

Ban carefully unlocked the grate, then pulled it open with a grunt. It broke. The maw yawned open to reveal the darkness within.

Ok, so it went down two meters ending in a small landing but not everyone could see perfectly in the dark.

What was left of the door clanged on the ground, hinges rotten to reddish flakes. The rest was covered in a sort of white, calcified gunk. The expected fetid waft never reached Viv's nose through the makeshift mask she insisted on wearing.

Those were sewers.

Abandoned sewers.

She knew the drill. Get in with a company of hardasses, then get picked off over the course of an entire movie fighting some subterranean insect species. Or get in and then return with some freshly unearthed turbo ebola pathogen that happened to turn humans into shambling horrors. A zombie apocalypse in the middle of another zombie apocalypse sounded like a shit idea. That's how you got superzombies.

//Your Grace?

Couldn't look hesitant in front of the squad of One Hundreds.

"Move out."

The objective was simple. Get into the sewers, explore them, map them, and clear them of any threats. She'd shared her concern about epidemics with Solfis. He had given her an answer she both hated and agreed with.

//If there is indeed a disease waiting to happen under the city.

//Then now is the best time to release it while we have an overabundance of priests compared to the rest of the population.

//The longer you wait and the more the population grows.

//The more it grows and the more keenly the need for sewers will be felt.

//And the more public hygiene will degrade.

//If there is a trap, it is best triggered early.

Viv hoped that was the right approach.

For this operation, she'd insisted on going with a group of elites like Irao or Solar. However, Solfis had disagreed before she could even ask them.

//You will go with a squad of the One Hundred.

"They might be in danger. It will be worse than if—"

//It will be.

//Which will provide a great training opportunity for you.

//Your task will be to keep them alive.

“I thought my task was to keep myself alive.”

//That will be my task.

//I shall come with you.

//And extract you should the worst come to pass.

//The operation will also prove your trust in them.

//The symbol is important.

//They have put a lot of effort into becoming worthy of the empire and you.

“You’re right. Ok, I’ll make sure to cover them.”

//And for them to cover you.

//There is no denying you are an extremely proficient duelist.

//Perhaps the best in your class.

//If you intend to join them at the head of your ‘tercios’.

//Then you must develop new skills.

“I am convinced.”

Or so Viv thought but walking behind the towering forms of Ban’s eleven handpicked warriors, she was having second thoughts. The only other nervous person was Poacher who had insisted on coming as well because they needed a scout.

The rest of the squad, plus Brick, looked like stone walls with muscles on their muscles. They would have been intimidating if Viv had not fought a necrarch before.

Viv cast a light enchantment as they reached the first landing. It was a small open space, now completely empty. The local mana was low concentration brown and black, exactly what one would expect from a place like this. Blue mana would return with the water later. Hopefully.

A passage led to an adjoining room which they explored first. Nothing was left inside except for empty alcoves and the corroded remains of a metal ladder going up.

//This would lead to a sewer gate.

//An emergency exit for the crew, in case something happened.

“Sewer maintenance people, you mean?”

//Precisely.

//Many Harrakan cities share the same design when it comes to sewers.

//This would be a changing room, armory, and emergency safe room in case of a monster.

//All sewer employees would know how to defend themselves.

//However, special teams would always be called for anything more dangerous than class 3 threats.

//It was not the maintenance crew's duty to fight.

//We should find more such rooms across the complex.

"Good, then we can hide there," Poacher said.

//Naturally, none of the doors will remain intact.

"Nevermind."

Poacher leaned and took her mask out of the way to spit. Viv was actually reconsidering the whole mask thing. The place was dry as hell, and surprisingly not dusty. As they descended further, they reached the first corridor Viv associated with actual sewers. The long, branching tunnel centered on a deep central canal where the dirty water would have flowed. Overhead arches collected refuse from overhead grates and, she assumed, private quarters as well. All of them had been walled off for now. The central canal was empty except for a thin layer of white fossilized matter. Out of curiosity, she took her dagger focus and prodded one of the layers clinging to a nearby column. It clinked with the sound of metal on stone. She removed her mask then. This place was neither dusty nor did it have any smell. If there were really pathogens in the air, that basic piece of tissue wouldn't block them.

"Ok, let's start left."

"Do you need paper, milady?" Poacher asked while Ban gritted his teeth.

"No, I've got a perfect memory. Keep an eye out and let's go."

"Aye."

The exploration was slow going. After the first intersection, Ban requested a set of three lights to cover the blind spots. The One Hundred had brought torches but they preferred to have free hands if possible, and Viv agreed. Her light blue radiance turned the entire level into a strange cathedral of crystallized architecture caught in time. Viv had an extremely strong suspicion that the crystal in question was, well, fossilized excrement, but hey.

She started to relax as they finished patrolling the first floor. Viv was very thorough, checking every nook and crannies for anything out of the ordinary. The only strange thing was that everything had corroded to an impossible degree, even more so than in Harrak. From the sluice gates to the doors and even fully metal-made ladders, nothing remained but rusted-through scraps. Viv wasn't sure why but she suspected magic. It did make the inventory of remaining stuff easy.

The clonk of reinforced soles on stone accompanied the group wherever they went. They first came across a large chute going down into an empty pool far below and no one suggested climbing down the vertiginous walls.

//There will be an access tunnel nearby.

The plan was split into sections, forcing the One Hundreds to pass through empty archways when going from one section to another. Viv remembered where they were and hoped they would not have to use them. As Solfis had promised, they found circular stairs diving into the abyss. It was narrow enough that only one man could walk at a time, at least with those massive sets of armor. Once again, Viv was in the middle of the formation where she would be protected. She found herself relying more and more on her mana perception to track possible danger before it could jump on them. The narrow walls worried her the most, as they would give a brown caster an overwhelming advantage. For now, there was nothing unusual besides the low shimmer of her guardians' enchanted sets.

They delved deeper.

The next level started with all the chutes ending in a large open cave dug into the very stone. A large basin waited there, apparently designed to collect the 'black water'. Viv had to increase the intensity of the light to reach the farthest reaches.

"Can you keep this up, Your Grace?" Ban asked.

"Yes, though everything will know we're coming."

"Most of the stuff that lives underground doesn't like light much."

//That is correct.

"If the spell fades though, you'll be completely blinded, even with torches."

"It will not fade," Ban replied with conviction. "We will make sure of it."

"Alright."

Viv was genuinely impressed by the strength of his conviction. His men, plus Brick, continued with unerring discipline as they covered all angles and remained in a state of constant vigilance. It suddenly occurred to her that what they perceived and what she perceived were radically opposed impressions.

From her perspective, she was in a constant state of winging it through the many curveballs luck threw at her. All of her preparations served the singular purpose of giving her more options when shit hit the fan. The bank heist had been such an experience. The rumors Solfis returned spoke of one of the greatest deeds any thief had accomplished in that magical city. They'd put a fucking bucket on a golem's head to block its field of view! That was so bad, it was almost cartoonish.

While she didn't take herself too seriously, it had become abundantly obvious that her soldiers did.

And she could not let them down.

Feeling calmer, Viv continued to move with the rest of the team. Poacher kept telling her what she saw, which was nothing, while Solfis explained what they found.

//This reservoir should lead into a series of increasingly small filters and cleaning vats.

“Using enchantments?”

//Yes.

//Sinur’s Gate was rich.

//Keeping this system working required little effort to them.

//Unfortunately, most of the purification work was done by strands of mushrooms selected by specific brown and life mages.

//They will have long died out.

“A shame.”

//The city’s mage population can make up for inefficiencies while we come up with a solution.

“They won’t like that,” Poacher commented.

Viv had to agree. Mages were high in the social pyramid while sewer cleaners lurked at the bottom, metaphor intended. If there were any issues, she would reactivate the enchantments themselves. How could one be considered inferior when they kept the city clean and promoted general hygiene? How could a worker be considered the lowest of the low when there were people who made loud phone calls at the restaurant? She would lead by example.

They kept moving through smaller series of reservoirs, rune circles still visible on the walls and ceilings. Once again, the sluice gates had melted and the only remaining signs of spell circles were rusty deposits in hollow recesses. Viv only gave the circles a passing glance. They could be reconstituted later. They needed to finish the delve first.

They came across another safe room on the way, just as Solfis had predicted. The passage did not lead up but to the side, the exit probably somewhere on the cliff’s surface. It took them another ten minutes of careful exploration before the purification basins finally led them to the final piece of the treatment process. A large passage with a very wide canal led forward to a cavern of awesome proportion.

Viv intensified the light until it touched rows of stalactites in the far end of the opening. From there, the natural formations seamlessly melded into a more rectangular cut wall to form a hollow pyramid pointing up, half natural, half excavated. The base, the entire bottom of the cavern, hosted a reservoir that would rival an olympic swimming pool. A stone column emerged from its center in a vertiginous climb towards the apex of the room, only to break midway, leaving behind a disappointing gash like a broken tooth. The mana here was stronger. The air also smelled musty. Whatever enchantment Viv had felt when looking upon that great work faded immediately.

“Wait. Something ain’t right,” Poacher said, echoing her concerns.

Ban made a fist and the soldiers tightened their ranks, spears aimed forward towards the reservoir which, at first glance, contained nothing but the same white, crystallized remains as the rest.

Which made no sense.

Wait, no, Viv realized, if the spells had faded before the waters could be purified, it would make sense that some of the gunk would end up at the bottom before being cleaned.

Would it?

“Back up,” she whispered, and the formation walked away from the edge with small, careful steps.

But then, where were the undead? Sewers clearly had an ecosystem or there would not be so many countermeasures designed to stop it. Surely there was at least something alive down there before the cataclysm. So where were the undead?

Unless, of course, something had consumed them.

A glint attracted Viv’s attention to the white gunk covering everything. It was the same residue everywhere. Again, that was weird.

Unless, of course.

“It’s not human excrement,” Viv realized.

“Movement, ahead,” Poacher replied.

Something pulsed once, cracking the surface of pallid crust in a quake. A second turned fissures into deep ravines. Black goop erupted from the wounds in pungent eruptions. As if an abscess was pierced, the smell of corruption escaped from the open sore and assaulted Viv’s nose in a revolting tide, an atrocious stench to overshadow even the most necrotic wounds. It was an odor that revolted the brain until the only possible option became fleeing. Already, someone was throwing up and it was all Viv could do not to join them despite her will and constitution.

Something broke the surface. The creature reared up like a flaccid snake, tossing purulent pieces of rotting matter across the room. Decaying gray flesh in bulbous assemblies supported a headless maw filled like a pit with hundreds of inward-facing brittle fangs.

//Depth worm.

It was undead, Viv felt, and so she did her best to fight back. Had to cover the One Hundred while they recovered from the shock. Her danger sense and perceptions screamed at her and she let her experience guide her mind.

“Yoink!”

It was surprisingly easy to drag back the black mana this time. Viv felt a fugacious, deceitful flash of hope in her heart before the link she’d hit disintegrated.

The head smashed onto the reservoir below with a screech, still alive. From the bisecting wound, hundreds of putrescent maggots erupted, spewed all over them in a doom rain.

“Oh my GODS! Blight! Werfer!”

Viv coated herself in black mana to stop the stench, then she her fastest area denial spells in quick succession but it would not be enough and—

“Hah!”

Against all odds, Brick smashed her shield on the stone, then stood her ground.

A strange pull sent Viv back into the realm of clarity.

Right. This was a monster. Fight the monster.

Her soul rose, reigniting Ban’s mind with the fires of leadership. They had no need to speak at this point. They knew what to do.

Her spell tore into the thickest mass of creatures, voiding them where they flew. The blight continued its path towards the twisting remains of the depth worm’s lower extremity as it still vomited torrents of ravenous spawn. She inspected one.

[Undead depth world hatchling]

Not too dangerous. She had to focus on the head now crawling towards them.

“The side!” Poacher said.

Hatchlings were climbing through the empty canal towards the passage they were standing on.

“Back up,” Ban ordered, and Viv agreed.

The squad stayed in formation while Viv obliterated most of the hatchlings. The rest swarmed over the heavies and the soldiers... cut them apart.

With cold efficiency, the back ranks placed their pilums over the head of their companions and punched creatures through the air before they could land. Other hatchlings bounced

against runic shields, or they were smashed down or pierced midair by expert spear lunges. The One Hundred fought methodically, systematically, with the well-honed precision of a deadly machine. The display calmed Viv down and let her focus on the head still making its way towards her. The first young spell failed. In answer, she floated a bit above the air to give herself a better field of view.

“Hyperbeam.”

A concentrated ray of annihilation. carved a narrow path through rotting flesh. Viv used the tiny opening to connect with the worm’s head.

It was powerful, but nowhere as powerful as a necrarch. And now that Viv had found what was left of the brain, the creature’s resilience worked against it. She cut off the toothy top of the head, leaving the rings flopping aimlessly on the ground.

Meanwhile, the squad was still falling back. Poacher used a saber to cut at all the hatchlings trying to climb from the sides, though they were few now that they were away from the main corpse. Once Viv was certain the main body was no longer a danger to them, she turned her attention to the swarm.

A summary blight purged the canal from one hand to another, then a second casting spread over the disgusting main reservoir scathing it from end to end. The heavy gas dug into the crater in a greedy shroud. A few last castings and spear thrusts disposed of the last wriggling survivors. The battle ceased due to a lack of combatants. Silence returned to the despoiled battlefield. Viv removed her coating and regretted it in the same instant. With the threat of imminent death no longer needling her on, her willpower finally succumbed. She leaned forward and regurgitated her entire breakfast.

“Oh no, don’t—”

Poacher joined her mid-retch. None of the heavies stooped so low as to join them.

“Oh that was—”

Viv’s second attempt didn’t fair much better than the first. Solfis picked her bodily, then the squad walked out of the reservoir where the air was comparatively fresher. To be fair, a public toilet at the end of a rave would have smelled better than this.

“Let’s... let’s never, ever, ever mention this battle again,” Viv hiccuped.

No one objected.

**//A sanitization team will have to be dispatched.
//They must be made aware of the circumstances.**

“You do it. I couldn’t give it justice without swearing for a solid ten minutes.”

Poacher summoned some water from thin air to clean her mouth, something Viv couldn't do. Ban discreetly did the same for one of his men who had faltered at the beginning of the battle. Viv felt extremely sorry for the One Hundred because she could guess they would be trained to avoid such a problem in the future and she would rather lick a cactus than submit herself to stench conditioning.

Then they waited.

They waited for Viv.

"Hm, so, I think we've mapped out everything. We can return now."

"As you say, ma'am. Formation, march!"

"A word, if you please?"

"Of course, Your Grace."

Viv walked next to Ban while the squad headed back as if nothing had happened. From their expressions, it was just another day at work. She used a sound spell for privacy.

"So, Brick. She just stood there and that grounded me, somehow? Is that a special ability?"

"We don't know, Your Grace. We just know that Brick does not run. Let me say that again, ma'am, because this is important. Brick. Never. Runs. And because she doesn't move, others will not move either. We saw terrible things in the deadlands. I remember... I remember a dead woman with her stillborn child..."

He shook his head, chasing away traumatic memories.

"We've seen the worst of the worst. Trust me. She never falters. I don't even know if she can."

"Have you asked her how she can stand her ground like that?"

"I did. And she looked me right in the eyes, and she said: because you didn't order me to move, sah!"

Viv pondered that for a little while. She'd met an entity more terrifying than herself, once again.

//Finally.

//The perfect infantrywoman.

"It isn't so."

//If you insist, Your Grace.

Sidjin and Abe volunteered to work on restoring the sewers. When Viv thanked them profusely for it, they admitted that they'd been working on a colorless approach to water purification and needed a testing ground for it. This obviously annoyed Viv very much, however they placated her by agreeing to drink the first glasses they would deem safe.

Honestly, Viv wasn't sure she could ever touch anything coming from that hellhole without the haunting memory of 'eau de rotten worm ass' teasing her nostrils. Just the thought sent her reeling. Sidjin also begged her to explain what had gone wrong. She categorically refused. Nobody wanted to mention 'the sewer incident' again, especially Viv, not since she'd found a piece of ancient gunk sticking to her hair.

This also led Viv to an uncomfortable realization as she saw Sidjin walk up to the room he'd selected for himself.

She was taking him for granted. And being an ass.

"Hey, Sidjin, can we talk?"

"Of course, Viviane."

"In my room."

"Oh," he replied more seriously. "This kind of talk."

"Yeah."

Viv made her way to the royal bedroom. Solfis deployed and left to give them the illusion of privacy. It was a nice bedroom she had, possibly the most luxurious quarters she'd ever had. The canopied bed, dressers and chests were still rudimentary and yet the care put into each object, each tapestry and each ribbon gave it a loving, cared for presence that Viv didn't quite deserve yet. She'd been moving a lot and never settling. Maybe it was time to make a home for the foreseeable future. It was also very safe, with wards and solid doors. The two sat next to a short coffee table Viv hadn't had the time to use. Sidjin boiled them two cups of klod.

"Look, first, let's talk about the job part. I want to get it out of the way. You've been helping people around and I haven't even paid you. Or given you a title. And let's be honest, you'd be overqualified for my job."

"Oh, no, the role of ruler requires sets of skills I am no longer willing to employ. And besides, I am having far more fun coming up with innovative technologies with Abe. Even Solfis grudgingly agreed that we have surpassed some Harrakan standards."

"Hah! You pair of... obsessive people."

There were no terms for nerds on Nyil. Maybe she ought to create one.

“And yes if you do want to give me a job, I’d happily take one.”

“Are you staying for Harrak? Or are you staying for me?”

“They’re one and the same, darling. This used to be the frontier town of Kazar, along with its narrow fertile strip. Now, it’s a growing kingdom built on your vision. You even let folks pick their own representatives! How very, very subversive of you. The power of the people...”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Oh, but it is. Trust me. We are pushing back the deadlands. We are feeding families. We are regrowing arms, curing people, changing lives for the better when everywhere else, those in power would not give them the time of the day. I have repaired the wall of the orphanage in Kazar. The children, the way they looked at me. They were not afraid. They were dreaming. This world is gray, Viv. So long as you struggle for good, I’ll be by your side if you’ll have me. Don’t worry. I know we’re not perfect. What matters is that we all try. And keep trying even if we fall and fail.”

“Well then, I kind of want you to be the, uh, first archmage?”

“Really?” Sidjin asked with a knowing smile. He could read her pretty well.

“Oh, fine, I want you as Prince Consort. However! I... I no longer know you.”

She deflated. The first time, she’d pushed Sidjin into the relationship but now, it felt strange for her to do the same when she’d been the one to stop it. They had drifted away after the arena fiasco and Rakan’s near demise. His scar, his hands, they were familiar yet foreign.

“We can take it slowly. Very slowly. The first time, you seduced me with great confidence. Allow me to return the favor. After all, in my culture, the prince courts the princess. Not the other way around.”

“Oh. That sounds pretty nice.”

“I will also act as your second staff on the field of battle. That means I will handle one of the shield arrays. I also have an idea to make your tercio formation even more effective.”

“I am intrigued.”

“Good, that is how it all starts.”

He kissed her on the cheek and left, leaving behind a perfume like clove and fresh soap.

“You smooth bastard.”

Viv expected she'd have to put out a lot of fire but that was without counting Lady Azar's management abilities. With her growing army of helpers, the experienced politician handled most difficulties from trade disagreement to underhanded election tactics, leaving Viv to deal with the weird and unique. Essentially, Azar provided management while Viv provided vision. Harrak had managed well while she was away and it continued to do so now that she was here dealing with issues she was best suited to solve. The first was limb regrowth.

Just like before, many experts had joined her banner and continued to do so in exchange for the promise of affordable surgery. Contrary to before, the number of warriors had decreased in favor of a more diverse cast. One of the smiths had lost most of his fingers in a fire. A jeweler's elbow had healed badly after it was broken by a rival. More came because their families needed help, especially children. She healed a small girl disfigured by a dog attack on her second day and that had been a delicate operation. After a week of this, Viv realized it would be better with help.

So she taught Abe.

The almost alive person had a knack for black mana. He only needed the change aspect, which was granted to him in a limited manner after a divine insight came from Enttiku. Viv would never forget his eyes turning pitch black and his face twisting in a rictus of beatific ecstasy. Disturbing as all hell. In any case, Abe could not regrow limbs without the help of Enttiku's clergy since he could not manage the divine healing himself. He was still very slow compared to Viv but there was progress.

Day after day, Viv regrew fingers, legs, hands, toes, knees, even the occasional eye and left people crying with joy in the arms of their relatives. There were hundreds of them coming when called to experience this miracle. It was possibly the most gratifying experience she'd had in her life.

The other gratifying experience, though a little tedious, consisted in building more mana-conversion pillars. Some of her staff suggested moving the pillars deeper into the deadlands but Viv fiercely opposed that idea, stating that should parts of the perimeter fail, black mana would pour through the gap corrupting humans and crops alike. Making new pillars was not particularly taxing and they were designed to recharge themselves anyway, so she could just leave the old one in place and they would reactivate if needed. Viv was much more concerned about sabotage and failure than she was about her time. Redundancies existed for a reason. It also took a while for life to return to a recently cleared section, which meant that she had to place pillars first and then the land would become arable weeks, sometimes months later.

"It is possible that the conversion speed will decrease the farther we are away from the Deadshield woods and its life-enhancing effects," Sidjin observed one day.

"One more reason to work fast while we are not too busy."

A model was left to the new mages just so they could learn how to do it but Viv got a dose of realism when it became obvious that the girls had suffered a lot under Elunath's tyranny and it would take a long time for many of them, and much therapy from Abe, before they could just go and plant obelisks in the deadlands.

It took Viv over a month before the influx of patients and most of ward work slowed to a trickle. By then, summer would happen soon and with it, the harvest. During the harvest, many soldiers would ask for leave to return to help their families. Viv had limited time to train them before this happened so she decided to make the most of it.

"We have a problem," she told her staff the night before. "We lack a general."

They looked at each other, then at her. Sidjin nodded thoughtfully.

"I'm not a general," she said. "It's not my path. I receive training in tactics and strategy at the Academy and I studied warfare on Earth but I know very little about maneuvers, logistics, everything else that matters. Hell, even fortifying a spot is beyond me. We need a general."

"And unless we get an unexpected defection, we won't have one." Sidjin said.

Farren grabbed the map of Param and placed it on the table between them. The angelic young man took a serious countenance.

"I believe you are mistaking the roles of general and strategist, Viviane the Oulander. A strategist belongs to a very specific path that has become quite rare following the fall of the empire, simply because it works best, nay, it requires directing an army and is therefore very specialized. A general leads the men. Remember Constable Tarano?"

Of course Viv remembered. She'd shoved an excalibur through his chest.

"You do. Well, he didn't have a general path yet he still commanded the loyalist army, and he did so pretty well. Nous-granted skills are not what usually makes a great leader though social skills help. It is, in fact, a combination of many factors."

"That makes sense."

"The most important of which is that your people follow you and you have us as well. We will have to work together for success and we will. If a strategist does show up, all the better. In the meanwhile, nothing replaces drills."

"Alright."

The army gathered on the plain outside Sinur's Gate, on the undead side where little would grow. Even here, at the foot of the cliff, some revenants still found a way to wander within

view. The army ignored them so long as they were not in range. Viv opened with a sound enchantment, eager to begin.

“Soldiers of Harrak, we have been tested before and we have come up the victors because we were superior. Superior in discipline, in equipment, in preparation. Superior in motivation. There is only one aspect where we cannot compete, and that aspect is numbers.

“Every drop of Harrakan blood we shed must be paid dearly. Every life we have lost must be remembered and avenged. Your lives are precious to Harrak, they are precious to me, and so I have come up with what I believe will best leverage our strength to achieve the only acceptable result: overwhelming victory.”

“Harrak eternal!”

Viv waited for the exclamations to calm down. Once again, the Children of the Scale had led with their enthusiasm, no doubt buoyed by the very smug presence of Arthur at Viv’s side. The dragoness left her bank to motivate her minions for at least an hour. They were overjoyed.

That annoyed Viv just a little bit.

“We will fight the way we have always fought: by backing and protecting each other. By combining our strengths until they become something greater. We will be forming a Tercio. The heavies shall block the enemies and fight them directly. The marksmen and women shall deliver death from afar. As for the casters, we will protect you with our portable shields and unleash arcane destruction on our foes.

“In order to do that, we must first train until we are not soldiers but a well-oiled machine of war: an army. It will be tedious but I assure you, when ranks of our foes fall upon us and fail, you will remember this day fondly. Let’s begin.”

The idea behind the Tercio was simple in principle yet difficult to execute. Tercios were created by the Spanish Habsburg Empire at the apex of its military might. Ranks of armored pikemen would form a square while mobile groups of arquebusiers, later musketeers, would shoot from within. The tercios enjoyed the staying power of heavy infantry and the range power of firearms which the formation protected well. They were also highly capable on offense while able to defend assaults from any direction, especially if deployed in echelons of several formations.

Viv would replace pikemen with heavies and arquebusiers with witch pact and hoped it would work. The only issue was that armies at that time had unreliable artillery while Nyil had mage formations. It would be easy for them to annihilate expensive and precious Harrakan heavies. Viv’s solution was the portable shield array.

Yries metal constructs were not, in fact, tanks. They were metal wagons powered by mana engines. The Yries thought they’d keep the method secret but Viv could read mana easily, too easily, so she knew they functioned on cores. Each wagon was about as long as a Hummer, though narrower. They also kept a rather high profile. The back of the tank was

dedicated to the engine, the front to a driver seat, and the top to whatever the yries wanted to fit on there. They moved off four large metal wheels.

The yries usually fit catapults and ballista, however they'd built three shield arrays according to Viv's design, powering them with the large black mana cores she has found during her necrarch hunt. They functioned by themselves but they worked better with a mage around who could recharge the core.

The most basic exercises consisted in having the soldiers simply form around the tanks. Viv elected to take the center one with the One Hundred in front simply because they were the most powerful formation. She picked the Children of the Scales to make up the rest of the square because that was, she believed, the safest spot. For the range company, she picked the Sisters of the Eye since they were the best marksmen. The right flank was traditionally the most dependable so she gave it to the Mountain Sons who had proven they were highly coordinated along with the support of the Bitter Hearts. The left flank had the Fingers supporting the Hightree Company. Both bodies boasted the most versatile fighters gathered from veterans. She was certain they would be the most responsive and adaptive block of her army. Lana joined, to Viv's surprise, and went with the right flank while Sidjin took the left with easy confidence.

The first part went well. The soldiers learned to go from column to squares in good times. Viv just showed the officers what needed to be done and they made it happen. She climbed in her tank and activated, out of curiosity, after they'd formed squares. The construct lit up beautifully and a huge, transparent circle formed a dome over the assembled troops to their delight. A few stragglers walked in as they were a little too far to be covered. Out of curiosity, Viv infused the shield with black mana. It took a lot of energy to feed the large construct but she managed it for a few seconds without problems. The issue was that no one could see anything.

Lana and Sidjin activated their own which turned a little blue and quite shiny, respectively. The machines worked. The mood improved as a result.

"Alright, now let's start moving!"

The rest of the day was spent simply marching in formation, then holding. Just as she'd planned, the three Tercios were echeloned with her own being slightly forward. By the first day's end, they were able to move forward and fall back while keeping the formation functional.

What surprised Viv the most was how thoroughly disciplined everyone was. She'd expected some sort of issue but each company was attempting to outdo the others in terms of performance, and they really took the exercise seriously.

The second day was much of the same but with lateral movements which ended in disaster the first few times. Then, Viv had the Tercios move independently. At the end of the day, she tested the shield's power in front of everyone by sitting inside her own tank and having Sidjin and Lana bombard her. She invited others to try and this turned into a game.

Stones and spells smashed into Viv's shield first by the soldiers, then more joined from spectators coming from the city. By the time night fell, all of the girls including a giddy Rakan and his students had gathered to throw everything they had at Viv who merely bothered to look cool while using the Aspect of the Guardian skill to beef up her shield. The diversion worked well to alleviate boredom and the next days kept going with the same patient determination as the others.

Once Viv was confident people could move, she tried to have them charge forward for the first time. The first few attempts actually succeeded, although the shield could not follow. The tanks didn't have enough acceleration. Viv could only offset this by having the shield move forward before the charge started. It wasn't a perfect workaround, however.

"We will improve next designs. We promise," her yries pilot assured her. "More death. Faster. Add spikes in the front."

Viv glared at the yries who remained the very picture of owlish innocence. She recognized him as the same lad who'd piloted the drill, the one that pierced the walls of Kazar during her very first campaign. He was just as unhinged now as he'd been back then. She suspected the bioweapon yries group were a gathering of murderous whack jobs by their society's standards. She wondered what that meant.

"Ok? So long as it can keep up."

"Yes, keep up, and smash into humans."

Viv glared harder.

"The bad humans."

"I have my eyes on you."

"We regret to inform you that the Manipeleso Bank and Exchange will not assist you in recovering Elunath's money, nor make the attempt, for the simple reason that you have been stripped of all rights in Helock and branded a criminal."

Viv shrugged. She suspected as much but it was worth a try.

"Make no mistakes, we have already refused their attempt to seize your belongings. For the same reason, we cannot request them to comply with their own laws because, in the end, the interpretation of their laws is their prerogative. It would be a waste of lawyers' fees to try to convince a government to work against their own interests for the sake of 'honesty'."

"I figured it might set a bad precedent."

"It would set a terrible precedent to reward an aggressor for being clever. I can only congratulate you on your victory and hope you took everything that wasn't nailed down."

"I did my best."

After two weeks of constant practice, the army could do as she wanted so she started shuffling formations, changing one company for another. It turned out that not much changed so the time came to test the army in the field. They gathered some rations, then Viv distributed her brand new invention.

Portable radios.

Those were actually communicating devices mounted on helmets and, if she had to be absolutely honest, okay, not her invention. However, though the Paramese already used communication in the field, those were mostly made using spells and horn signals. The ability to communicate complex orders should help. It took a bit of getting used to but eventually, she had a system in place where officers could listen in on orders and activate the secondary module to reply.

Feeling rather confident, they traveled north, stopping regularly to practice deploying in places where there was simply not enough space to fight normally. This forced the squares to become more compact, or to temporarily disband while going through a chokepoint. After that came the real test: actual battle.

Using a life beacon, Viv attracted a rather large force of revenants to attack her people. Using her square as bait allowed the two other formations to charge to cover her back. Viv made sure to kill revenants before anyone could really get hurt. It also revealed a new flaw in her formation: the lack of thickness.

One of the issues they had was almost a parity between lighter, shooting troops and heavies. This meant that the squares were relatively fragile if the marksmen were given enough room to move around. To remedy this situation, Viv had the Tercios practice heavier sides. That took a long time to get right. It was also at this point that Sidjin perfected his innovation: deployable forts. His idea was to create elevated platforms with crenelation from which the marksmen could shoot without having to do so over the ranks of the heavies. It was a great idea and they practiced its implementation. Although Viv could not do it as well as the others, eldritch walls still served the same purpose.

When they returned to Sinur's Gate, they had an army capable of maneuvering albeit one that would still need to be tested in battle and improved upon. That was fine with Viv. She was in no rush to go to war.

The first message upon her return came, to her surprise, from Irao.

"King Sangor of Enoria wants to come visit."

"Ah. And I assume he is not very pleased."

“You assume very well,” Irao replied, sarcasm going over his head. “He is coming with two thousand men.”

“Wait, is this war?”

“No. This is intimidation.”

“Doesn’t he know? I’m an intimidation expert.”