

The council finished soon thereafter. Viv caught some shut-eye and woke up at the crack of dawn. She used the barest amount of water to wash her face and brush her teeth, then they were on the way with a squad of city enforcers, the inquisitors, and the temple guards. Viv trotted down the slope and soon recognized where they had battled a horde of revenants. At the corner of a ridge, they spotted the Min Goles abandoned complex.

It was still as dusty and desolate as when they left it. They passed the slag columns and the ruined warehouses without incident.

“How do we know that there aren’t any dead ones in those things,” a city guard asked.

“Because there’s no one trying to eat your ass right now,” Lorn retorted.

“Look,” one of the guards said, “footsteps. Humans. They were not wearing shoes.”

“More revenants?”

They followed the tracks to the remains of a campfire.

“It looks like the mountain tribe sent people here.”

They mulled this information for a while.

“I knew the bastards could not be trusted, they came here behind our back!” a guard spat, but Lorn reacted immediately.

“Don’t judge too hastily. It’s just scouting. We have enough enemies as it is.”

The other grumbled but did not comment. Viv agreed with the old knight. Everyone had a different agenda, with their own priority. It didn’t mean that they couldn’t work together. As long as they respected the fact that the temple had legal priority.

It wasn’t long before they came in front of the monumental entrance. Someone, probably the Yries, had enlarged the hole so that people could go in and out in a single file. There was still a veritable mound three meters high and eight wide that blocked the way.

“We don’t need to clear everything right now. It just needs to be large enough to let the cisterns through,” Lorn reminded everyone.

“Not to be critical or anything,” a guard said, “but can Lady Bob help at all? Can you even use brown mana?”

Viv raised an eyebrow. A second later, a thick wire of black mana dug into one of the upper rocks. It sliced half a slab, which then slid and crashed down near her feet. The witch stepped away and pointed at the result of her labor.

“Remember to lift with your knees, not with your back,” she told the guard as he gaped.

Lorn's team chuckled with good nature as they helped with removing some of the obstruction, but soon it was time and the inquisitors led the way inside to secure a base. Viv was left outside with the city guard. Between the men's stats, motivation and the liberal use of Viv, they had cleared a dozen cubic meters before the first cart arrived.

The group kept working tirelessly as some of the guards moved in to protect the more vulnerable refugees. Laborers soon replaced tired soldiers until Viv was working with a brand new team, except for Marruk who was effectively pacing herself. Courtesan Yan came to hail her between two spells.

She had not seen the man for a while. The good-looking head of the brothel had evacuated with all his aides, and Viv had seen Spotted Feather employees walking around, spreading harmony by inquiring how people were feeling and — she suspected — occasionally dispensing the odd blowjob. They had worked hard to keep people together, though she had never seen him in the command tent.

"How are you doing, Viv?" he asked in a low voice. Everyone around suddenly looked very busy, with the vacant look of those who are obviously eavesdropping..

"Could be better," she answered honestly, "by the way I appreciate you guys coming."

"We didn't have a choice, my dear. Even if the Enorians had not deported us, invading armies seldom pay for our services, and never take no for an answer."

"Ah."

"I am delighted to see that you have little experience with that. I hope we can keep it that way. Also, I regret to say that we will need secure access outside. People need sunlight."

"Working on it."

"When do you think that your work will be done? I apologize, it's just that we are curious."

"Passage should be wide enough in two hours, or half an hour if you use that chin of yours to help us crack rocks."

A few people chuckled and poor Yan scratched his most prominent facial feature with a rueful smile.

"Glad to see that your tongue is also sharp. I'll help with unloading, you take care."

The courtesan moved away and the grind resumed. They had made a large enough hole as noon arrived and everyone was served some broth with preserved vegetable and rathclaw meat. It was actually quite tasty in an 'side dish' sort of way.

"Damn I don't miss being hungry."

There were no incidents for now and the people of Kazar were clearing the entrance with record speed. Latrines and proper cooking spots were dug outside by people in armor, but it was a stopgap measure. As it was, the refugees would have to sleep in tunnels, which were not so easy to defend. The time had come for Viv's next initiative.

"Whelp, time to test my limits I guess."

//All will be well, Your Grace.

//I will guide you, as always.

Viv walked through the desolate remains of the Min Goles foundries and barracks with the usual suspects in tow. Silence was heavy and the air was still, a mark that the black mana saturation was too high for the world to function properly. Viv felt the spice of it flowing into her conduits, half poison and half energy drink. They stopped at the edge of the desert. Solfis had selected a column of molten slag. The vitrified surface was too bulbous and irregular to inscribe anything, unfortunately.

"Hm, don't we need a flat surface?" Viv asked.

Solfis did not answer beyond fixing her with his yellow glare. His long hand whipped out faster than she could follow and there was a sound of tortured metal.

A full slab slid from the column and collapsed on the ground, revealing a smooth plane underneath.

"Wow."

//I exist to serve.

//Now, we will begin by drawing the outline of the spell.

Viv took out her notes. She didn't need them, but it made her feel better.

First came the battery, with its link out so that a core would be charged by placing it against the surface. Then came the spooling circle, which was used to concentrate the collected mana and turn it into something usable. Finally, the most important part was the collector itself. This one she had entirely copied from the obelisks she had recharged.

Viv drew each of the three circles with calm concentration. To her surprise, her recent improvement in finesse genuinely enhanced her ability to draw and write cleanly. Meditative trance helped her stay focused as well. In the end, she had every circle carefully drawn with glyphs in place.

The spell primed. It was weak and diffuse, yet she felt it. Black mana was being pulled from around her. It was ready.

//Good, Your Grace.

//But we are not done yet.

//The construct was designed to be engraved.

//We must finish it.

Viv knew what to do. She grabbed one of Solfis' claws, a weapon as long as her forearm, and went to work. The powerful weapon served as a stylus with which she carefully engraved every rune she had drawn, using them as draft. Twice, her exhaustion took its toll and her hand faltered, but Solfis simply used his reflexes to prevent her from damaging the spell. He guided her through the process even as cold sweat pearly on her brow. She was not physically exhausted, but mentally so. Holding all those concepts in her head at the same time brought the kind of strain that only exam marathons could match. Her mind had grown fuzzy by the end of the second circle. By the end of the third, she was holding to clarity like a drowning man to a buoy. All the exercises she had done those past few months gave her the practice she needed, however, and with one last stroke, the spell triggered.

Circle by circle, the glyphs lit up. A pale glow emerged from the grooves, followed by a light hum. Black mana swirled lazily at first, then with increased speed into the construct. The obelisk lit up like a beacon a minute later as it reached full functionality.

Viv sat down heavily on her haunches and watched her creation come to life. Despite her exhaustion, her grief, and the fatigue that came with constant stress, she felt happiness. This was proof of a job well done. Here stood the culmination of tireless efforts. It was working. Her construct was working.

//Well done, Your Grace.

//Now the deadlands will be pushed back by a few more leagues.

//You did it.

New path Skill: Arcane Construct at novice 1

Black Witch: 5/5

"Wow. I..."

//You are on the third step of your path.

Marruk's eyes bulged.

"This is great news! Congratulations! And only after a few months... aw, back home we would have celebrated it."

"Is this a big deal?" Viv asked, quite pleased with herself. The interface was prompting her but it was not in a hurry.

“A step up the path is always cause for celebration, Viviane. In every culture.”

//You are finally catching up.

//Right now, you are only a few years behind a competent mage in terms of skill levels.

//We are on schedule.

//Now, I shall let you read the available list.

“Not going to direct me?”

//You are not actively dying, therefore we are not in a hurry.

//I would request that you consult with me before picking your choice.

“Alright, let’s have a look.”

Path evolutions available. You may choose any from the following list. Congratulations!

Available paths:

- Empty palm warrior
- Scholar
- Accountant
- Explorer
- ...

The beginning of the list was exactly what she had been offered last time, with most of them relying on her earth experience. There were a few new ones as well. She immediately discarded those that were too situational.

Rune Inscrber: The best shields are those that will last a lifetime.

- Rune engraving and activation is easier, less tiring.
- Intuitive understanding of constructs..

The description showed a class dedicated to making magical constructs. Taking care of them too. If she based her entire existence around Solfis and his restoration, it would be worth it, but she much preferred him basing his existence around hers.

Undead bane: Erase the mistakes of the past, one victim at a time.

- All your spells are more efficient against the undead.
- You detect and understand undead with preternatural acumen.

That was pretty useless. She was already devastating against those, and did not intend to spend her entire life here anyway. She would have to leave the deadlands to fix her soul, at least she thought so, and humans were the most dangerous of her foes right now.

Viv continued down the list.

Tribe shaman: Sometimes people need guidance, and sometimes they need an artillery spell.

- Improved casting.
- Added social and administrative skills

This one was pretty useful in the current circumstances. It was a continuation of the caster path with some politics mixed in. Varska had warned her that she needed to have very high skill levels in order to reach the fourth step of the caster path. It was technically possible not to advance one's path and wait, and she suspected that it was what Irao had done. There was simply little incentive to do so. A path was simply a way to channel the magic of the world to help oneself. There was no way to cheat the system. It was simply a tool to guide someone to what they wanted to become. Right now, she had completed the Black Witch path and was not good enough to reach the next step. She had to keep working and could use this opportunity to diversify her skills.

She kept going.

Arcane assassin: It's harder to find the culprit when all the clues have been disintegrated.

- Additional tools against humans.
- Stealth tools
- Improved casting.

This one... was tempting. Not only could Irao help her, but she had a way to go after Prince Jackass now.

Except... no.

No.

This was not just about revenge. The people of Kazar had lost their homes and she had decided that she would help them and, fuck it, this would not. They would still have an intact army behind strong walls except that this time they would be out for blood. She had to bide her time. Survival first, vengeance later.

And she would be a shit assassin.

Viv associated assassins with snipers. Those she had met had been extremely patient, extremely driven individuals. For all her hard work, she was not the most cold-blooded person. The din of battle, teamwork, and helping the wounded attracted her more than a patient game of cat and mouse.

No, that did not feel right.

There was only one class left and it immediately caught her attention.

//Your cardiac rhythm increased, Your Grace.

//I see that you have found it.

“It sounds too personal to be random.”

//Sometimes, people are trailblazers Your Grace.

//Individuals who have an impact.

//When you influence the world, it influences you back.

Lost Heiress: Not all who are lost, wander.

- Improved leadership, particularly in crisis situations.
- Improved black mana casting
- Improved colorless casting
- Improved survivability.

“I’m not the heir to anything, not really.”

//Was your father not rich and influential?

“I left that part of my life behind a long time ago.”

//Clearly, it has not left you.

//His influence is still prevalent in your mindset, your methods.

//You reproached him for his jaded ruthlessness.

“I am not jaded.”

//No. You are not, Your Grace.

The unspoken sentence hung between the two. Solfis broke the silence with a careful tone. His voice was low.

//You are not just technically the heir of HARRAK.

//It started as a trick to alter my directives.

//Now, it is the truth.

**//You carry our language, our casting techniques.
//You carry my hopes for the future.
//You are the heir, because there is nobody else left in this world to carry that title.
//And because I trust you.**

“So... I should pick that, you think?”

//You must feel it call to you.

“Yes...”

**//Tailored classes are tailor-made.
//They are a rare occurrence, though far from unique.
//There used to be a ‘Lenneis slave lord’ path, for example.
//It was designed for the ruler of Lenneis.
//I would advise you to pick tailor-made paths everytime.**

“Alright. I’m doing it.”

Viv selected the path in her mind and didn’t feel any different. There were some notifications though.

Leadership and intimidation are now class skills.

“Oh.”

**//It means that they will progress faster, Your Grace.
//And become more effective.**

New skill: acuity reflexes at Novice 1

“Come to think of it, I got leadership at beginner, not novice.”

**//Leaders need a variety of qualities.
//You obviously worked on some of them before.**

“Maybe. Anyway, we’re done here. Let’s head back.”

“And celebrate!” Marruk said.

“Squee!”