

Viv returned to the base camp with aching legs and found a mob. Said mob had gathered in the mine entrance's main square and people practically jumped on her when she arrived. Viv felt like a firefighter going from one catastrophe to another. Cover the convoy? Send the black caster. Need to detoxify the land? Caster. Talk to the people? The caster. Negotiate a fucking trade agreement? That's right. Her again. She was clocking more overtime than the average investment banker.

Viv's grumblings were replaced by alarm when she realized the source of the problem.

"So, do you agree that we Kazarans deserve the land and should kill and drive off any newcomers?"

Oooh someone had lit the firecracker on a dog turd. She had to douse this before it blew off and plastered them all. Her money was on the grocery store owner. That massive twat.

Viv walked with the appearance of confidence towards the elevated ground, her mind going on overdrive.

"Viviane?" Farren said by her side with worry.

"I know. Shut up."

She stood up and watched as a wave spread through the crowd before her. Light spells bobbed in the air, giving the entire cavern a surreal aspect. Between this and the clothes, the scene was intimately familiar and utterly alien at the same time. The locals had a greenish tint to their skin and wore undyed clothes. They also stank with an aggressive pong that even the summer crowd back home had not matched. At the same time, the organic way they moved, like a giant organism, was known to her. Silence spread and people turned, and more people would turn and more groups would fall silent. It was the same strange physics that let people sing rolling hymns or stampede. The diffuse mind of the masses.

Terry Pratchett had once said that the IQ of a mob was that of its lowest member divided by the number of participants. She understood the comment but looking at all those avid faces, she realized that there was also an opportunity for something better. Not all speeches had to be for the sake of the speaker. She could... yes. She could teach them about modern values. There were opposing theories on the essence of a nation. Some were based on blood, the ethnic group, the culture. Others were based on ideas. Both had their pitfalls, but at least one of them did not promote xenophobia.

That she could remember.

At least not actively.

Viv's brain went into overdrive once more, the leadership and polymath skills helping her structure and articulate her thoughts.

"What is a Kazaran?" she asked, voice amplified by a spell.

She had silence and their full attention now. Better not think about it too much.

“A Kazaran is someone who stands with the deadlands before them and the infinite wood at their back, on that thin strip of land we call home and fights for, yeah?”

“Yea!”

“Aye!”

“A Kazaran is someone who sees Prince Asshole come for their land and, instead of bending, travels to this mine to oppose him, yeah?”

“Hear hear.”

God that was such bullshit. Anyway. As long as racism didn't take hold...

“So everyone here, everyone who walked the long trail and carried their family so that they would not be slaves is a Kazaran. We are all Kazarans here, right?”

“Yeah yeah.”

It was easy. She could say ‘All Kazarans like cake’ and people would first say yes then actually think about cakes.

“You there,” she said, pointing at a man she remembered almost turned back with his family on the first day, “what's your name lad?” she asked.

He squirmed under everyone's scrutiny.

“Come on, don't be shy, Kazaran. Tell us.”

“Dorrel, goodmother.”

Goodwhat? Ah, whatever.

“And where do you come from?”

“Enoria, goodmother, the north. The border region, near the silent field.”

“And you've been here for how long?”

“Five years, goodmother... me and my family...”

“Came here to find a future free of conflict, am I right?”

“Yes...”

“Someone who came here for a new life, who made the land better. That’s a real Kazaran right here. And you?” she asked, addressing a guard.

“Kazaran born and raised!”

There were a few cheers.

“That’s right, a fighter who held the line against the beastling tied, I remember you. Another true Kazaran you are, sir. And is there anyone here who would dare claim that Resh Ganimatalo was not a Kazaran?”

No one spoke, which was as much conviction as survival instinct, really.

“That’s right. She was from far away but she fought her whole life for the city. Northern Enoria, Southern Enoria, Baran, the Pure League. Hell, even Helock. It doesn’t matter where everyone comes from. What matters is that we all stand here at the edge of the abyss, together. It matter that we all came here to the mine because we wanted to be free!”

“Yeaah!”

“When you look at your neighbors, do not think of their old homes or their tongue, Think that they are by your side today, in our darkest hour, and that we will face Prince Asshole together. For unity! For freedom! For Kazar!”

“For Kazar! Freedom!”

That roused them nicely. Ooof. Ethnic cleansing averted.

Leadership: Beginner 5

Wow, that was a nice increase, three ranks in one go. It was lucky that the Kazarans were not exactly the most educated people around and her cheap eloquence tricks had done it.

“Free Kazar!”

Hah, they were chanting now. Maybe that was why the skill increase had been so large.

“Free Kazar!”

“Free Kazar!”

“That’s right, if those Enorian noble pricks think they can come and tell us what to do, they got it coming!”

“Free Kazar!”

Uh oh.

Uh oh!

“Congratulations on your successful declaration of independence, Viviane,” Farren said, unamused. “Please tell my superiors that I had nothing to do with it if they ever ask.”

“Errr.”

//And you even had the masses do it for you.

//Truly, the Heir has potential.

//Long may you live, Your Grace.

“Aw.”

There was another party to celebrate Kazar’s (tentative) separation from Enoria. They were almost out of booze but people took to grilling the meat Viv had gathered earlier with enthusiasm. She found herself standing on the edge of the raucous crowd with a mutated mole skewer in her hand while Arthur gnawed a giant bat wing. Apparently, her grudge extended not just beyond the grave but beyond the frying pan as well. Truly, a vengeance for the ages.

Her ruminations were interrupted by a burly mass of muscular men guided by the old bearded guy she had seen before, the one who led the remote villagers. He had the defiant look of someone who didn’t trust anyone easily, but when he talked he was polite.

“Evening goodmother. Wanted to ask you a few things.”

“Hm sure. What’s your name?”

“Ban, goodmother.”

“What’s with the goodmother?”

The man looked a bit lost but Farren, who had decided to hang around just in case Viv decided to declare atheism, answered in his stead.

“Ban here is an Enorian, like Dorrel. They came here a few years ago.”

“That’s right,” the man said.

“I mentioned that the Enorians had changed drastically since the onset of the civil war, right?”

“Yes, I think Varska mentioned it as well,” Viv replied.

“That is quite likely. Old Enorian elites had turned hedonistic when the rebellion started. There are rumors on how scandalous they were... I will not share them here. Both the rebels and the current king adopted conservative social measures as a reaction. Enorian men are encouraged to lead a regulated life rebuilding the nation while Enorian women are supposed to help... repopulate it. Goodmother is a recent term of respect used for women past marrying age.”

“Oi.”

“The marrying age in Enoria is thirteen. The title implies that you have married and already given birth to fulfil your role as a productive member of the great Enorian society. I am sorry.”

Viv grumbled but she knew that he was just the messenger. And thirteen on Nyil probably meant something close to fourteen or fifteen on earth. She expected that sort of shit from a feudal society. Obviously, she was already an old bag according to their standards, possibly a scaley cat-lady, the scales being on the cat.

And quite possibly Enoria was the most sexist country on the continent right now and she had to take it into account when dealing with them. A faction led by a woman was bound to be dismissed or seen as decadent. It was too late now anyway.

“They really mean it as a sign of respect,” Farren continued.

“Yes, well, can I say what I have to say?” Ban said impatiently.

“Sure thing but drop the goodmother please.”

“Understood ma’am. As I said, my name is Ban. Me and the boys, that is the good folks around me, we left Enoria after the civil war. Many of us are veterans and we thought that, well, here, the old bullshit would not be the same. Beg your pardon. That is, nobles can’t just take our lands and families for a yes or a no.”

She nodded. That she could understand.

“Well, we were wrong. But what you said about Kazarans being about belief and not a place of origin. You... truly believe that?”

“If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have welcomed the Hadals here.”

“Yeah...” the man said, suddenly remembering the weirdoes who had wisely disappeared off to their caves as quickly as they had come, “yeah you’re right. Actions speak louder than words. Anyway, we were thinking, that is, some of us were thinking that we should help. I bet that you have lots of guards but very few soldiers, aye?”

“You could say that,” Viv replied.

//Excellent.

Everyone turned to Solfis. His natural immobility and tendency to stay in the background made it easier for people to ignore him. Not that he was easy to ignore, but people made a conscious effort to do so to preserve their nerves.

//We will soon have access to heavy infantry armour.

//We will soon have access to heavy infantry weapons.

//We have access to state-of-the-art Harrakan heavy infantry regimens optimized for retraining.

“We do?” Viv asked.

//Yes.

//I have a great many confidential training manuals stored in my databanks.

//I shall select a number of recruits and prepare them for the offensive.

“What’s the difference between whatever you said and our own militia training?” Ban asked, suspicious.

//My program will create killers.

//Militia training will create their victims.

//Any questions?

“Nope.”

//While you were talking, Your Grace, I have contacted Lorn to assist with your own acuity reflex skill practice.

“Eh? How?”

//I have requested that people randomly throw stones at you.

//Everyone in the mines, actually.

Viv gawped.

//Small stones.

//Small stones, Your Grace.

//You will use danger sense to detect the attack and acuity reflex to stop it.

As he spoke those words, a small girl ran out of the crowd. She stopped squat in front of the group and closed her eyes, then with a mighty yelp, she threw a small rock. It clattered uselessly against a nearby support pillar.

She ran squealing.

Viv sent a half-assed bzzt at the projectile.

“Squee?”

//We go to war with the army we have.

Training began the very next day. Viv had received instructions on how to improve the Arcane Construct skill from Solfis to allow her to set up defensive positions, and she practised at the edge of the foundries. Training implied creating a circle on the ground, which she did with a normal purge, then adding shield glyphs at regular intervals. She tried the same for the artillery spell but it was so complex that her mind couldn't latch on the construct when it was done, and that was strange because she could make it in her mind, but try to write it down and it became strange and unfamiliar. Magic was weird.

Arcane Construct: Novice 3

As long as she operated within an army and had a flat surface, taking the time to set up could help her tremendously. She only stopped for lunch (gruel and grilled rocksnout, she refused to touch the bat). Yries visitors came to help set up a well outside and another inside and she was informed that they would soon have enough water for people to bathe.

God fucking bless.

In the background, tireless workers were finishing repurposing a derelict building as latrines and another as an actual bath. Hordes of children played outside under vigilant care and many guards and militias were moving their spears around while others were shows how to handle a crossbow.

"Come to think of it," Viv said, "I've never seen the militia in action."

"They train with the guard twice per week on the common fields," Marruk said.

"How comes I've never seen it?"

"They do it at dawn and while you were in the city, there has not been an instance when you were done eating breakfast by the time they had finished."

Viv tried and failed to detect a trace of disapproval or sass in the Kark's tone, a sure sign that she had done some amazing progress. Maybe even unlocked a snark general skill.

As Viv kept pursuing the path of sorcery, Solfis was doing his thing farther out near the ward stone.

**//Rejoice, maggots.
//For I, Solfis, experimental strike golem of Harrak, have selected you.
//All your life, you have been eking out a living in the dirt.
//Fighting for scraps on the edge of the greatest empire that Parram ever knew.
//Feeding off its remains like worms.
//Now, fate has seen it fit to bring you a chance to exist.
//To have an impact for the first time in your miserable lives.
//Instead of wallowing in the mud like your forefathers before you.**

“Hold on, man,” a muscular bearded man said from the backline, “it ain’t like that! I was not always a laborer. I was a soldier at the battle of Regnos. We held back the rebels!”

//Oh?

Solfis’ unblinking glare focused on the man who had interrupted him. He tilted his head, the gesture strangely organic and all the more terrifying for it.

//And what company did you belong to?

“The Arlon brigade, sir, folks from around the city.”

**//And what will they sing about the Arlon brigade at the battle of Regnos?
//That you took the victory with your own bloody hands?
//That the rebels fled before you as you struck them down?
//Or that you stood and died while others played the important parts.**

“We held the line...” the man muttered, but his eyes were glazed and sad. His back bent under the weight of tragic memories.

The golem stood straight then. He lifted a clawed hand before his skull and intoned in his alien, organic snarl.

**//Lo, during the fifth year of Emperor Hertan, did the Skyrend battalion took to
Windscythe pass.
//For three days, they fought the combined forces of Loress in glorious battle.
//For three days, the arrows of the Merl shattered on their shields.
//For three days, the Krol charges broke on their lines.
//And for three days, Unbroken berzerkers died on their spears.
//On the fourth day, as the sun rose, the battalion descended upon the resting foe with
the fury of the Emperor himself.
//They drove the barbarians back to the river, where they drowned in the hundreds.
//Until the waters ran red.
//And their corpses floated to the ocean.**

The golem had spoken Enorian, not the more subtle language he usually favoured. The tale was raw and brutal and it spoke to the men present. It was not one of bravery against all odds, as they were used to from the usual propaganda. It was one of unstoppable might,

and it bore with it the enticing promise of crushing victory. Power. Being more than just a cog in a meatgrinder. Being on the actual winning side, for once in their damn lives.

“But how are we supposed to do that? We got only one month or two, and none of us are Eron the Dragonslayer!”

//I have no need for Eron the dragonslayer.

The golem’s declaration was received with stupefied silence.

//I heard of his story.

//I have no need for one who rushes alone on a doomed quest and dies by himself.

//I have need of soldiers.

//I picked each and every one of you because I saw the potential in you, the potential to be more than just spearmen dying for the cause.

//But in order to succeed, potential is not enough.

//It must be backed by effort, and a silverite will.

The men closed rank around the golem.

//We shall strike a covenant.

//I will make you go through hell.

//You will curse me.

//You will curse you day your mother gave you life.

//Some of you will leave.

//But those that stay will become the heralds of a new world.

The bony frame leaned forward and suddenly, it was level with the considerably smaller humans. Its tone grew almost conspiratorial.

//I will share data with you.

//If entity Beebiane survives.

//And if entity Solfis survives.

//There are four chances out of five that this region of the world undergoes a resurgence.

“What’s a resurgence?”

The golem lets out a strange, sigh-like sound.

//It means that the deadlands will become smaller and the living land will become greater.

//As will those who live on it.

//Our numbers will grow until lines of steel-clad phalanx blot out the plains.

//And barbed arrows fall like winter rain on our foes.

//You fleshbags will be the first.

//The tip of the spear.

//And the first thing you will do.

//Is to ram that tip down Prince Lancer's throat.

The crowd shifted for all of two seconds, then...

"I'm in."

//Good.

//Let us begin.