

The shadows lengthened over the town hall as Resh Ganimatalo finished her tally of the goods to be traded, and the taxes she expected from those. Kazar had undergone growing pains, but now things were looking up under her enlightened rule. Resh was a fine administrator from a long line of advisors and civil servants. Even in the desolate expanses beyond the Deathshield Woods, her skills had made a difference. Influence and coin were her weapons.

Something clicked in front of her.

Resh raised her head to meet the large chestnut eyes of the town mage. The woman was disgraced, but still, she had her uses. Her nature as a recluse meant that she kept away from politics and did not interfere with the affairs of the city, which suited Resh just fine.

Except, that was not quite right.

The mage Resh knew was a broken thing with a subdued air and a bitter smile. This one was different. Resh noticed an intensity in the woman's posture that sent shivers up her spine. The hair at the back of her neck stood up as well-honed instincts came into play.

"How did you get in here?" she demanded. And that was a mistake.

The woman took her sweet time to answer. She had her wavy black hair up and her ugly scar smoldered in the light of the dying sun.

"I set up the wards and detection constructs in this wing. In fact, I maintain and repair all the spells protecting this town."

Resh could read between the lines.

"Is this about the witch? You know that we are at a delicate junction in the future of the city. I cannot have wild practitioners spreading chaos where—"

"Shhhhh," Varska replied, a light finger on her lips.

Resh wanted to scold the woman for belittling her, and realized that she could not. Her throat vibrated and her mouth formed words, but the world ignored her. The end of her sentence died in silence.

"In the world of politics, power only matters when it is seized and used. I allowed you to have free reign over the city because, in the end, this is the gods-forsaken shithole where I will spend the rest of my life in exile. I could not care less if you clear a new section of the forest for some mud-faced yokels to grow tubers on. I will happily let you count all the beans and design all the pigsties. There is, however, one thing that still brings some measure of excitement to little poor me: the supreme arts."

Resh knew she could stand up and leave, but she spotted something in the gaze of the woman sitting opposite her, something she had never noticed before. Life.

“So, Resh dearie, I came here to tell you that the witch is mine. You are a smart leader. She is not worth the price I would exact if you interfered.”

Something lifted, and Resh found that she could speak again.

“You are unwise to provoke me, Varska. There will be repercussions.”

“There could be, and then we could play an interesting game of one-upmanship. Do you know why I am here, banished?”

Resh kept silent. There were talks. Most reports had been erased. Varska had come from a powerful family.

“I am here because I never lost a game of one-upmanship,” the woman explained, and there was something horrible hidden in the meaning of that sentence.

“I have found an interesting thing for the first time in three years, and you will let me have it, or else.”

Resh knew when she could win, and also when it would cost entirely too much.

“As long as she does not break rules, I have no cause to go after her,” she declared to save some face.

“That is all I ask. Goodbye, Resh.”

Varska stood up and something loosened around Resh’s ankle. Blood left the mayor’s face, carried away by a thundering heart.

The mage had been ready to use offensive magic on her, a grave crime. Resh had not felt a thing. Resh could not have done a thing. She knew of no one who could stop Varska.

It did not matter that she was a disgraced caster one minor crime away from the axeman’s blade when no one in Kazar would even try her.

By the time Resh brought herself under control, Varska had already disappeared.

In the following moment of quiet, the sun dipped beneath the horizon.

For the next three days, Viv developed a routine. It was the second time it had happened since coming on Nyil, however and contrary to the Fort Stone routine, this one did not suck ass. Mornings were spent learning Enorian with Farren at a pace that only earth geniuses could have matched. Between the 'polymath' thing and her high acuity, she was able to assimilate an incredible amount of information in a very short time, especially because she had Old Imperial as a base. It was fantasy bullshit, but it was fantasy bullshit to her advantage and that was sort of cool.

It was in the afternoon that things picked up. With Solfis' nature partially revealed, Viv had no qualms bringing him with her to her visits. Varska was more than accommodating, and helped Viv with her practice, going so far as to provide Solfis some of the tools he had lacked. For example, a neutralizing circle and a charged item were used to allow Viv to develop her mana perception with great ease. The item was a small, levitating ball whose sole purpose was to emit mana. Varska also loaded it with different hues to further allow Viv to tell the difference.

Even if Viv felt like she had some difficulties, the playful nature of Solfis' training softened the blow and kept things interesting. It was fine to feel stupid on occasion if the outcome was good progress on her skill. Her results spoke for themselves.

Mana absorption: Beginner 4

Mana perception: Beginner 6

Viv knew that the gains would slow down as she progressed. She enjoyed the feeling of achievement while it lasted.

On top of those exercises, Varska would teach her new runes. She would first draw them in the very air using her own mana, which was brown and earthy with green undertones. Then, she would explain its meaning and have Viv get a feel for it. Solfis had proposed the method and it helped tremendously. Varska's contribution allowed her to visualize and understand the rune at a speed that she did not think possible, then she would cast it a few times to anchor the knowledge into her mind. She did it last, as the effort usually left her exhausted. Like that, she added words such as 'thick', 'forward', or 'turn' to her arcane vocabulary. Varska promised to teach

her more abstract terms afterward. Viv was in no hurry. Each session left her with the feeling that her head would explode.

“I do not think that she was sent here randomly,” Varska said after Viv had gone to satisfy a natural need. They kept drinking tea while working.

//Are you referring to her talent?

“Yes. I have never seen anything quite like it. I thought that the biographies of archmages exaggerated the tales of their speed in order to glorify them. Now, I am no longer so sure.”

//I have aggregated statistics from several generations of talented mages.

//She does not fit in those statistics.

//I will ask that you do not tell her.

“I share your opinion. It would be harmful to her progress.”

//Precisely, mage Varska.

//She is still below average for someone her age.

//We must not let up our efforts.

“We won’t.”

In the evening, Viv played with Arthur and helped the dragonling fly and hunt at the edge of the woods. Arthur was getting better at flying. She was also getting better at communicating by pointing her cute little snout or claws at the things she wanted. The best part was when she picked up the bestiary and brought it to Viv every night, standing on her hind legs and walking upright like a goose. Viv wished she had a phone and the internet, because Arthur would have been an instant celebrity.

They were also joined for dinner by Irao, who always managed to bring back something. The first time, it was a strange, fat animal that he had already dressed, leaving only a fat carcass for Viv to cut and place onto skewers. The grilled meat was gamey, but it also had this unmistakable taste of power that magic brought to some creature. The nourishing, juicy flesh gave Viv a feeling of satiation that no banquet on earth could match. Curiously, Marruk only ate

a little bit of meat every time. On the contrary, any roots and vegetables that Irao brought back were expertly prepared, and then promptly devoured.

Irao offered no signs that he was willing to talk, standing in silence and replying by monosyllables when Viv made inquiries. He would greet them with a weird "Hellow!" and then sit down to help. That was it. Marruk was more receptive to Viv's efforts. She answered the caster's questions about Kark culture with the guarded air of someone expecting criticism. Even after several nights, her wariness did not completely let up.

It turned out that the Kark were an ancient race inhabiting the northern steppes of Param, the largest expanse of land on the continent. The steppes were less fertile than the rest, and the Kark tribes moved often with the help of their large pack animals with which they had a symbiotic relationship. They ate wild cereals, roots, tubers and small game aplenty, hence Marruk's limited appetite for meat. She could not digest too much of it at once.

Lately, however, the Pure League had moved on the tribes which had been weakened by years of infighting following a particularly disastrous civil war. The tribes had been pushed west towards the high peaks separating the steppes from the deadlands. The Pure League made full use of their professional armies and assassin orders, while the Kark's lack of unity and exhaustion left them at a disadvantage. Marruk also mentioned that the steppes had no major sources of iron, so they had to trade for most it at high prices with smugglers and bandits. Marruk's tribe had been hit the hardest by the recent troubles. They were but shadows of their former selves, and Marruk had chosen the path of exile for reasons she did not share. She half-mentioned that her father was still alive, and that she might return one day, after she had learned enough. Viv did not ask what Marruk wanted to learn because she suspected it had something to do with killing humans efficiently. That's what Viv would do.

It was on the dawn of the fourth day that something finally happened in the town. Viv noticed a clamor as she and Marruk were making their way to the temple. Villagers rushed up and down the street with concern clearly visible on their traits. When the pair reached the statue of Neriad, they were met with a squad of temple guards in full battle regalia, standing in two rows and doing their very best to pretend that they were deaf.

"You cannot go, Voice. Your place is here! With your flock!"

"I am the voice of Neriad, Deacon. Not Maranor. I will assist as I am able and not stay on my throne while others risk their lives. I will leave the fighting to the temple guards."

The annoying twit who had welcomed Viv on the first day was arguing with Farren, who finished fastening his armor just as they arrived. His irate companion turned and immediately found a new target for his hire.

"It's that witch twisting your mind!"

Danger alarms rang in Viv's mind. If there was one way for her situation to deteriorate, it would be for Farren to lose favor with the church.

"Ooooh you hear that Farren? My horrible acts of killing undead and necromancers are corrupting your mind. And my great beauty, I suppose."

Viv knew she could be easy on the eye even with the local shortage of cosmetics. Mentioning it herself would hopefully trivialize it.

"Oh yes, and let's not forget your tact and courtly manners," Farren added in a teasing voice.

Most of the temple staff had heard her bitch loudly about declensions, which were an important facet of Enorian and Old Imperial alike. She was reminded of Latin. Or worse, German.

"Speaking of which, we could use your help," Farren continued as he ignored the Deacon. The man turned with anger and strutted away to everyone's indifference. The mood among the temple guards relaxed.

She imagined that someone as rigid as the deacon would be less popular than a Voice who led from the front.

"You know that an expedition through the Deathshield woods was meant to arrive?"

"Yes."

"Well, some of the early elements left the woods at dawn after running for the whole night. Reports are confusing, as they are wont to be after a rout. It appears that the expedition left with less soldiers than what was wise and they paid the price for it close to their destination. The main body might have been overrun by a beastlings tide, or they are still holding. We are heading out to offer relief immediately, and I would be grateful for your assistance. You will be offered the standard rate for casters."

"A search and rescue? Count me in. I just need to go grab my stuff."

"Good. Meet us on the road, at the edge of the forest. Lady Varska and Captain Corel will be there as well."

The two ran back, and were stopped on the way by women who handed them baskets of packed food. They refused payment and pointed at the wood to remind them of the urgency of the situation. It took them only a few minutes to get prepared since they did not have to worry about food. Viv decided that they would leave the sled here. She carried most of their food while Marruk picked up Solfis and the rest. They jogged to their destination.

There was no way to leave Arthur behind. The small dragon had felt the tension in the air, and she had taken off as soon as the door opened. Viv could look up and see the dragonling's shape before the blue background of Nyil's sky, keeping a lookout.

They could not have missed the gathering if they had tried. Corel was at the head on a warhorse with a small mounted detachment of well-armed guards in scale armor. They were at the head of a column made of a few wagons, mostly empty, and one large barrel-like thing that must have held water. The temple guard took the center of the formation with both Farran and Varska sitting in a fortified carriage loaded with archers. More guards in compact columns formed the back. Those wore leather armors and wielded shields with various weapons. Viv ran to Farren and climbed by his side. Arthur landed a moment later. A few people glanced her way without alarm, the tale of the witch and drake duo being old news by now. After a few minutes, the last stragglers had joined the column and the armed troop marched forward at a good pace.

The light woodlands that Viv trained in, and in which Arthur had become the bane of the local squirrel population, soon became denser and thicker as they penetrated deeper into the Deadshield woods. The local mana took a taste that Viv recognized as 'brown' mana. Brown mana was not just brown, it had a green aspect to it and was unique in this regard. It was also Varska's specialty.

The change in the taste of the world also altered the black mana quantity by increasing it. Viv realized that Kazar was especially poor in black mana, partly because of the ward stones blocking it off. The woods were filled with life and death as well, with many of the taller deciduous still devoid of leaves. Numerous evergreens still provided enough color to block their views.

Ten minutes into their silent ride and Viv was struck with a deep feeling of unease, not exactly oppression but more a feeling of immensity. The Deadshield woods had stopped the black mana saturation for a simple reason. It was alive. It was ancient, and it was, more than anything, impossibly vast. Viv thought that ancient Germanic tribes must have felt the same way when they first delved into the untamed depths of the Schwarzwald, long before it was dotted with settlements.

Few people spoke. Whatever orders fused now and then were muffled by the dense layers of loam, and the infinite rows of gnarly trunks. Animals did their thing hidden in the distance. They could sometimes hear calls, roars, and the piteous cries of things dying to feed a bigger one.

Viv turned to Watch Varska as the court mage finished her preparation. She had a short staff by her side the length of a nightstick. It was a delicate work and, just like her, it had been disfigured. Parts of the ornaments have been torched and mangled, leaving the rest functional but no longer whole. She also wore a form-fitting armor made of very light mail under a green and brown tabard. Viv had always found the female armors in most fantasy armies retarded, what with all the exposed cleavage as if boobs had their own repelling force fields. She was glad to see that Varska's armor was sensible enough to go up to her collar. She even had a mail

coif, and a cute little hat made of leather and steel. By comparison, Viv was terribly underdressed.

Varska had checked all aspects of her armor, then lit every glyph on her staff one by one. After she was done, she inspected tiny vials she had in pouches and other tools Viv could not identify. Only when she was done did she turn to Viv and addressed her in a low voice.

“That’s your armor, yes? We must absolutely get you a new one.”

“That’s not my main defense though.”

“What is then?”

Viv pointed at the Kark woman by her side. Marruk had applied a strange paste to her face that added black swirls to her red skin. She had the health potions they had left on a bandoleer around her leather armor, except one that Viv had saved for herself. As they stared, Marruk repositioned her ‘shield’ which emitted a loud clang as she let it rest on the wooden boards surrounding them.

“Fair enough,” Vaska admitted, “now am I right to assume that you have little experience fighting in an army?”

“Not one with magic.”

“Ah yes, you were a soldier. Stick with me and I will direct your efforts, if you allow me. Our first priorities are the large monsters and casters, in that order. If they are allowed to disrupt our formation, the beastling could overrun us. Leave the chaff to the soldiers. They know what to do.”

“What can I expect in terms of large monsters and enemy caster capabilities? The bestiary said the beastlings fought in waves.”

“Correct,” Varska said with a hint of approbation, “they will launch mass charge after mass charge and capitalize on any breach they find. Remember, beastlings always outnumber you. Always.”

“You seem certain that they will still be here.”

Varska’s eyes grow unfocused.

“I remember fighting them before during a cleanup campaign. If the Beastlings are numerous enough to attack a caravan, they will not stop until every person in it is dead and devoured, or until they have been slaughtered. We will meet them, and we will fight them. We must.”

“Alright.”

“Corel is in charge of the operation this time, with Lorn as second in command.”

“Is that the head of the temple guard?”

“Yes. I take it that you two have never met. The temple guards are veteran fighters and they all follow warrior paths. If it looks like we might lose, regroup around them. I assume that you did not have the time to recharge your stone?”

“No, I did not have the opportunity.”

“A shame. No matter. Assist me and the two of us should be able to disable the most dire threats before they threaten our lines. I hope you are ready.”

“Don’t worry, it’s not my first time,” Viv assured the mage, “I can take it...”

There was a small awkward moment when Viv realized that it was definitely an innuendo. Thankfully, language here probably functioned differently so Varska would probably not notice.

Viv looked at the mage.

She had noticed. One of her eyebrows was raised in amused consternation.

“Err, I mean. I have done this before. The action part.”

The second eyebrow joined the first.

She was just making it worse, wasn’t she?

“Do mages also tend to make sex jokes just before battle?”

“Of course, dirty jokes might just be... standard preliminaries.”

Groan.

Wait. Viv was a modern woman, the result of centuries of enlightenment and social progress. She was not going to be outdone by a woman in a goddamn tabard.

“I finally understand why you brought that stick with you.”

“I could give you an in-depth demonstration.”

E...EW!

“I think I have things well in hand.”

“But I know just how to hit the spot.”

How could she be that vulgar with her straight face and aloof noble look and that casual voice?

“What’s this thing called again? I have it on the tip of my tongue.”

“A wand. And I am always happy to help you explore... new venues.”

“Ladies, if you please?” Farren interrupted.

Viv stopped and realized that every archer was looking inward instead of keeping guard. A few looked extremely uncomfortable. One of them was drooling. Marruk had both her hands covering her face and she had turned a beautiful shade of burgundy.

“Perhaps... we could continue our contest later,” Viv finished, unwilling to admit defeat.

Varska nodded gravely, then leaned to the side and whispered in Viv’s hear. The mage’s warm breath tickled her. She still smelled faintly of flowers.

“It would be tragic to leave each other unfinished.”

Ok so maybe it was arrogant and culturally insensitive to assume that Nyil would not have its own snarky perverts. Varska’s dirty mind certainly surprised her. As they moved apart, Viv watches a genuine smile bloom on the mage’s face, the first one to show no brittleness.

It came and went like an eclipse.

“Fine. You win,” Viv confessed with an eye roll. The smile returned.

“I have no idea what you could be referring to.”

“Squee?”

Viv thought that Varska should be ashamed to make sexual overtures in front of the kid. Ah well.

Viv found that her mood had improved, which proved useful in the following hours as they started to find the first bodies.