

Viv rode on a fantasy Percheron, her chest against the back of a muscular lad, and regretted every second of it. It was now clear that he had not showered in a long, long while. She put her mask back on.

The armors had little glyphs on the pauldrons that she did not recognize, but she hypothesized that they protected their wearers against the excess black mana.

Actually...

[Baranese knight]

No, you dingus.

[Black-shielded light knight armor (enchanted): this poorly made armor was designed to equip soldiers deployed in the Dead Plains. It is shielded against the pervasive black mana and the legs have been reinforced to protect against revenant bites.]

Better.

Specialized gear. That meant an organization dedicated to monitoring the dead lands and, possibly, SOPs to handle errant casters found there loaded with loot.

That was probably not great news.

On the other hand, the soldiers had been respectful. They had not leered. They had not laughed. She took it as an encouraging sign.

She quickly realized how the knights operated. Their blades were designed to smash into creatures and push them back without getting stuck in withered flesh. With enough strength, they could even cleave their targets in two, though they rarely bothered. She kept draining the odd revenant and her rider started to take the habit of pointing at targets for her with a grunt. He had an uncanny ability to tell when they would get in range and when they would be too slow to intercept them.

That was one other interesting thing. The undead detected the three knights from much further away than they had detected her. It probably meant that a large expedition could trigger a small zombie apocalypse.

Those guys knew what they were doing.

The horses were indefatigable, probably due to the magical enhancement that pervaded everything in this world. They soon arrived at a small hill and the fort above it. There were no undead anywhere close.

Viv took a moment to appreciate her destination. The fort was old and it had seen some action. Successive garrisons had repaired the holes with stones, the patchwork result giving the edifice a ramshackle appearance despite its obvious sturdiness. The structure itself was simple. It had a single path leading up to a heavily reinforced gate. A circular wall surrounded several buildings with a single tower rising at the back. She was reminded of low middle age fortifications from her home country. She noticed a few sentries on the wall, each one wielding the same revenant-b-gone polearm. She would have to figure out how it was really called. None carried bows.

The place looked quite impregnable. Revenants would have trouble scaling the sheer walls even if they happened to be smart enough to do so. The defenders would merely have to push them away, and then light a fire down on occasion. It was a sweet setup.

A heavy grate was raised to let them in. Those were the thickest steel bars she had ever seen.

[Reinforced steel gates: those fortress gates can stop mundane battering rams for hours. Only powerful spells will breach them.]

They dismounted. She had to lower her head to pass and soon found herself in an inner court filled with buildings on all sides.

As soon as she was through, the omnipresent black mana saturation faded, just like it had at the springs. It was good to be free of the stuff, even if she felt a kinship with the strange energy.

The court was not empty. She counted about ten men in uniforms milling about. They all stood dumbstruck as she came in, their eyes as wide as saucers.

There was not a woman in sight.

Viv knew the deal. Give an inch and they take a mile. She wore her war face and channeled Mouq inspecting a group of drunk dumbasses coming back from leave. It helped that, compared to them, she was quite tall.

The soldiers were a bit unimpressive. There was a ragged, bottom of the barrel quality to them that she could not quite define. They wore a leather cuirass over a green shirt and steel gauntlets, all of which looked like they had been put in service sometimes during the last decade. They also smelled a bit ripe.

Their short statures were not exactly natural. She had seen it before in the more remote corners of her area of operation, back in Afghanistan. These soldiers had been malnourished during their teenage years. It has stunted their growth.

The interior of the fort was clean, at least, so discipline was maintained.

The officer in charge screamed something she did not understand but probably went along the line of “are you donkeys certain you have nothing to do?” The inner court was deserted ten seconds later.

He turned to her.

“Food,” she said, precluding any negotiation.

His second translated her word with an amused smile. He pointed to a side door from which came an enticing smell. She started to leave, then stopped. She turned back to the sled, grabbed a squawking Arthur from her lair and carried the dragonette inside.

She found a small refectory that could feed around a dozen people at the time. A man in a stained apron was piling jerky in a basket at the back, next to a bubbling pot. A fresh loaf of bread waited nearby.

He froze when he saw her.

Her gaze met his. She calmly sat a squirming Arthur on a table and approached the man slowly, with a light smile. His mouth opened but no sounds came out.

She stopped in front of him, still smiling. She grabbed a piece of jerky and bit into it.

It was pretty good!

Removing the basket from his hands, she returned to the table. The cook crashed against a door on his way out.

You have gained the intimidation skill.

“Nonsense! That was diplomacy.”

The interface did not comment.

The officer followed her in as she was starting on a bowl of stew with a slice of fresh bread.

It was good.

Actually, it was really good. The base was some sort of wheat-like cereal that was still al-dente, with dry veggies and sliced roots in a light broth. The bread was dark brown, crispy outside and tender inside. She could fucking cry. Only her adamant resolve and the temperature prevented her from pigging out in front of the plebs.

The man put a hand on the seat facing her. Arthur hissed aggressively from her half-eaten piece of jerky, beady reptilian eyes squinting with aggression. Viv appeased her with a small no, and a second piece of jerky offered as a peace gesture. She noticed, now that the dragonette was so close, that she had grown a little bit. Not much, but enough to be noticeable.

The man sat down and removed his helmet. Under that, he had a strong, honest face with a prominent cleft chin and deep-set intelligent eyes. His traits were weathered and there was grey at his temples. The most curious feature was that his skin had a greenish tint under his tan, just like the soldiers outside. It looked natural. She was curious to know if this was an ethnic trait, since he did not look like he was from anywhere she knew of.

The two knights by his side also removed their helmets, and her suspicion was confirmed. The tall man she had ridden with had a square jaw and a severe look, while the one who spoke Imperial had a refined and elegant air. He was also the only one with a mustache and a short

beard. They all had black eyes and dark hair that was not much longer than her own, and the strange green tint.

She had stopped eating as soon as the man pulled the chair. He was nervous, and so were his subordinates, even if the suave one was trying to hide it. They waited. The leader was hesitating.

It occurred to Viv that she could start eating again. She was ravenous.

Her father had shown her that eating and sitting while someone else was standing was the height of disrespect. He enjoyed these kinds of games a lot. He would always remain calm and polite. The insults came from subtle gestures, from twisting the truth with measured words so that reality described through his filter fit his agenda. Viviane had loved him for it when she was young because he had used it on others, and she enjoyed winning. It had turned her life sour during her teenage years.

Karma, really.

Leaving had been the most painful decision of her life, because deep inside she still mattered to him and vice-versa. He was just too much of an asshole for it to matter. She had believed that she had thrown off the weight of his legacy when she had made that decision.

Boot camp had proven her wrong.

Entitled. Arrogant. Distant. Those adjectives had come from too many sources for it to be just a coincidence. The hostility she had felt had provoked her to do better, to show the others that she was not a princess and that she belonged. Instead, it had turned her into the queen bitch. Only a small cadre of others had accepted her, those who saw past her demeanor or simply did not care. It had taken her a long, long time to stop expecting people to do things for her because it was the way of the world. And now, half an hour into meeting humans again, she had reverted to her previous habits.

And they were letting her.

She could do it then, she knew. She could position herself as an exotic, banned royalty and they would eat the deception hook, line, and sinker.

Viv sliced the loaf and extended the piece of bread to the man in front of her. She grabbed the platter of jerky and placed it between them.

She smiled.

A great weight seemed to lift from her host's shoulders. The gruff knight sighed deeply, and the suave took a seat as well. The muscular third went to get more bowls.

"Viviane," she said, pointing at herself.

"Bibiane."

"Bibiane."

Aw what the fuck?

"Bveebveeahn," the tall one corrected as he came back and distributed stew.

Viviane, with two Vs as in vindictive violence, gently massaged the bridge of her nose and tried again.

"Bob."

"Bob."

"Bob."

"Bob."

"Okay, who are you?"

The officer seemed to understand that one, which was nice.

"Cernit!" he stated, with pride.

The mustachioed gentleman introduced himself as Benetti and the stoic one as Jor. Afterward, Cernit started to ask her questions and Benetti translated with some difficulty.

She stopped them.

"Golem," she said, pointing outside.

It took some effort, but eventually Jor stepped outside and brought back the heavy frame of Solfis as if it was a crate of wine, muscular arms barely bulging under the tremendous weight. It would have been sexy if the man did not look like an outhouse and smell like one too.

He casually placed the central unit on the ground where the disarmed and delegged golem could observe the proceedings.

"I apologize for leaving you behind, Solfis. My stomach got the better of me."

**//I cannot blame you for your fleshy weaknesses, Your Grace.**

Oh, he was pissed alright.

**//What did you need of me, Your Grace.**

“We are going to ask each other questions. Feel free to drop in. But please, stop threatening them and demanding that I be called princess.”

**//Your Grace, those are lowly knights.**

**//This place is a dump.**

**//You must demand proper respect!**

“We are trying to understand what is happening in the wider world. Be patient. This is an investment for the future.”

**//Deception is a mighty tool in any ruler’s arsenal.**

**//Very well, Your Grace.**

**//We shall have them taught proper manners later.**

**//Once their nation has been subsumed.**

She was reasonably certain that Benetti had trouble following the conversation, but perhaps it would be wiser not to mention conquest when knights of the target nation were around?

“Please, stop provoking them.”

Solfis obeyed for now, and she started a game of linguistics with the Baranese knights. It took her twenty minutes to learn that she was at the Western end of a huge island called Param, and that the knights came from the Eastern part of the continent, where it linked to some other large landmass via a small isthmus. She learnt that because Cernit brought a tattered map and tried to ask her where she was from.

Between the Harrakan heartlands (which had a cute little skull on the map) and Varran stood a handful of other countries. Two of those were very close and rather big. There was a plethora of small stuff as well. Baran was, by far, the largest.

She had to point at the map and say no when Cernit started to ask about each independent city one after the other. Discussions would have stalled without Solfis’ timely help.



**//Your Grace, I believe I have successfully identified the language as a dialect of Varrae nation.**

**//This unit should be able to communicate with them more easily by using this language.**

“Really? It took you this long to draw the parallel between Varrae nation and Baran?”

**//This unit apologizes, Your Grace.**

**//It had to access an unused part of my memory linked to the life and habits of the pitiful peoples our great empire subdued.**

**//The Varrae nation offered the most resistance to our glorious forces amongst all of Param.**

**//That is to say, they offered an actual challenge.**

**//Instead of us just crushing them like pitiful insects.**

“Could we get to the translation part please?”

**//Of course, Your Grace.**

The rest of the conversation went much more smoothly. All three knights could understand the dialect and appeared ecstatic to hear it. It made them more amicable, yet still politely distant. The deference made Viv more self-assured despite her best efforts. She lounged in her seat as if it were a throne, and used her height advantage to its utmost when leaning forward. Before she could realize it, she had created a gap between herself and the men, although one tinged with respect instead of fear.

“Who are you?”

“I gave you my name. I am a caster specialized in black magic. Beyond that, I would prefer to maintain my identity secret.”

“What were you doing in the dead zone?”

“I appeared there following a long-range teleportation accident.”

This part was technically true. The fact that the word ‘teleportation’ existed in Old Imperial informed her that it was a possibility. Solfis did not object to her improvised cover story so it had to make sense, somehow.

Those were the only two questions that she answered in full. As for the rest, Solfis made scathing answers to some of the other lines of inquiries and the look of embarrassment on Cernit’s face indicated that he had stepped out of line. Or at least, the line as understood by Solfis.

Viv did not want to undermine the golem's authority, but she used a lull in the conversation to ask him what this was all about.

**//He asked about your path and casting capabilities, Your Grace.**

**//It is not his place to make demands of you.**

**//Even if you were a regular Hedge Witch, this line of questioning would still be rude and invasive.**

**//I merely reminded him to watch his words.**

Viv was reclining on her seat, hand playing with a small piece of jerky. She flipped it to Arthur, who snagged it and swallowed it in one gulp. The dragonette locked eyes with the trio and licked her chops.

Intimidation reached Beginner 2  
Intimidation reached Beginner 3

“Ask him why he wants to know.”

Solfis relayed her words, and she waited as the leader answered.

And waited.

And waited.

The knight talked for at least ten minutes, with Solfis urging him on and asking additional questions.

**//Your grace, this man's tale is long.**

**//This unit shall summarize it for you.**

**//Lieutenant Cernit is part of a multi-national corps of soldiers deployed at the edge of the deadlands.**

**//That fleshbag extollated their sacred duty under the guidance of Neriad, the god of virtuous combat.**

Solfis' tone is equal part condescending and impatient.

**//This unit believes that he is one of the worthless fleshbags considered expendable and sent here to act as an early warning system.**

**//His role is to light an alarm fire in case they spot or are attacked by mighty foes.**

“And then reinforcements come?”

**//This unit believes that this is not the case**

**//This unit believes that Cernit knows that it is not the case.**

**//Lit fires serve to direct scrying efforts by trained mages.**

**//They also serve to inform the headquarter that there will not be a need to arrange supplies for a return trip.**

“Harsh.”

**//Sacrificing the few for the need of the many is a necessity when monsters can wipe out a kingdom in three days, Your Grace.**

**//It already happened.**

“If you say so. I fail to see how it relates to me.”

**//Cernit claims that a necromancer has destroyed the two nearest forts.**

“Hold it. A necromancer? As in, skulls and bones and bad breath and controlling the dead?”

**//This unit sees that you are familiar with the concept.**

**//A necromancer mostly uses black mana. Like you.**

**//However, they focus on controlling and enhancing undead.**

**//They use those in battle.**

Solfis' voice drips with disdain.

“You make it sound like it is an inferior path, but Cernit obviously fears them.”

**//Humans are fleshy and faillible.**

**//Undead are fleshy, faillible, and stupid.**

**//The mindless undead are an antithesis to sapience.**

**//A necromancer can build nothing, only destroy.**

**//Before falling to an assassin's strike.**

**//Because their bodyguards are imbecilic constructs**

**//By the time I am done with you, you will wipe out necromancers and their armies with a flick of your wrist.**

**//While eating fondant.**

That did sound enticing.

Solfis knew her too well. Sometimes, she felt that he was out for world domination and she was but a convenient patsy. She would have to go back to her world before it happened.

Going back to her world.

She had to do it, eventually. There were people waiting for her. The problem was that the longer she stayed here and the more bonds she was creating. There was already Arthur and Solfis, although she was sure they could manage without her.

There was also magic.

The power was still here, coursing through the strange non-organ that was her conduits. It was hers and she felt that she had been born for it. Every second she spent practicing tied her more deeply to the world.

Perhaps, one day, she would be tied too deeply.

**//Resuming demonstration.**

**//Cernit wishes to enlist our help to last until the change of guard, which will occur in two months.**

“That sounds like a terrible idea. We should just leave and keep going to the forest.”

**//If I may, Your Grace, that might not be the best idea.**

Viv physically recoiled in amazement as Solfis advocated placing her in danger.

“Are you serious? You want us to stay in this death trap?”

**//You are thinking that the necromancer will besiege this place in an attempt to lay it to waste.**

“Yes!”

**//You are correct, Your Grace.**

**//I believe that this will happen.**

**//Nevertheless, staying might still be the best solution.**

“You are going to have to be extremely convincing, Solfis.”

**//Of course, Your Grace.**

**//If we leave now, there is a chance that we are detected by the necromancer’s outriders and caught in the open.**

**//Although most of their troops should be made of revenants, they will undoubtedly control fast-moving elites, such as gut spillers.**

**//There is also a chance that we are intercepted by elite church fleshbags, who would be much less understanding than those pliable fleshbags,**

**//There is also a chance that the knights attempt to coerce you.**

Viv gazed at the trio, who were politely waiting in front of her. The noble one was trying to follow the conversation without much success.

**//Finally, we would be going blind and could possibly face monsters.**

“Those are all maybes while the necromancer attack is a certainty, if what you say is correct.”

**//Indeed, Your Grace.**

**//I deem our survival with this option at around 50%.**

A coin flip? Really?

At least, it was higher than her starting score of lower than 37%. There was hope for her yet.

**//The reason why the number is low is because we will have no avenue of success in any of those scenarios.**

**//Despite your amazing progress, you remain a lowly caster.**

**//An experienced village mage could beat you in a duel.**

**//Being caught means death or long-term imprisonment or servitude.**

“What are the benefits of staying?”

**//One, we will be able to understand the general state of Param before traveling it.**

**//Two, we will extract the location of local garrisons and towns from our willing host.**

**//Three, we will obtain useful contacts as well as knowledge of local personalities from our willing host.**

**//Four, we will obtain the good grace of the Church of Neriad.**

**//Five, I have ascertained that this fortress contains an up-to-date bestiary, which we will need.**

**//Six, we will be fed and hosted for two months, which will give us the breathing room required to bring your skills up to par with a descently trained provincial mage.**

**//Seven, I now have a workable plan to build myself a battle-capable frame within two weeks, which will be implemented immediately.**

**//Eight, and this is important, the battle will considerably increase the speed of your development.**

“Assuming I survive it. Okay, but I see a few issues as well. First, how comes there are no women here?”

Solfis asked, and she was informed that the rule was put into place after several incidents of sexual and plain violence. The garrisons were segregated by sex. One of the forts further along the defensive network was apparently operated entirely by women.

**//Your concern is a serious one, Your Grace.**

**//However, disabling a caster without killing them requires specific equipment that is not present in this fort.**

**//None of those fleshbags will dare lay a hand on you.**

Slofis' belief was built on flimsy foundations, but Viv had to admit that he knew the world better than her. She could also cast Bzzt from anywhere in her body with no gesture and without speaking, a serious defense considering the speed of the projectile.

“Are you certain that the garrison will not turn on me when they figure out I only cast dark spells?”

**//On the contrary, Your Grace.**

**//Those mongrels will be terrified.**

**//You have little to fear from them.**

“From them yes, but what about the necromancer themselves? This is all bullshit unless we can take them down.”

**//Indeed, Your Grace, that foe is the crux of the problem.**

**//However, your own ability to take down even a gut spiller in moments helps us tremendously.**

**//Essentially, the cover of the fortification, your affinity, and the drain spell put you in a unique position to counter them efficiently.**

**//Cernit reports that the nearest fort had a fire lit for three days before burning down.**

**//This indicates a necromancer of middling power, as a powerful one would have felled the place in much less time.**

**//It will take a certain amount for the foe to come lay siege to our fort.**

**//They will need to herd a sufficient amount of revenants our way first.**

**//By then your training will have advanced and my frame will be almost over.**

“You seem confident that you can take them down, Solfis. I do not share that confidence.”

**//Your Grace, this unit has killed a great amount of casters from many different paths.**

**//A basic frame will be enough to dispatch one.**

“You really believe that this is for the best?”

**//Yes.**

Viv considered her options. Solfis would certainly agree to leave if push came to shove, but she saw little point in going against his advice for the sake of it. Solfis had saved her life. Several times. If he believed that this course of action offered better chances, she believed him. Their fates were tied, after all, and he had several hundred centuries of existence on her.

Solfis had influenced her decisions since the day they met, she realized. He still shaped her as he saw fit, and she allowed it with the belief that survival, and eventually a return to earth, would come from her own hand. This world was merciless. She had little faith that powerful archmages would simply accept her story and help her without exacting payment. Training for a few months would be worth the effort.

And the fact that she loved wielding magic and the feeling of power that came with it had little to do with it. Nope.

She had to admit that her reluctance came from disappointment. She had been looking forward to leaving the wastes, but now she would have to watch the green prize from the crenellations of this lone fort for a while longer.

In the end, it was practicality that convinced her to go with the plan. She had to survive first and foremost. Anything else was secondary.

Not that she would agree so freely, of course.

“Negotiate with them. I want my own quarters, enough food for Arthur, and identification papers or equivalent. And ask for a salary as well.”

**//Excellent idea, Your Grace.**

**//I shall exploit your superior bargaining position to milk them for all that they are worth.**

“Don’t make them too resentful, just ask for a fair treatment for a mercenary spellcaster. I am sure those exist.”

Negotiations went swimmingly. Cernit was poor, which she expected, and could only pay her with his own stipend which did not amount to much. His subordinates tried to share their salaries as well, but the proud man adamantly refused. He was obviously moved by their support, however, and Viv instantly placed him in her ‘honorable retard’ box alongside movie Faramir and anyone who had ever fancied doomed charge and heroic last stands.

To make up for the little money there was, the brave lieutenant bent himself over backwards to accommodate her other demands. She would get the room at the base of the tower, a room currently used as an officer’s mess slash plus storage room. She would receive enough dry meat to feed her pet ‘drake’, which they had in excess anyway after the previous garrison had lost half their numbers fending off a mutated undead bat. Cernit could produce a letter of recommendation that would get her recognized as a mercenary in the service of Varran after they were done. That sort of thing could open a lot of doors, mercenaries being a common sight in Param’s fragmented geopolitical environment.

Finally, he acknowledged that she was her own woman and that while she would help them fend off their foes, he could not order her around.

They shook hands on it. Viv’s employ as a mercenary witch had begun.