

Viv reached the tail of the convoy by afternoon. Her borrowed horse trotted merrily along the line of well-organized and neatly packed carts. Gone was the image of refugees groggy and stunned by their misfortune. The Kazarans moved on with cold determination hiding their deep fears. She saw it in the fake smiles, the deep sighs and the licked lips. Those people were terrified, but they had hope, and so they were throwing themselves down the lion's jaw hoping to kill it before the fangs snapped shut.

It was the same with the fighters. At the top of the column, they marched in good order. The militiamen had turned their pilfered cloth armors and weapons into a semblance of uniform by all wearing a white upper shirt. Grey flags bearing the tree of the city floated on top of spears like so many pennants. The core of the army, both newly made Harrakan heavies and mountain soldiers went ahead in neat ranks. Finally, the elites under Lorn and Denerim opened the march, with scouts fanned before them. They, too, showed nervous calm and well-contained anxiety.

The first night came.

Despite their decent speed, it would take almost a week to head back. A lot of people had trouble sleeping despite their exhaustion if the amount of late night strolls and isolated couples were any indication. The morning came with a copious breakfast. They had decided to go for broke and finish their reserves. If they succeeded, they could just get grain literally off the stalks and eat them boiled. If they failed, well...

The convoy passed through the mountain tribe territory on the third day. Villagers came to wave red cloth at the passing fighters and sing songs of encouragement. Laborers in the field cheered for the Kazaran fighters and their own. A few of the villages distributed fresh water and flasks of extremely powerful booze at crossroads. The convoy took on a festive air. That night, the council gathered.

"Any indication that we're walking into a trap? Lancer could have pretended to leave."

"I don't think so," the man in charge of the scouts replied. His name was Michar and he was seldom present, preferring to stay on the field. "We followed their tracks for a good fifteen leagues and a few of the Hadals went much farther. The Prince is gone with two thirds of his troops."

"Can they be trusted? The Hadals, I mean." Lorn asked.

"I think so. They're damn good, I'll tell you that, If they decide to lie, there isn't anything we can do. But I trust them. They showed their worth during several hunting missions."

"Alright. Then we shall proceed as planned."

Viv eyed the only Yries to join the strike. He was a tiny one named Rak-Tok and he had brought with him the key to success: a SUV-sized, self-propelled drill that looked like someone had fixed the digging part on a steampunk locomotive, modified for speed so that it could keep up with the column. Viv wasn't sure how it was powered and dared not ask.

It looked suitably badass.

The mood turned more serious as they went over the mountain. On the afternoon of the sixth day, they arrived at the edge of the chain. Beyond, the green wall of the Deadshield Woods expanded to the horizon, and before it, the thin golden stripe of ripe fields. Finally, sitting on its small elevation in the middle of that defiant band was Kazar herself, shining red under the lilac boughs of its great tree while the twilight sun bled across the land. Their prize, waiting for their return.

They drank and made merry on that last afternoon of free time. They were far enough that the scouts had absolute control of the place. In fact, they reported no enemy agent. There were just a handful of militia in a waystation at the feet of the mountain. Viv didn't drink, she meditated instead then told a few stories to Arthur who was still convalescent. They went to bed early.

They woke up with the aurora.

Every soldier put on then checked their gear, including Viv who had also found a standard helmet her size. They assembled in a column and walked down the mountain. The bodies of the enemy sentries lay by the side of the road, throats sliced open in ghastly red smiles by their scouts. Those soldiers who had not known combat saw the bodies and shivered. A few lost their breakfast but no one gave them shit for it. The army advanced without a cry, their approach covered. The pallid pink lights of the early morning caressed the plain.

They went past many fields. Those who had stolen their land had barricaded themselves in their warprize homes, aware of how tenuous their claims were. The scouts made sure that no one left to warn their enemy. The Kazarans stopped close to the city at the edge of the deadlands, just behind a ridge. It was the shortest uncovered distance to the walls.

There was a lull when soldiers went from march formation to ranks, with the crossbowmen arraying themselves behind the shields. Viv stepped to the front and waited until everyone was ready. They were looking at her. They were expecting a speech. Viv made a circle and cast the sound enchantment, the only colorless one she had truly mastered.

"Kazarans, this is it. The moment we've all been waiting for. The conclusion of two and a half months of gruelling work and selfless sacrifices to reclaim what was taken from us. All of us gave their all to make today happen. We trained from dawn till dusk. We fought through confusion and despair. We never doubted. The world is not fair but if there is one group here on this gods-forsaken continent that deserves a lucky break, it's us."

"Yea, aye," came from the ranks.

"Success isn't assured. Success is never assured. What we can do is prepare and when the time comes, go in with no fear and no regret. I will tell you this, there is no need to regret. We have stacked the odds in our favor. Every piece of equipment we could make, borrow or steal, you're carrying them right now. Every technique and skill we could use have been practiced till our fingers bled, and if there is anything more we could have reasonably done

to prepare, well, I can't think of it. I'm proud of all of you, and when we all go down that hill, don't look behind, but know that you are carrying the dreams of your loved ones and that they could not have hoped for better champions. Now, remember. Fight hard for your home, look after your neighbors, and give those fuckers hell. I'll see you lots on the other side. For Kazar!"

"For Kazar!"

It was on. Orders fused from every officer. They knew what to do.

"Form up, form up!"

"Hah!"

"For the temple..."

"... for Neriad!"

"Harrak eternal!"

"The mountain will never fall!"

Rak-Tok locked himself in the cockpit of the drill and made the engine roar. Horn calls shook the air at the front of the formation and far, far in front of them, alarm bells rang in answer.

The line of fighters crested the hill with sun and fate at their back.

Viv had been in battle before, back on earth. She had also faced the beastling horde but this was different, it had been rushed and more police operation than true war. Now she felt an energy in the line of fighters that modern warfare lacked. Squad tactics brought with it a sort of excitement that could not compare to two hundred fifty throats yelling battle cries and descending down the slope with the slow momentum of the nascent avalanche. It was partly her doing. She had taken the spirit of the mob and sublimed it into the spirit of the warband. The allied yells ballooned her, pushing her up and front with imaginary wings. In front of her, the walls neared slowly. They were walking fast, not running. The drill had to get there first.

Viv saw activity far into the distance, near the gates. The enemy was probably thinking that it was their destination since it was the only way in, but Viv had made it this far by creating her own doors and she had brought a fucking tunnel borer.

They were walking on fields now. The slope to the wall was very near when Viv's danger sense screamed at her and she dove. At the same time, Marruk raised and angled her shield, which had been reinforced. It still looked like a door though.

A massive arrow clanged against its surface and was sent twirling through the air behind them.

“Try again, bitch,” the stout woman muttered. She never swore. Viv looked at her own shield and thought the poor girl might be feeling offended.

//That two-storied mill right in front of us, Your Grace.

//On the roof, left side.

“Purge!”

A black line like a thunderbolt surged from above her head and smashed into the roof of her target, sending gravel and stones tumbling down.

//He dodged by jumping off.

//I will hunt him later, but I fear that he might not be alone.

“Let’s just stick together for now.”

The boring machine approached the wall and slowed down. The engine roared and the drill started to turn. It moved on at a slow pace.

For one moment, Viv feared that the walls might resist. They had been enchanted by Varska and then possibly upgraded by a siege specialist. She need not have bothered. The Yries creation went through it like an incendiary round through butter. It barely slowed down. They saw its butt go through the breach and then the Temple Guard followed it. They were in.

The drill turned as it was instructed, letting their elites establish a beachhead. Viv looked on amused as the Yries went to open a second one, which was not exactly in the contract but could not hurt their chances. The wall was now a human-height pile of rubble, over which their side was climbing carefully as the footing was unsure. Viv followed the vanguard and they were inside of the city.

It felt unnatural seeing all those white stone houses with flattish roofs, so familiar and yet alien now, harboring invaders and foes. As she watched, a few militiamen with spears and the white and blue of Enoria ran away with terror, followed by a pair of men in full plate and conical helmet. Those were the bridgers, and they were as well-equipped as she feared.

“We need to move to the center of the city,” Lorn ordered loudly, “single column.”

They had expected resistance immediately but as far as Viv could tell, the foes were still gathering around the gate. It was worrisome until she remembered that if the entire enemy army was inside the walls the defenders were pretty much fucked.

The troops moved on with Viv encased in ranks of soldiers and Marruk before her, Solfis by her side and her new shield over her head. She was searching for the earth caster and leaving the rest to her allies. The fabric of the world was quiet for now. Everyone was saving

their strength. The colorful weave of mana smoldered at a low pace, waiting to be unleashed by hundreds of minds. It was quite the spectacle.

//I have located the archer.

//I will intercept while the buildings offer you cover.

//Please do not be reckless.

Solfis must have calculated that this offered the best odds. Viv hunkered down as the column progressed at a snail pace. They had to move past a few blockades that looked improvised but were annoying enough to delay them. Two minutes into the slow trekk, screams erupted from behind. Lorn moved back while the column stopped and hunkered down. Viv thought that it was a bad idea, they had to keep moving, but she was not in charge and frankly didn't know shit about battling other humans. Solfis landed by her side, right claw bloody.

//The Enorians have formed hit squads to slow us down.

As he spoke, there was another yell not far behind and an Enorian fighter in chainmail crashed on the streets, throat slit.

//Two-six has taken exception to it.

“Alright, Temple Guard with me,” Lorn ordered, “Ban, lead your men to the main square, double line with crossbows. Deploy when you see the foe. Cover the witch!”

“Aye!”

The Temple Guard left the front on an intercept mission and Viv found herself only three lines and one Marruk away from the front, which meant that she could see stuff again. The old man Ban was perhaps new at being a heavy but this was clearly not his first rodeo.

“Move up, you asshole! What are you waiting for, an invitation?”

They came to another obstruction, this one just a few overturned carts. Ban had his men lift them and push them aside under cover of a forest of pointed quarrels. They were through in fifteen seconds.

“Enough of this bullshit, we’re going in!”

The heavies roared and the city guards behind answered in kind. They accelerated.

“Where are the snipers?”

//No signs, Your Grace.

//They may be waiting for you to be distracted.

“I’m not moving a foot away from you,” Marruk declared. Her yellow eyes searched rooftops and elevations for danger.

Finally, they were in the main street between the city gate and the square where the tree and Varska's tower stood. The way widened enough for ten men to walk abreast. The formation spread out. The Harrakan heavies took point once more, not slowing down with the guards just behind. The militia covered their backs. They moved up and Viv was getting tired trying to feel earth mana. They found the enemy as they rounded the corner.

Anchored between the temple of Neriad on Viv's left and large houses on her right, there was a line of militia with shields and bows. An officer in mail and with a shiny sword stood upon a low wall. He pointed his blade at Viv and yelled, voice improved by magic.

"Here she is, the Great Black Slu—"

Twang.

Viv looked sharply to the side to find that Corel's replacement, investigator Tars, had fired her crossbow. The man reeled and reached for his cheek where the bolt was now firmly embedded. He fell backward.

"None of that now," she simply said.

"Hold there!" Ban yelled. "Crossbowmen readyyyyyy!"

The two formations stopped fifteen meters from each other. Viv could see a mole on a terrified militia's face. Some of them had clearly been dragged from their beds.

"Fire!"

Both sides shot at the same time. The Enorians were using short bows, hunting implements, mostly. Their arrows plinked against the thick shield wall of the heavies, bounced off massive helmets. One of them found an eye and the soldiers simply pulled it out and crushed it. Their side, however, was using Yries-made crossbows. At such short range, they were absolutely lethal.

Viv watched the first rank of militia get mowed down. Many fell with screams and many more kept tumbling with every passing second. There was still no trace of the earth caster.

But... Viv was a pure caster and he was not.

"I should be on the offensive," she realized.

//Yes.

Viv cursed and started blasting purge spells, making sure to stay vigilant. She was too used to someone telling her what to do when it came to pure battle operations. Her inexperience impeded her.

"Fuck. Purge!"

The spells had a devastating effect on the Enorian militia. They yelped and pulled back in disorder until the Kazaran side lost sight of them behind the curve of the slope. They had retreated to the square.

“Forward!” Ban ordered.

They moved on. Viv saw more of the temple on the side. Neriad’s statue shone under the early morning sun. The tree was so close. A few more dozen steps and she would see Varska’s tower.

Time slowed down as she finally found what she had been expecting. The smell of blood and shit faded as wind picked up and carried the purifying aura of thousands of purple leaves forward. She was already hot under her helmet, and everyone was breathing heavily. Under her feet, a massive trap activated. Someone had buried a circle under the stone and triggered it just now.

Viv breathed out as hours of intensive practice let her flood the ground with black mana, just like her lover had shown her. The ravenous power wreaked havoc through the carefully crafted construct, splintering it. The trap hiccupped and died. Black mana kept expanding until the enemy caster cut all contact. The main enemy army came into focus then, with the bridgers at the front this time. Armies placed chaff at the front when defending and elites when attacking. They were obviously waiting for the spell to activate. It wouldn’t.

It was too late when they realized that it had fizzled out. Most of the heavies and mountain soldiers were already on the plaza. There was one fateful moment of suspense when both sides looked at each other in perfect silence and Viv could see the white of the eye of a kid in armor to the side, then the officers roared at the same time and two massive waves of metal-clad humans rammed each other with skill-backed fury. The sound of impact was more car accident than battle.

“Werfer.”

Men screamed and died and the lines wavered, yet they held. Viv remained vigilant, she still had not seen her enemy. Every second, she arced a simple purge spell above the head of her allies and shoved it into the enemy lines out of sight, but it was getting difficult to focus. Her new mastery of mana played against her.

Humans were magical here. They all had some measure of attunement to some colors and skills used mana, and there were a lot of those being thrown around right now, but it was not all. They were pushed, needled, reinforced by the powerful emotions animating the crowd. Viv realized that she had never truly understood how deep the resentment ran in her allies’ mind. She did now. The battlefield was a scene of purposeful, methodical savagery. The officers bolstered men who exchanged blows around or through shields, steel weapons stained red. The mana of the world danced exquisitely and she made the mix darker with every dark spear she threw.

Her side buckled and they would have bled much more without Viv's steady strikes and Tars' vicious point-blank range crossbowmen. As it was, the fight was too vigorous to determine a winner. The bridgers were simply too disciplined and battle-hardened to fall to their much less experienced opponents. In the mighty din of battle, Viv's mind would have lost focus without the magic changing her to her very core. Calculations and concepts ran on overdrive and she felt more than saw the coming retaliation.

"NOPE!"

A vast shield spread over her line, the largest she had ever conjured. Many bridgers covered but it was defensive and blocked a hail of obsidian spears ready to rain upon her side. Compared to Varska's attack against the beastling wave, it was small and pathetic. The void devoured the conjured stone and her own attack followed shortly after. Viv cut a summary circle and glyph under her feet for more oomph, then she conjured the true form of her 'arty' spell. Charged with the meaning of annihilation, the projectile launched with the power, momentum, and penetrative power that qualified it as her first war mage construct.

"Blast."

A javelin as thick as a leg curved gracefully through the air and to the point of origin of the spell, the second floor balcony of a manor. She saw a wall rise defensively in a mere second. The spell went through it without slowing down.

//I see blood, Your Grace.

//I shall make sure that the caster is no longer a threat.

//Two-Six is covering you, but please be careful.

Viv nodded and focused forward. She was at the highest elevation of Kazar and Kazar was the highest elevation around, therefore the number of places from where she could be shot was limited. With the snipers a lesser concern and the caster disabled or about to be, it was time to go to town.

"Move us forward," she told Marruk.

The stout guard pushed through and replaced a wounded soldier in the battle line. Viv peeked from above her shoulder and dove immediately back. A small arrow was intercepted by Marruk, not one from a sniper but from a militia. It didn't matter. She knew exactly where the foe was.

"Purge net."

She aimed at the highest concentration of bridgers and flayed them. Their armors were solid enough that she failed to cut them to pieces, but the wounds were so devastating that her victims fell in droves anyway.

"Purge net."

Again, the spell flared and again it was received with a concerto of cries. Her side was pushing now as the others collapsed under the devastation, but as the heavies advanced, the front extended and Enorian militias could now join the fray. The lines stabilized once again and Viv simply kept casting, killing again and again and again even as she could not see exactly where she was hitting. It was like lobbing grenades into a sealed room and felt... almost cruel. Solfis returned quickly with a man in uniform dangling helplessly from his grip. He was surprisingly alive.

//The earth shaper unexpectedly surrendered, Your Grace.

Viv imagined what her own reaction would be when facing a magic-absorbing bone terminator and 'surrendering' definitely topped the list, so she was honestly just surprised that it didn't happen more often. She dismissed him for now to focus on the closing battle.

There could only be one outcome at that point. Viv's side had too many aces including a spellcaster on her third step. Lorn's Temple Guard's suddenly appeared from behind the bank and smashed into the militia's flank. Tars' guards and the Kazaran militias also had the same idea and they had managed to flank the mass of Enorian defenders. It was too much for the defenders. A large chunk retreated to the town hall while individuals ended up surrounded, begging for mercy. They were disarmed and taken aside.

Both groups reorganized in front of each other, almost within spitting range. For some reason, there was no exchange of arrows or quarrels while this happened, which Viv thought was weird before realizing that she had stopped casting spells as well. A momentary truce, perhaps?

Lorn took the tip of the formation and Viv realized with worry that Koro was not among their numbers. She could be just hurt though. Similarly, the seriously wounded were taken back while fresher combatants took the front. On the Enorian side, the remaining bridgers had formed a line three-person thick in front of the entrance. They were needed by an angry-looking officer with a deep, precise gash in his shoulder that Viv thought she might have inflicted. He looked livid with anger. And blood loss, probably.

"We offer you Neriad's peace," Denerim said without anyone's input. Viv frowned but she realized that she was using a religious order as warriors and she could hardly blame them for being, well, religious.

"Surrender now and you will be held prisoner humanely, until you are judged."

"It's a lie," the enemy officer screamed, "they are under the spell of the Great Black Slut. Do not trust a word that comes out of their mouth!"

Denerim's face showed a perfect mix of disbelief and annoyance. He closed his eyes and whispered a few words. A golden radiance fell behind him on the statue of Neriad in front of its temple. An otherworldly wind lifted the inquisitor's dark and grey hair, now tinted a radiant gold.

"Neriad is still with me."

“It’s a trick!” the officer growled, though many of his men looked less than enthusiastic.

“Do you mind if I say a few words?” Viv asked. Denerim sighed heavily.

“I am not convinced that it will help coming from you, but... sure, be my guest.”

“Alright lads, you lost. You can surrender according to his terms, or you can deal with the rest of us.”

Solfis, still holding the wiggling form of the earth shaper, stabbed forward with his right foot. A man who had pretended to be dead screamed and dropped his knife as he was dragged up.

“No! P—”

Solfis calmly grabbed the man’s head with his right claw and pulled with the casual grace of a sommelier opening a bottle of champagne from a great vintage. Arterial blood spilled in the deafening silence. Marruk took a few swings of her gore-covered mace while, left and right, guards reloaded their crossbows with malicious intent.

Intimidation: Intermediate 6

“No!” the officer said, “We are Enorians, we will never give up against an agent of vanity and fornication!”

“Alright, then the truce is over,” Viv declared.

Her words floated in the air even as her own size looked surprised at the abrupt end of negotiations.

“Purge.”

Viv’s spell was overcharged and as fast as she could make it. The deadly black spear skewered the officer in the throat then went up. He fell like a stringed puppet.

“Truce! Now, who’s in charge of you lot?” Viv asked the terrified ranks.

“Hm. You are?”

“Good lad. Drop your weapons and come out slowly, single file.”

It was over. The prisoners lined up with fear and doubt but without resistance. Viv let the Tempe Guard handle them as they were more familiar with the rule of war.

“I should go help with the wounded,” she said.

//Your Grace, remember that the Enorians have a political leader.

//We must capture him and receive his rendition.

“Oh yeah, and then submit this lot to judgement. I take it that raping and enslaving the defeated counts as a crime, yeah?”

//Indeed Your Grace, according to Enorian and Neriad tradition.

It was then that the earth shaper spoke. His voice was pretty calm for someone who was so obviously terrified.

“Oh then let me state for the record that we had nothing to do with the way your dead were treated after the battle. It was the Prince’s decision, I swear.”

Viv wondered what the fuck he was on about, then realized that by ‘battle’ he probably referred to the readguard action in which Varska... Varska...

Wait.

“What the fuck did you say?” she asked with a deceptive calm.

“I... uh...”

Solfis lifted the man and smoothly smashed his head against the pavement. He lay there, mewling.

“WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU JUST SAY?”

“The... the fallen were declared traitors to the kingdom, the gravest of crimes. Their remains were brought to the deadlands and... discarded. I am so sorry.”