

Training picked up. The mines now had the peculiar mood of a home army camp on the eve of deployment. Half of it was all business, but the other half also did their best to make the circumstances more pleasant. The baths were kept clean and well-flooded, there were new constructions rising every week and a few kind souls had spent a lot of time and mana to create bushes of wildflowers, bringing some much-needed green to the desolate place. Viv spent her days either practicing outside or accompanying convoys to and from the Yries camp and specific hunting grounds that only the Hadals dared travel. She fought the moles again, the bat, two giant worms, a sort of trap lamprey that dropped from the ceiling and a particularly pungent gut spiller. The Yries asked her to help clear the vale outside their cave which she did for a few more services. Her efforts bore fruit and she got a pleasant surprise after a particularly intense practice with the inquisitors.

Mana sense, mana manipulation and mana absorption have merged into the advanced skill: mana mastery at novice 1

It was a breakthrough, one that had a distinct and lasting impact on her perception of the world. Mana pervaded everything, absolutely everything. Even the stones had a potential, an impact on their surroundings that went beyond the mere physical. The entire world of Nyil was... malleable. Someone powerful enough could turn it into a salt plain or an eternal garden. It would take an impossible existence but it was technically feasible. Mana colors were not true colors but categories of intents left on reality. She could taste them, feel them, see them... not manipulate them since she did not have the proper distribution though, and that was strange.

She could see the red around a lit torch, but she could not grasp it with her mind. It felt strange to her, distant, though not alien. It just did not recognize her. The part of her soul that moved the world did not have the limbs to touch red mana. Trying was a strange and frustrating experience, but the frustration lasted only so long as she didn't try to touch the black. When she did, well...

Once, Varska had said that using mana was struggling against the will of the world. It certainly felt that way with colorless mana which was simply raw potential. Black mana was an entire different beast altogether. Before, it was like an overeager Labrador puppy. Now, it was a bloodhound. Even if Viv's control was far from perfect the energy still flowed in and around her with lithe, deadly grace. It begged to be unleashed. It almost felt... alive.

Lost Heiress: 1/10

Her attunement had also reached 24.2%. The idea that such an abstract concept could be measured with math baffled her to no end, yet it came from the god of magic so who was she to judge? Concretely, she was on the verge of casting her artillery spells the way they were meant to be, not their simplified version. Her mana channels also reached the mage level and her ability to cast continuously increased dramatically. All in all, it felt like a massive

improvement after months of relentless pursuit. She sometimes wished she had gotten it a bit before, but quickly told herself that it may not have helped much.

The Yries made good on their promises and they delivered heavy armors and weapons with regularity. The trainees selected for this week's shipments immediately switched to their proper gear and discarded those that had been pilfered from revenants. The armor themselves were made of iron, very dark, and made by means unknown. They had a glassy, pitted quality to them that gave off a raw vibe that worried her until the town smith and the church conducted some tests.

"This is prime work, if ugly. I threw an axe at it and the thing barely got dented. The owls sure know how to build things."

Meanwhile, the rest of goodies arrived, mostly Yries crossbows. Those were not new. They were the sort of cobbled-together weapons the strange beings had used on the revenants, yet they were effective and the guards took a liking to their own. Many took to decorating their weapons with some turning into real works of art. The only parts left untouched were those dedicated to firing and they were mercifully standard so bolts were interchangeable.

Viv got her silverite tool delivered with the black mana stone used as pommel. It was not a short staff, of course. She wasn't some sort of field marshal. It was a knife.

A big ass knife.

To stab people, because why not have the option? She was going to bring that thing into battle and did not see the point of looking like a cheerleader. It also came with a sheath that complimented her off-grey robes pretty well.

The design was both simple and exquisite and truly showed what a master forger could achieve when skills and magic were involved. She didn't think that a modern computer-based cutting machine could have done any better. Most of the surface was left untouched except for a few shield glyphs that immediately proved useful.

'Pok'

"Aw, DAMMIT!"

'Hss'

"Hah, I got it this time.

"Paf."

"Gah, not the shin you ASSHOLE!"

Day after day, the children of Kazar would sneak up on her and throw small stones to help her train acuity reflex. The skill allowed her to cast at an incredible speed when in danger, replacing finesse-based reflexes with mental ones. It was an incredibly useful survival tool

and she was more than happy to see it develop. The only problem was that she was convinced that the little twerps had gotten skill increases too. They were merciless. Solfis had even been forced to implement one hour breaks between attempts so that she could practice in relative peace.

Arthur was a bit surprised about the violence at first, yet she understood the concept of 'mock-battle' and training.

"No."

"Squee?"

"Not you too. No."

"Squeeeeeee..."

She was not the only one making progress. A month after the start of the training, Solfis went to visit her as she was recovering near the well. He had brought Ban with him. The old, retired militiaman looked even more thunderous and wiry now, all lean muscles like taut steel cables. His long white beard jutted out of his heavy helmet while his dark gaze zeroed on Viv with laser-like intensity. As for the lost heiress, she was trying to chill and the atmosphere had just turned dead serious.

"Yes?" she asked, regaining her composure.

**//We have achieved success, Your Grace.**

**//Ban has reached a milestone and he is able to upgrade his path.**

**//There is only one condition left to achieve.**

"I need to swear allegiance to the Harrakan Empire," Ban said, looking miffed, "Can't say that I'm ecstatic."

"The Old Empire? The one that blew up completely?"

**//You are considered as heir to the empire, Your Grace.**

**//I am aware that I stretched the rules to nominate you when we met.**

**//However, it appears that the Dead God, Nous, has a sense of humor.**

**//Ban must swear allegiance to you.**

"Errr, fine? I guess? Is there a ceremony or..."

"Not so fast," the old man stopped her. He took a deep breath, quite flustered.

"Look, I swore to myself that I would never bend the knee again to any man. Or woman, I suppose. I am forced into a situation I don't like one bit. That said, hmm, if it will improve our

chances against Prince Lancer then, harrumph, I suppose that I can make that sacrifice. However..."

And there Ban's expression grew so dark that Viv could have sworn that it was a skill. It was particularly impactful because Ban was quite strong, his dark armor was quite thick and he had a full metal practice stick that looked like it weighed a ton.

"Betray the ideals you've shown, ask me to kill children or the like, and you'll get my spear through the guts, even if it kills me. You won't see it coming but you sure as Enttiku will feel it going out. We clear?"

"Perfectly clear."

Solfis didn't say anything so Viv assumed it was all fine.

Ban sighed again, a powerful movement that shook his whole torso.

"Right. Right. I, Ban, son of Greror, solemnly swear to serve the heir, long may she live, for the good of the empire and its people. Gah! Harrak eternal."

**//Harrak eternal.**

"It... It's working."

Viv inspected the man as his eyes grew wide as saucers.

[Harrakan heavy recruit: dangerous, a man who follows the path of the Harrakan heavy infantry. He focuses on heavy pole weapons, group formations and squad tactics.]

Ban relaxed and his eyelids fluttered.

"By Neriad's balls that is one powerful path. If this is the norm then no wonder real infantry tore us to shreds. Fuck. This is so unfair."

**//Ah yes, the world is unfair.**

"Don't patronize me.

**//But it is quite nice when it is unfair in your favor, is it not?"**

"... Yeah."

**//Let us stack the odds.**

**//Back to it, recruit.**

"It feels so strange not to be called a maggot anymore..."

**//That's the spirit, recruit.**

**//Now go back to training with the other maggots.**

Viv watched them leave and returned to her practice.

The next pleasant surprise happened one morning as a regular Yries convoy reached town. The owl-creatures had come often to trade stuff and the Kazarans had only been too happy to oblige. It had the added effect of giving jobs to the less martial members of the community. This time, the visitors had been unexpectedly joined by Lak-Tak, the large female stone-weaver. She requested to see Viv and a crowd gathered before the mine's entrance to watch the scene, with the light of the morning sun shining from behind the mountains.

"Friend Viviane, you have been truthful and fair in your dealings with us so far. After we were chased from our homes, we had a poor opinion of your species. We still do, but we think you and Farren and the others might pave the way forward to greater cooperation."

Lak-Tak spoke in a slow and determined voice, each syllable clipped but perfectly clear.

"Thank you, Lak-Tak. It means a lot coming from the Yries," Viv replied, appreciative.

"Yes. By greater cooperation, we mean more exchanges and more trades. You can even come and visit sometimes but generally we would like to be left alone."

"Of course."

Blunt.

"To symbolize our friendship, we have designed a shield that will prove useful to you. We remember that you were hurt by a quarrel. This shield will stop the quarrel and arrows that will come this way. Please note that this is not an oath. Also, please note that the shield only blocks quarrels that hit it, you still need to hide behind."

"Oh, thank you. That will be very useful."

Marruk grumbled something but Viv thought that it was a delicate attention. The powerful Kark fighter could only 'gate-keep' (haha) the enemy from one direction at the time. And it was true that the Yries quarrel that hurt her had passed through her partially-formed shield, only looking a bit corroded. The snipers probably had arrows that were even more efficient. It did not hurt to have more protection, not to mention that she usually didn't use her hands to cast anyway. That was more of a mage thing. She was much more instinctual.

"This is a very thoughtful gift," Viv added in her most earnest voice. It felt nice to get free stuff once in a while.

"You are welcome. Please kill Lancer. If not, please keep him away from us. After that, please remain the same."

“I will not turn on you, if that’s what you fear. I promise.”

“I think that you believe your own words. I also know that humans desire much. I hope that you remember this moment when it will be convenient and easy to go back on your word. Then, you will know your own measure.”

“Yeah. And I hope it never comes to that.”

“It will. Iron is very valuable. Goodbye, Viviane the lost heiress. Stay alive and stay yourself. The drill is almost finished, we will send it up soon.”

The Yries passed a spindly limb over her heart, or at least Viv thought it was her heart it might have been her gallbladder. She nodded once and departed with the other Yries squawking excitedly at the sight of greenery. They were gone soon after.

Viv looked at her shield. It was round and surprisingly light given its girth. It came with a harness that she had to wear to fix it on her back, which allowed her to just reach for it over her head in an instant. The surface was sheer and grey except for a single inscription on the side that did not feel magical.

“It’s the symbol for Yries!” the town smith grumbled, “can’t have you go into battle wearing foreign colors. Gimme dat.”

Viv did because the rest of the crowd cheered at his words. The piece was returned to her later with a flat layer of metal half a finger thick added on the opposite side of the symbol. The smith had inscribed the tree of Kazar on it. It was rather cute

“I won’t mess with that inscription of theirs. For all I know, it’s part of the enchantments and besides it’s bad luck to erase an artist’s signature.”

The added layer probably messed with the balance but it was not like she knew how to wield a shield anyway. She inspected it.

[Reinforced Yries Aegis (enchanted): this masterwork was designed specifically to protect its wielder against piercing attacks by spreading the impact over its entire surface.]

Nifty. Now she only needed a proper helmet.

Training continued, with Viv keeping her shield with her to protect her back at least. Eighteen more trainees changed paths over the next two weeks while the rest dropped. A few of the guards gained skill related to crossbow-handling and integrated them in their existing path. The mountain tribe soldiers did not change paths since an oath of allegiance was required. The army of Kazar was close to taking shape and Solfis successfully requested joint maneuvers. Viv found herself spending a few afternoons hunkering behind Marruk, walking around behind ranks of infantry. The golem had advised the adoption of a combined line of shields and ranged weapons, here crossbows, which was effective in small scale battles. Viv

had no idea if it would work or not. She was not a student of military history to begin with, and skills would fuck with her assesment in any case. Better to let the experts decide.

Lorn had approved.

It was impressive how important formations were perceived to be, and how much effort was spent making sure that the army would hold together until past the wall where it would (hopefully) split. Even with skills backing the movement of the soldiers, there were accidents and bumbles. They did little to soften the sight of three hundred men and women moving in unison to reclaim their home. She just hoped that most of them would make it.

So far, the army was a patchwork of different forces. She could count on the twenty or so Temple Guards still alive, the deadliest force they had. Then came the twenty Harrakan heavy infantry. Together, those formed the core of their shock troops. Behind, they had fifty borrowed mountain soldiers with decent weapons and armor and another hundred guards in leather, gambeson and the rare brigandine. The crossbowmen were all guards. Over a hundred poorly-equipped militia made up the rest of their force. Viv and the others had done their very best to recover and repair equipment from the hordes of revenants they had slain but no amount of gear would turn them into anything else but chaff. They were useful for holding the line and that was it. Viv hoped that they would not pay too heavy a price for their courage. Finally, Kazar also had its hunters and a handful of Hadal strains, but those would operate by themselves.

Things were taking shape.

Food was growing scarce, and yet their diet remained varied thanks to the hunts and mountain tribe deliveries. Viv was growing tired of the eternal broth and congees. She missed desserts. She also decided not to voice her opinion on the subject.

Finally, after almost two months of exile, it happened. Viv was getting changed in her assigned room which had windows over the mine entrances when she heard a voice.

**//You may want to wait a minute.**

“I have news,” Irao’s raspy voice came through the door.

**//And it can wait a minute.**

**//There is a fine line between lack of social graces and lack of common sense.**

**//See that you do not cross it.**

“I’m presentable!” she announced, clad in a comfortable dress.

Irao let himself in and stared at her for a second.

“Yes?” she finally said.

“I want to say that I did not want to see you getting changed. I also find you pretty but too dangerous and have no romantic interest in you. It is a nice dress though.”

"I'm not flirting with you Irao, the dress is for my own comfort."

"Oh, sorry. I wanted to make sure."

Outside, the golem let out a strange warble that sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

"You had something to say?" Viv asked, split between amusement and cringe.

"Yes. Prince Lancer finished overseeing the land theft, gathered over three hundred slaves and then departed. He left Kazar in the hands of a nobleman with over a hundred bridgers to back him up, as well as one earth hybrid caster. He departed three days ago."

Viv immediately bounced forward, her feet carrying her past her humble cot.

"So this is it. We need to alert the council."

"I had my kin do so. You may join them when ready."

Viv grumbled about having to change back into her slightly damp and sweaty robes. Gogen's brood kept the place, and Viv's underwear, clean. They still needed a few hours to do so. Viv made her way down to the main square and met everyone in the room. Some of the resting warriors saw her pass and gave each other knowing elbow bumps. The hunters and Hadals had reported movement and the preparation of a convoy so everyone was expecting news any time.

"So, this is it," Farren said. He was distinctively paler. His fingers worried a corner of one of their few inventory books without him realizing it. Lorn nodded, expression grim yet determined. His group had suffered the most casualties relative to their size since the beginning of the year.

"Let's give ourselves a few days before the main group leaves. The scouts can go now. As for the main convoy, it will be soldiers, then the medical group, then the smiths and quartermaster and finally the non-combatants, as agreed."

It was decided not to split the Kazarans. Unarmed folks were just prey without dedicated fighters to protect them so they might as well follow. It was sink or swim anyway. If the Kazaran army failed, the population would have to choose between slavery and death.

Viv hoped it never came to that.

"We are ready with medical supplies. Our alchemist did his best, and we have twenty-three batches of flesh-mending potions to split among the fighters. They are low quality due to lack of, well, everything, so do not expect miracles."

"We are fine food-wise. We rationed in order to have enough for another three weeks but we can increase the rations for a few days so that everyone goes to battle well-fed," Farren added.



Viv was looking forward to that, she had lost a bit of weight and she didn't have many reserves to start with.

Denerim spoke next. The inquisitor had remained aware of his status as an outsider, so his interventions were few.

"I suggest that we hold a mass prayer before..."

His words were interrupted when a soldier barged in. His eyes found Viv immediately.

"Goodmother! That is, mam. Your drake is very sick. It has collapsed on the ground."

Fuck.