’m sorry, could you repeat that?”

“The conquest of the Remnants has been successfully completed, ma’am. The empress requests you to manage the integration.”

“Of Frostbay.”

“Of all of it, Your Grace. All, ah, three hundred and twenty-seven recognized municipalities for a population of, hmmm, approximately forty-five thousand people.”

Lady Azar leaned back into her chair.

This couldn’t be happening.

That was twice the current population of New Harrak, after a recent wave of immigration they STILL HADN’T FINISHED PROCESSING YET!

“Why did I even come here?”

“To make a difference?”

Lady Azar glared at her secretary. That woman had a mouth on her. It was the girl’s influence. She was far too casual with propriety and the chain of command.

“By all the gods light and dark, this is ridiculous. At least, this time there will be an existing framework. We shall raise the Remnants’ administration to our standards. Have the coachmen prepare my personal carriage. I shall go to Frostbay in person to assess the situation.”

“Yes, well, milady, this concerns the second part of the missive?”

Lady Azar didn’t have intuition. That was a spy skill. And yet, a shiver of anticipation crawled up her spine.

“The war golems went to Frostbay under Solfis’ direction. They found it very offensive.”

Lady Azar froze as she was standing up.

“The imperial archives?”

“Very, very offensive.”

Lady Azar calmly grabbed her letter opener, then, with a frightful yell, planted it in her desk.