

Viv woke up in her bed all warm and dehydrated, with a solid weight curled around her chest.

“Better not make a fucking habit out of it,” she grumbled.

//Good afternoon, Your Grace.

“Squee!”

“Hullo everyone. Gh. Head hurts.”

Arthur peeled herself off from Viv’s chest and received a scratch on her chest scale for her trouble. Viv luxuriated in the warm sensation while the dragonette spread her wings and held her head high, proud as hell for the worship. Viv managed to reach the side of the creature’s neck with a light touch. The scales were warm and smooth and, come on, it was a fucking dragon.

Arthur squawked and retreated to her perch, the separation, which creaked under her increasing weight. She took flight and there was a crash on the other side of the room.

Meanwhile, Viv realized that she felt the rash fabric of her cover on her skin. A brief inspection revealed that the skin suit had been dragged down to her waist, and her shoulder bandaged. That could only mean one thing.

“*Putain de merde*. Someone saw my tits.”

//As a matter of fact, two people had a glance at your chest, Your Grace.

“Dammit.”

//A soldier by the name of Korad, who has the largest life mana attunement of the camp and is in charge of healing.

//And Jor, who held you up and then carried you here.

“Hold on. How do you know all of this?”

//Cernit came by and explained everything while standing at the door.

//He seemed worried about your reaction.

//He also heaped praise upon you for saving their lives.

//I requested that he swear allegiance to you as repayment, but he claimed he already had a previous engagement.

Viv stood up and summarily washed herself with water from her basin. Her shoulder was still painful.

“Does not feel fully healed to me.”

**//The good lieutenant mentioned that your body resisted healing.
//I was afraid that it might be the case.**

“That’s bad.”

//You should be receptive to alchemical healing, Your Grace.

“Oh, yes, they had potions.”

**//Did they, now?
//You should ask for one, Your Grace.
//But not for this wound. It would be a waste.
//We might need the potion later.**

“Maybe I should ask, yeah,” she agreed. Now dressed, she left her sleeping space and saw a large ribcage by the golem.

“Oh, they listened.”

**//This belonged to a powerful undead beast.
//Or, to be precise, it was powerful according to your current, lowly standards.
//I shall make good use of it.**

“I thought you already had everything you needed, by the way?” she asked with a bit of suspicion.

**//Indeed.
//The ribcage will save me a lot of time.**

“Not that we need it now,” she remarked, “the necromancer is dead. I killed him myself.”

She was pretty sure that he was dead. If that kid, no, if her foe could come back from such a serious case of sieve chest, he could start his own religion.

//This unit estimates that there is a 67% chance that the necromancer you killed was not responsible for the fall of Fort Stone.

Viv choked on the glass of water and pill she was draining with the enthusiasm of the severely hungover.

“How do you figure?”

**//As mentioned, Cernit made a full account of the encounter to me.
//From the safety of the entrance.
//Since Arthur chased them away after they placed you on the bed.
//And was hissing and threatening to take flight.**

“Aw. Good dragon.”

//The necromancer should have had a great many revenants with him.

Viv stopped to consider.

“Perhaps he left them to search for powerful undead in the village?”

**//No, necromancers have no need for that.
//The size of their horde can increase to stupefying amounts with little effort on their part.
//As revenants will simply follow the pack without prompt.
//However, revenants without impetus, those ‘left behind’, will tend to spread out over time.
//A horde left for several days without supervision must be gathered again.
//It would be more impractical to split up to move faster.
//It would also be safer to stay with the horde.
//Therefore, there could be another threat.**

“I guess we shall see.”

**//Yes, Your Grace.
//In the meanwhile, this unit requires charging of the main power source, please.**

Viv sighed and complied. The process of charging exhausted her mana but not her mind. She was out rather fast, however, having not entirely recovered from her ordeal.

“I think it’s taking more and more time for me to have a full charge of mana, if you know what I mean.”

**//Yes, that is correct.
//But not an urgent issue.
//As long as we are in the fallout zone, you can simply step out of the isolation zone and drain black mana from the very air.**

“And get poisoned.”

**//I am sorry, Your Grace.
//I am going for efficiency.
//For your own sake.**

“Yes, yes, I get it. I’m out of juice and I’m hungry. I’m out of there.”

//You should take a moment to rest, in any case.

//We can continue your education tonight.

Viv stepped out of her room and made her way to the mess, bleary-eyed. It was deserted at that time, but someone had left cold bread and warm water around to eat. She dug in.

Cernit knocked on the door and joined her a moment later. He was walking slowly and favoring his right leg, but seemed otherwise fine. Benetti and Jor came soon afterward. She narrowed her eyes at the taller soldier who studiously ignored her.

She did not have an issue with nudity when medical professionals were concerned. She did not have an issue with nudity with her fellow female soldiers. The knights were different. They were... other. Not her group.

Viv realized that she was biased. The three knights and all their soldiers had joined the list of outsiders in her mind and it was probably too late to change her own view. Racism perhaps played a role. They had greenish skin for fuck sake. And different traits. And a different tongue. Foreigners, although to be fair she was the foreigner. And they were suicidal morons who had left her behind in their suicidal charge as if she would have stood a chance alone and without a horse had they failed.

No matter the cause, they pissed her off. She had saved them because... because they were on her side and she was supposed to be the medic. Fucking meatheads.

Cernit must have felt something because his hopeful smile fell down. He took something from his back. It was, she realized, an overcoat made of black-shielded material.

“Thank you,” he articulated.

She accepted the gift with a nod. How could she express how annoyed she was? Perhaps this was normal behavior for them.

Yes. Now that she thought about it, it made sense for the knights to risk their lives on a gambit rather than choose the path of caution and regret it later. They were called knights, not mercenaries. She had to expect some sort of honor-based chivalry from them.

She would complain, but a less chivalrous group might have tried to take advantage of her and those clearly didn’t. You lose some you win some.

In front of her, Cernit was searching her expression with worry. He was so desperately transparent that she found it amusing. Any of her father’s allies or foes would eat him alive.

Benetti broke the silence.

“Is Bob... Princess Bob... irate?”

The term he chose was part inappropriate. It sounded like it would be written “meleus”, and was reserved for official proclamations. More specifically, war. The incongruity of the word brought a small smile to her lips. Here she was, in the middle of a shitty fort on planet fuck you, sulking because her comrades-in-arm were behaving exactly the way they were supposed to, while they were discussing is some long-dead language that magic had imprinted directly into her brain. Was it really worth getting pissed off over?

She shook her head.

“No, I am not irate.”

“Sad?”

“No. Just. Please do not leave me behind.”

That was the crux of the problem. If they were to fight side by side, they should not drop her and fuck off, even if it was supposedly to protect her. They should have counted on her to take the enemy caster down instead of charging forward like retards.

“Sorry,” Cernit told her, “and thank you.”

“You saved our lives,” Benetti continued. Jor nodded, face as expressive as a brick.

“We promise. No leave behind.”

They all conferred and repeated their oath.

“No leaving behind.”

Though they may never achieve friendship, they had achieved respect.

After that very moving moment, the trio looked at each other and the wall with mounting embarrassment until Viv shooed them away. She finished her meal and decided that she would accomplish exactly fuckall magic-related. She was also tired. This place had no internet, however, and that made down-time a thumb-twiddling nightmare. Might as well help Arthur.

She regained her room and scolded the little monster for clawing one of her sleeping bags apart, for some reason. That was annoying, but perhaps she was bored? The dragonette was soon dragged outside for some landing exercise, squealing with delight. After a dozen crashes, she started to get the hang of it. After half an hour, she could stay in the air for a few seconds.

After ten more minutes, the beast was washed and needed a break. Viv retired to her tower. It really sounded nicer than it was.

She leafed through the monster compendium again and tried another book, The history of the region escaped her, but the way to recognize magic had a hidden treasure trove of information: it contained runes. Written runes.

“Solfis, I think we hit the skysteel vein. Look at that!”

The war golem was working relentlessly on his new ribcage. He did not pause.

//Indeed, Your Grace.

//I did not expect the book to have the runes actually written down.

//It will accelerate your learning.

Solfis was right. Viv dug in with eagerness, devouring the instructions with a little translation help from the golem. Her mind latched on the symbols on its own, and she finally came to a realization.

“I can focus better.”

//That is correct, Your Grace.

//The higher your mental score, the easier performing mental tasks will be.

“Does that mean that I am... smarter than before?”

The golem had no eye, and no face, and it still managed to convey condescension through a second of silence.

//Is thinking faster and for a longer time the same as intelligence, Your Grace?

“I believe that you are enjoying putting down organics far too much, Solfis.”

//This unit admits to a certain bias against fleshbags, present company excluded.

Arthur squealed weakly from her napping spot.

//This unit does not extend the exception to your pet.

//Returning to the main statement.

//On the other hand, you have come across fleshbags yourself, Your Grace.

“You are too harsh.”

He did not answer. She had to admit that there was a gap between memory, processing speed and focus on one hand, and intelligence on the other. She had a memory of an IT specialist working for her dad's political platform. He was an uncontested genius in his field. He was also convinced that the opposing party was secretly headed by a cabal of freemasons aiming to start the third world war, and that her father was out to stop them. She and her parents had repeatedly made fun of him behind his back. Damien, her brother, had not. He pitied the man. Her father kept him around because he was cheap and easy to order.

She returned her attention to the book. Any increase in ability was welcome, she just had to remind herself that it did not equate being more competent. She still had to work at that.

The runes flowed into her memory as if latched on. They were magical in nature, each carrying a concept. It was... a universal language. Exhausting universal language. Even just visualizing one drained her focus.

Viv closed the book a bit later. She was now a bit disappointed. Her book's purpose was to allow a soldier to identify the most common spells, enchantments, and traps, with the explicit purpose of surviving them. It was not designed to teach the runes or give general examples of classical combinations. Solfis also declined to teach her.

//You must rest now, Your Grace.

//You have pushed yourself too far for too long.

//This unit must also dedicate itself to finishing its frame.

//Having me by your side will significantly improve our chances of survival.

//This unit would advise thinking about the symbols and how to merge them into spells.

“Ok, but are there not, I don't know, tried and trusted combinations I could use?”

//This unit has many such combinations.

//Unfortunately, most of them require the use of other mana colors.

//At your level of skill, that is.

//I can only suggest you to experiment, as witches have a more... organic approach to learning.

//You have already demonstrated creativity with the yoink spell.

Viv mulled this over, then stood up to scream no at Arthur, who was checking if books were edible.

“Damn it, why is she nibbling everything? There are teeth marks on every piece of furniture.”

//Unknown.

Perhaps she was being too cloistered? Viv would try to walk the dragonette more often. She just hoped the little terror would not attack anyone.

Shortly after, Viv realized that she was exhausted and laid in her bed. Arthur grabbed one of her covers in her maw and huddled by her feet. It was nice.

The night was dark. There were no stars and no city light to offer any source of illumination. Her mad dash southward had left her exhausted almost every night. It was the first time that there were no clearly identified threat on her life since, well, since she arrived in this land. Nyil, the interface had informed her. The necromancer was dead. Her poisoning level was low. She was among allies in her own room.

It was silent too. With nature deadened, the only thing to disturb her rest was the soft hum of Solfis' engraver as it delicately carved through dragon bone. Loneliness reared its ugly head. Back on earth, Viv had had many acquaintances but few friends. Those who she had clicked with on a fundamental level numbered few, and she had kept their bonds alive with jealous care throughout the years. She missed them terribly now, especially her online friends. She missed Fraise's boundless optimism and Gevaudan's sharp wit. She missed her brother. And Mouq. At least, they were safe back on earth. She had to believe that.

Arthur crawled up between her legs. The warmth the little monster emanated was simply staggering.

That was nice as well.

Viv fell asleep.