

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 interrupted 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 belonging, 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 fill 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 see it with 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 empire? 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 psychotheralich.

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 Enoia. 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 Enoia. 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 the fucking around and the finding out would not be much worse if she got caught anyway.

“Arthur. I need you to carry me.”

“Squeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.”

“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 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, notables 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 merchant 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.”

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 as Lady Azar informed Viv. 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. Javis 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 lots 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 tha

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 Shrii," 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.