

Viv's older colleagues always had a faraway look when they mentioned Serbia and Kosovo. Now, Viv knew why. Out of all the heinous things people could do to each other, the wholesale slaughter of civilians topped the list, if not by horror, at least by frequency. It should have come as no surprise that funding an expedition to take land did not attract the most empathetic people, and that gathering raiders out of the group would lower the bar even more. Viv had simply not thought about it.

Corpses were strewn haphazardly through the rings of buried houses. Boys. Men. The raiders had bound older women to the flat walls of the communal hall. Their white hair fluttered in the wind under scarlet scarves. The slingers had used them for target practice. Farther down the road, cages waited, some of them open and their captives crashing on the ground in tears. The three Hadals were liberating the rest with a pilfered key.

"Marruk, could you let the others know that the prisoners need help?"

The shield bearer left without a word. Distaste was clear over her large face and Viv could guess why. The Kark had made her distaste of human practices clear enough.

They found Corel lying on his side in a pool of blood. Anybody on Earth would have died of shock minutes before but not him apparently, not with the stats fuckery. Viv wondered how that worked exactly, was it magical energy that carried oxygen to his brain? Because most of the original fluid filling that role had left his body. Viv's spell had hit him in the left clavicle. It had left a crescent of missing flesh reaching to his shoulder. Where the spell had hit, flesh and armor had been sheared off cleanly. There were no signs of burn or acidity. It was just gone. She noticed in passing that the spell had punched through at least two walls before digging into the ground. It had been a risk. There could have been civilians, but in her mind, eliminating a powerful leader had been worth it.

Corel saw her then, and smirked in the bitter fashion of those who have lost too much to cry. It made Viv feel angry, with the background of slaughtered civvies. Someone who had stooped so low had no right to feel sorry for himself.

"Squeeeeee."

Arthur had left to sniff the body of a kid. She did not appear to understand, and neither did Viv.

Corel knew things. She had to... she had to ask him.

She was just too angry.

"I suppose this is my fault as well?" she asked loudly, arms spread to expose the disaster around.

"Cockroaches clinging to their mountain slope. Useless. Let Kazar down," he growled weakly.

“But not as much as you, Corel. I simply don’t get it. You were a cop for fuck sake. I know that it was you who showed the raiders the path to the hidden mountain refuges. Only a local notable would have known and you are the only turncoat so far.”

“Talk all you want,” the man gasped, “Kazar is dead. The one that mattered, not the gathering of idiots you’ll use as a stepping stone, Bob the Calamity. Resh was the city. You are just a parasite moving its corpse around.”

“Are those your last words? Is this how you want to end up, killed in a bandit raid you led yourself? A slaver, murderer and a rapist? Because the woman you admired died?”

Corel was gasping now. He had stopped trying to save himself and the last of his life was quickly leaving. Viv knew that interrogating him now would yield no results. He was too stubborn, and he was dying too quickly.

“Better to destroy it all... than let you steal it...”

“You are insane.”

“Hah.”

The fallen captain’s eyes left her and focused on a point by her side. Inquisitor Denerim had come, followed by his apprentice. He was both livid and detached.

“Are you here... to judge me?” Corel rattled.

“Yes.”

Denerim’s hand whipped like a snake and fastened on the fallen captain’s forehead. Meanwhile, his eyes shone like orbs of molten gold and the hair of his grey-streaked beard lifted from some invisible wind radiating light from some unknown source.

“Know what they endured,” he roared.

Corel screamed. He screamed until he died.

Denerim shuddered. Viv was a bit disappointed. No information from them man, and yet he did suffer an absolutely horrendous and pathetic death so there was that. she would take all the victories she could.

“You need a moment?” she asked.

“Yes, please. Sometimes, I learn things from such punishment but this time I did not. I am sorry. It had to be done.”

“Don’t worry, it was not like I absolutely had to kill him with my own hands.”

“No, ah, I forgot that you were a traveler. Sometimes, carnages can give birth to aberrations. Abnormal monsters that actively hunt humans. I had to purify Corel’s soul or dark magic could have focused on his powerful resentment to turn him into something even worse.”

“Ah yes, Farren mentioned something of the sort.”

The discussion petered out. A dozen soldiers were helping the caged prisoners down and towards the main group under the watchful gaze of the three Hadals. Temple guards went from body to body to touch them and stop them from rising as revenants. The wounded were taken care of by their fellows with bandages and magic. Not for the first time, Viv felt completely useless. Fortunately, Solfis had a great sense of timing.

//Your Grace, there is the matter of the archer that tried to kill you.

“Oh yeah. Are you ok by the way? I saw damage on your frame.”

//The mark six version of the mage-killer frame has an integrated self-repair mechanism for long deployments.

//At the cost of durability.

“It’s the first time that I see you damaged.”

//Indeed.

//We operate under strenuous circumstances and I had to make do with improvised equipment.

//In an optimal setting, the dragon bone would have been treated with precious oils.

//And the glyphs would have been etched with silverite powder or an equivalent.

//The use of second-rate materials has led to this.

“Maybe we can give you an armor or something.”

//No, Your Grace.

//Anything you come up with now will reduce my overall performance.

//Please consider that my loadout was designed by the Empire’s top engineers.

//The mage-killer can absorb and disperse all but the most devastating of spells.

//In exchange, my frame is vulnerable to physical damage.

//An armor would reduce my mobility, which is where my greatest advantage lay.

//I am a strike golem, not a guardian golem after all.

“I realize that I never asked about your abilities. You told me that you were dedicated to hunting monsters and high-value targets but I never dug deeper into the question.”

//You saw what I could do when I slew the necromancers.

//This was an accurate demonstration of my capabilities.

//With my current frame.

//As for why I stayed by your side instead of hunting, it was to protect you.

//Since this was the battle’s only point of failure.

“What do you mean?”

**//You are a smart and resourceful heir, Your Grace, just as I had hoped.
//For example, using an arrow from a scout to guide your spells is a method that was recorded in my database.
//But it did not occur to me, because my ability to think outside of the basic parameters remains limited.
//It did occur to you, which shows that I can trust you to fulfill your role.
//As such, I calculated that we could only fail if you were disabled.
//I also calculated that there was a non-insignificant chance that the prince would send an assassin to take you off while you were distracted.
//By using the fallen captain as bait.
//It is the sort of cheap, honorless tactics my prediction algorithms have come to expect from that thin-blooded upstart.**

Solfis walked and led Viv and Arthur to a small hovel behind which a man lay dead. He was dressed in what she could only qualify as a medieval Ghillie suit, complete with terracotta dust and pieces of grass. The interesting part was his bow, which was very large and looked deadly. It was made from a dark sort of wood Viv had never seen before.

[Killer yew bow, enchanted: this bow requires a large amount of power to draw. It is best suited for dedicated paths.]

It looked nasty, but not as nasty as the barbed javelins that served as its arrows.

“So, Prince Lancer gathered all the disgruntled among his group and threw them at us with the hope that they would inflict enough damage before they died.”

**//Historical records hint that just getting rid of them could have been an equally important objective.
//A summary analysis of the marauders’ equipment indicates that most of it was their own.
//The quality is simply too low to have belonged to a proper regiment.
//Additionally, there was a high likelihood that you would show up.
//Hence why he sent a sniper to take you off, just in case.**

“He’s really taking the cheap investment, high return approach every time. He must really need the money.”

//Would that alter your plans, Your Grace?”

Viv thought about it for a moment then shook her head.

“I don’t think so. The way I see it, he’s going for the low-hanging fruits in a bid for his father’s seat. He got the money from the settlers, then he’ll get the money from the slaves he’ll bring back since there are at least six to eight hundred people who did not evacuate in time. He’s fulfilled most of his objectives, and after he’s gone he won’t really care about Kazar. It was never a strategic objective anyway.”

//The iron mine will change this.

“Yes, but only after he takes the throne, I think. We’re all secondary concerns to him. He’ll want to do the bare minimum then piss off to the power race that will come with the season for war. We wait for him to leave, then we take the city back.”

//I must ask, Your Grace.

//You take the city back then what?

//You will be the most driving element in what is technically a separatist revolutionary government.

//Against one of the continent’s most powerful kingdoms.

//Is this how you envisioned your stay in Nyil?

“No, I guess not.”

//What will you do then?

“I have not decided yet,” she lied.

Solfis leaned forward and his yellow orbs pulsed once in their cavities. He tilted his head. To Viv, he looked smug.

//I see.

//I, Sofis, am delighted to see that your objectives now go beyond just going back to your home realm.

Viv cursed in her mind when she realized that he was completely right. At first, she had been a tourist. Clearly, Nyil had a lot of stuff going but it did not really concern her as she was just a transient. Now, she cared. It was like going to some obscure country for two weeks of hiking, getting trapped there by a government crackdown and joining the guerilla. She had been pulled in so deep that even if someone popped out from nowhere to offer her a ticket back, she would not accept it.

Not while Arthur was vulnerable, not while over a thousand people depended on her for their survival.

And not, she had to admit, until she had her revenge.

“Fuck.”

//Welcome home, Your Grace.

Viv glared and was quickly reminded that glaring at Solfis was an exercise in futility. The cold shower of the recent realization also calmed her down. Revenge was good but she would not drag Kazar into it. She would find another way. And if Prince Lancer actually won both the throne and the war, she would probably have to give up, at least until she gathered a lot of support. She was not completely insane.

Damn.

What a world.

//Should we return to the group, Your Grace?

“Hold on, let me get the bow and arrows, no need to let them go to waste. Let’s go and talk to the Hadals. I’m curious.”

They moved out and found that all the civilians had been freed and moved. The Hadals were now lounging on top of the cages like sated tigers. Their leader, a woman, followed Viv with their eyes as she approached. She dropped gracefully down when they were close enough.

“Hi,” Viv greeted, “we have not met yet. Can I ask your name?”

“Two-Six,” the other replied in the same raspy voice as Irao. She was smoother than him, less awkward. There was also a bite to her tone and posture that Viv normally enjoyed but was a bit too tired to appreciate right now. Two-Six shared the same skeletal traits as Irao. They looked more exotic on her, and a tad softer as well. Black hair reached to her shoulders, tied in a ponytail that was a bit too thin. She had shaved both sides of her head and Viv thought she looked a bit like a goth who had adopted the man-bun. She immediately felt guilty for the unkind thought.

“Well, hello Two-Six. Folks may not say it since you’re a recent addition, so thanks. I appreciate you getting those slingers off our backs and rescuing the civvies.”

Two-Six nodded and so did her two bald companions.

“Appreciated. The mountain warriors actually did thank us. Lorn did it as well. We are pleased. And relieved.”

“You were testing to see if integration was possible?” Viv asked, curious. The woman smiled in return.

“Not integration. Cooperation. Living together. Most of us still struggle with... normal people. The lads and I are second generation Hadals. We have less of what makes us us, so we are better able to function around normal people.”

“I was not aware that Hadals had different, errrr, strains?” Viv asked, trying not to make it too awkward, but Two-Six just laughed.

“No, I mean that my mom was a Hadal but my dad was a normal human.”

“Oh.”

“She told me that a large amount of mead was involved.”

“I see.”

She was trying to test her, Viv thought. Two-Six’s mouth smiled but her eyes didn’t.

“Half of our group are first-generation. They tend to survive better because they were better-trained, you see? It’s hard to make it to adulthood when half of the world kills you on sight.”

“Hopefully this will change now that you have joined us,” Viv answered.

“Yeah. Hopefully. I know that you took a risk and expect us to pull our own weight so I decided to join the war effort. More of us will assist as time goes on and we... recover. This is the first time in my life that I can show myself for what I am and not get hunted.”

Contrary to Irao, her eyes were black, not yellow and slitted like a cat, but as Viv watched they shone red in the dim light and she thought there might be some illusion at hand. Obviously the Hadal was still on-guard and Viv only understood too well why she would protect herself. After what must have been decades of persecution, any entity that welcomed them must be seen as a trap. It didn’t really matter to Viv so long as the woman carried her own weight.

As Viv pondered, Two-Six came to a decision. Her mask of casual snark disappeared and her expression grew serious but not threatening.

“Look, I’m not going to threaten you. You know what we can do, we know what you golem can do. Just think, though. Right now, most of us wait for the hammer to drop on us. If you are what you say you are, you stand to gain our eternal gratitude. All the remaining Hadals survived for a reason, and all of them will eventually make their way here. I’ll be your hand in the dark in the meanwhile, but please just give it a real chance. You won’t regret it, I swear.”

“I was honest when I said that all were welcome regardless of species so long as they behaved,” Viv assured, “I just hope that one day you will trust me enough to believe those words.”

Again, utter platitudes, but the Hadal liked it, or so it seemed. Viv decided to move and check on what was going on before the conversation grew awkward. It turned out that the Temple Guards had things well in hand. The mountain soldiers, less so. They had fourteen fatalities out of about fifty fighters. It was an incredibly high number. Most armies would have broken long before it happened. As such, she and her allies had to wait for a full day before everything got sorted and the bodies were incinerated using very efficient pyres. The return to the capital was not the triumphant march Viv hoped it would be. They had many of the rescued civilians with them who were to be split among distant families. The handful of small villages Corel’s raiders had found were nothing but graveyards now.

Marredyn, the mountain leader, took Viv apart during the humble celebration feast he insisted on having. They made their way to the stairs of his long house and she caught a few discussions that were happening between mountain folks who could understand Enorian and her own archers.

“So, the rules that direct how we live together are called the social contract, right? But a social contract is implicit. That’s just a fancy way to say that it ain’t written down, you see? So, you got to write the rules down or else old Ramak down the street can say it’s ok to eat your apples and you say it ain’t and it’s a right mess. So first, you got to write the general mood of the rules. Principles. And there comes the constitution... “

She felt like she’d started a cult.

Marredyn didn’t seem to notice. Up they went, under the rafters. The mountain leader’s office was small and made of wood, and more importantly only contained a handful of papers. It reminded Viv that she was on the frontier of a world that didn’t have much of an industry that she could see, and that Marredyn had to govern without notes. She wondered if he had a skill for that.

As for the leader, he sat down heavily and stared at Viv with hooded eyes. They reflected under the orange glow of a pungent candle. He waited for a few minutes, long enough for Viv to grow distinctly uncomfortable. Only her habit of ignoring cheap tactics prevented her from squirming.

She didn’t think that Marredyn was doing it on purpose.

“You are going to attack Kazar and try to retake it,” the old man finally said.

“Yes.”

It was no secret, or at least no secret to anyone on her side. Marredyn was on her side. If he had not been there before, he was now.

“What will happen if you succeed? Will you change the terms we had with mayor Ganimatalo? After all, Kazar will have to be rebuilt.”

“I don’t even know what terms those were, and I’m not interested right now. We have a say where I come from. Don’t sell the rathclaw’s pelt before you’ve killed it.”

It was a good-enough approximation.

“I see. The mayor allowed us to trade not just with the Church of Neriad but with some select armed forces I will not name for confidentiality reasons. She took a ten percent share in return.”

He leaned forward.

“If you waive that fee for the next ten years, we will lend you soldiers. Fifty well-trained mountain warriors with their equipment, just like those you fought alongside with today. Think about it.”

Viv did not have to think. She felt something in him that she recognized in herself. It was the leadership skills. She understood it better than. Leadership was possibly one of the few skills where progress came from without, not from within. It was a mark of the world on her soul that told the other: here is a mover, here is a shaker, and here is someone who gets shit done. Marredyn outclassed her completely, but she had another one social skill well-suited for the situation.

Viv let it happen. Something rose with her anger. It was the same vague feeling that permeated her being when she was doing, shall we say, aggressive negotiation.

She leaned forward in return.

“You know, we found traces of your deadland walkers scouting the mine while you were away.”

The man blinked at the *non sequitur*.

“Now I can appreciate that you look after your own first and foremost,” she continued, “that’s why you sent people sniffing around the mine for opportunities even though the Church of Neriad claimed it first. After all, it’s a cruel world. Likewise, I can understand that you want to cover yourself against a leader who you are not familiar with.”

Her intimidation aura spread throughout the room and even the ever-canny Marredyn took a deep breath.

“But what I can’t tolerate is people fucking with me, because I represent Kazar and fucking with us is not something that’s in your best interest. Not now, not ever. So I’m going to be perfectly clear. You will send those soldiers because you can’t afford to ignore your villages being so casually destroyed and your people murdered and taken. You are going to send those soldiers because if you don’t do shit, when I return in one month, someone else will be sitting in your chair wearing that fancy turban. I’m not someone you screw with that easily, old man, and I don’t appreciate you trying.”

Leadership: Beginner 7

Intimidation: Intermediate 5

Hm. That intimidation rise was slightly worrisome.

“Fair enough, young one, fair enough,” Marredyn replied with a chuckle. He showed no more signs of tension. “You will forgive an old man his tricks. I was not asking for much, I assure you, but I agree. It was inappropriate. Please accept my apologies.”

“I’ll accept actions, not words. Also I have a proposal.”

The old man’s eyes glinted with the fires of greed. It would take more than Viv to affect him in the long run, it seemed.

“Do tell?”

“We could train your men for food.”

“Our men are already trained.”

“Your men are trained like a militia handling well-made but antiquated equipment. You have lost much of what you used to be.”

“And you have found a way to recover it?”

“I have.”

He remained silent for a while.

“What we have lost, eh? We have lost much, and not just training methods. We are those who didn’t stray far and returned as soon as we could, but the deadlands stopped receding. They had reached an equilibrium.”

“There is a way to claim back more ground and you already use it. I can make more ward stones. Although, we both know that it’s not what you need. You need to reclaim your legacy. You need more breathing room than just the leagues of harsh terrain you stubbornly cling on. You need to live, not just survive, or you will never fully flourish.”

“You are exaggerating. We have traditions that keep us strong. However, I have to admit that we could accomplish much more with more means. Suppose we accept your offer of training against food, what then?”

“You can always join us through a military alliance.”

Marredyn laughed.

“No, I know what you are going for. We will not bend to a Kazaran. Never.”

“We shall see how things develop, shall we? In the meanwhile, I need an answer.”

“Two hundred crates of fresh greens over the next two months by weekly delivery. A hundred of various tubers and millet to feed my fifty men for this duration. This is a generous offer. Please do not push me now.”

Viv made a quick calculation. Two hundred crates was a massive amount, practically a full warehouse. They had only brought several times that number to begin with. It would not just stretch their food, it would also bring variety to everyone's diet, an important aspect of morale. Marredyn's offer was indeed generous. More importantly, her political instincts told her that the old grumbly man had thrown his pride into the mix. To object now was to invite a worse trade and she would accept it anyway. They were desperate.

"Deal. And thank you."

"We have suffered more losses in soldiers yesterday than we have in the past two years combined. Thank me after this is all over by bringing me my people back. "

"That is the plan."