

Viv was off the room before the soldier could utter another word. She sprinted out the door and out into the complex in front of the mines. It wasn't too hard to find Arthur because kids hung on every corner, running around in panic. They all pointed towards the baths.

Viv ran. She spotted the dragonette's prone form and slid by her side. Her body radiated heat.

"Eeeeeee."

Fever, a big one. Viv took the heavy creature in her arms and hissed in pain, changing her posture. The scales scalded her. Had to bring down that a bit, as Arthur was decidedly uncomfortable. She ran into the baths and dove into a nearby pool still wearing her dress. Arthur shivered. Her clawed hands pierced Viv's skin a bit and the caster grit her teeth, but her charge sighed in relief.

Viv's mind was a mess.

She should have paid more attention to the dragon instead of spending so much time training and doing politics. She should have checked her health. She should have interacted more with the small one, instead of doing the bare minimum for months, because she thought she was too busy. She was a shit surrogate mother. Now Arthur was burning and she didn't know why.

As despair gripped her heart and the fever kept going, Viv inspected the dragonling in her arms. At first, she felt very little because of her turmoil, but soon her perception became more acute and the strands appeared clearly to her mind. Arthur had colors about her. More specifically, she had all of them. Ropes like a kaleidoscope shimmered across her skin while her horns appeared to pull mana from around. Viv could see thick black tendrils emerging from her own body. It did not hurt at all, nor did it feel intrusive. Her mana was full and this just looked like overflow being captured before it could dissipate.

Viv had never noticed, never paid attention.

"Squeee.."

"I'm sorry. I'm here now."

The dragonette held Viv hard, clearly dismayed. Viv felt the incredible power in her limbs. She had witnessed Arthur tear revenants and men to ribbons in mere moments, yet even now in her hour of pain, the little one only used enough strength to keep herself latched. Viv cupped some water and rubbed a snout she could not see, above her shoulder. Arthur's breath came raspy and hurried.

"What's wrong with you, won't you tell?"

And she did.

Viv watched, mesmerized, as Arthur used blue mana to manipulate liquids, more specifically the water they were in. Characters coalesced with slow purpose. They were blurry, but readable.

S.

A hard C.

W.

E.

“Squee,” Viv summarized.

“Squee!”

She didn’t know what she expected.

“I don’t know why you have a fever. I don’t know if you’re sick or poisoned or about to blow up. Do you need me to get you anything?”

Arthur grabbed her a bit tighter.

“Alright, I’m not going anywhere. We can just stay here and wait it out. You can relax.”

And she did try but it proved difficult. Arthur was on and off, sometimes moving and sometimes sleeping fitfully. Viv had to lay back against the bath’s stone walls to let her arms rest a bit. At some point, Marruk brought her a bowl of something she gulped down without tasting it. Kids would occasionally whisper from beyond the walls in frantic voices. There were no changes. Late afternoon turned to evening, and evening, to night, and Arthur was still burning. Viv had to change bath because the previous one was quickly turning nice and steamy.

The hours went on.

Viv tired and let her mind wander. She yawned. Someone knocked on the door.

“Yes?”

“May I come in?” Farren asked.

“Eeeeeeee!”

“Hm let’s talk through the door, Arthur is feeling territorial.”

“Fine. I would like to point out that the moment we have been waiting for and working towards is finally upon us. We need to make ready to depart. As much as I appreciate you

taking care of your pet, you are carrying the hopes of over a thousand people. Don't you think that you should set your priorities straight?"

"Calm down, Farren, Kazar isn't going anywhere. A few hours won't make a difference."

"What if it's not just a few hours? You rushed out of the council like a charger. We just stopped existing. What if it's a day? What if it is five?"

"What if? What if? With what ifs I could bend Lancer over and make him sing an anthem. What's your point?" she asked, annoyed.

Farren sighed and it was clear that he, too, was angry.

"You are placing your pet over all the people who followed us into the deadlands. That's my point. What is wrong with you? Don't you see how much you are risking? Is it even dying?"

"She, and I don't know, and she's not a pet."

"You don't even know. You could let 'her' stay under supervision and take care of what really matters."

"She's sick and worried and I will take care of her until she gets better. People are not dying right now, Farren. We can afford to let Lancer's main force get a bit fatter just in case he gets any idea and decides to head back."

"This isn't about the timing, it's about your decision-making."

Both were raising their voices then. The kids around the bath house were making themselves scarce.

"How about that then, since you care about what matters? Kids love Arthur, she's the mascot. If we left her to scream alone and dejected on the eve of departure, what will it do for morale? Have you considered it?"

"You're exaggerating."

"I am not. Her scales are so hot I would burn myself without the water."

"Fine, I see that you have made your mind. Have it your way, fearless leader. I just thought that your words meant something. I thought that you were rational and reliable. Neriad's cock. Pah!"

Viv's eyes went wide as saucers at the unexpected rant. Farren was usually so composed. What crawled up his ass, she wondered? Besides, he was full of it. She was not letting the invasion down, just taking a short delay because Arthur was a few degrees short of the gold melting point and that would affect her pouch, which she was still wearing.

The dragonette squeaked weakly and Viv poured some more water on her snout. Farren could deal, and the invasion was still on schedule but it did raise an important point. In a way, Viv had had it easy. Not the whole almost dying and snipers things obviously. In the social way. None of her allies, or friends, had been at each other's throats despite their numerous differences. She had only made minor efforts to gain the trust of those who counted the most in her eyes. Arthur. Solfis. Marruk, though it had taken some time. Varska, technically, since the mage had not survived her betrayal. Farren... Farren was a weasel even if he meant well.

Yeah, she was lucky.

All those people in her life had become solid and her family and friends back on earth had grown blurry despite her improved memory. It had happened so progressively that she had not realized. They were... not in phase with what was happening to her. If earth had not blown up, they would probably be moving on now. By contrast, her new world was solid in a way that she had not experienced before. They all had their thing. Marruk always kept an eye on her back. She also hated wasting food, even scraps. Arthur liked to take out her two gold talents and look at them before she went to sleep. Solfis had upgraded his opinion of the surrounding mortals from meatbags to useful tools. They were very real and very alive and it had not cost her much to bring them around. Perhaps today was a real test of her character.

She was ok with her decision.

Arthur was important to her. The invasion would not stall if they delayed half a day. She would not sacrifice the little one for a perceived schedule, even if it made Farren mad and possibly destroyed her reputation. There were many uncertain things in Viv's life. This was not one of them.

Evening passed and it was now night. Arthur stopped hugging her to drink clean water once. Her temperature had not dropped. There was no change that Viv could see so she stayed as she was, the earlier worry less now that Arthur didn't look to be in pain. Her thoughts wandered to music. She had loved music on earth, and she now missed it more than ever. The melodies were still alive in her mind, yet it was not the same as listening to the original. She hummed a few under her breath to Arthur's delight. At some point, the dragonette untangled herself to attend to a natural need but she returned quickly, temperature already rising.

"Can you write anything else in the water?" Viv asked, now curious.

"Squee?"

"Whatever you want and only if you feel like it."

Once again, Arthur manipulated the flow of mana closeby like it was a part of her. New characters appeared.

'Mama.'

“Awwwww!”

‘Gold.’

“Maybe later, you have to recover first, yes?”

“Squee.”

Feeling chuffed, Viv returned to being the dragonling’s cat tree, the eucalyptus to her koala. She yawned harder. Tiredness caught up and she managed to sleep by half an hour increments, until Arthur woke her up once again.

Her temperature had dropped. In fact, she was getting cold.

“Arthur? Arthur, are you alright?”

The tiny one had closed her eyes and was breathing fast.

“Arthur?”

The dragonling was now letting out a congested breath doubled with a kettle-like whistle.

“Hks hks hks HKS KSHAAAA!”

A sound like a woosh and Viv fell back. The bath was made entirely out of stone. That stone was now on fire. Angry red flames smouldered on the ground and the far wall in tiny puddles of death. Arthur sniffed once more as her breath returned to normal.

Viv felt a very distinct caress on her forearm where Arthur’s head had been resting, the specific jolt of nerve endings realizing their neighbors had died an ignominious death. Any time now.

“Aaaaa FUCK! OW!”

“Squee?”

Viv lifted the flame-spitting lizard like a handbag and crashed in yet another pool of frigid water. Every hair on her forearm had been vaporized and she could see a reddening track where Arthur’s head had been resting. Second degree burn. A bad one.

It hurt like a motherfucker.

“Aaaaaaa sa mère. Awawawawaw.”

//Your Grace, your vitals are—

//ABSOLUTE OVERRIDE: IMPERIAL HEIR IN MORTAL DANGER.

“Don’t you fucking dare you bone twit. Get me a healer, stat.”

//ORDER ACKNOWLEDGED.

“Squeeeeeeeee!”

“It’s ok. Ugh. Nothing too serious.”

It was, in fact, quite serious. Pretty sure she had lost a lump of flesh, but this was the land of magic and she was not amputated yet. The cool water helped the abominable pain.

Pain tolerance: Intermediate 9

Earth her would be screaming on the ground right now. Not much of a comfort. It REALLY hurt, but she could not show it because Arthur was inconsolable.

“Squeeee...”

“That’s fine honey, just a small accident. You didn’t do it on purpose.”

Viv started to sweat and her breath accelerated as well, but she had to keep a strained smile for the panicking Arthur instead of stringing insults at eighty decibels like she wanted to.

“I swear I’m not mad. It’s fine.”

Farren burst in with a health potion and Denerim in tow while Solfis peeked in from the door. The inquisitor had the stronger healing spell out of everyone present. Viv guessed that he had a rather high attunement for someone who was not a mage.

“What in the name of Neriad happened here?” Farren asked, all anger dissipating. He looked like he had just woken up.

“Hks hks hks hks...”

Viv grabbed the dragonette by the neck with her intact hand and aimed the head towards the far wall.

“KSHAAAA!”

It was a sneeze except that every droplet of snot had been replaced by napalm.

Farren froze at the sight. He looked at the flame burn for a while, weaker but still hot enough that the room’s temperature was increasing.

“Can I get the fucking potion?” Viv asked.

“Hold on, let me take care of you first. It’s not my first burn,” Denerim said. He started using life mana on Viv’s arm. The flesh of the burn slowly melted into a pinkish puddle. It was a horrifying sight.

Viv’s burn was as large as half her palm, which meant quite large for a forearm. Denerim revealed damaged muscle fibers. Viv averted her eyes when they reached the bone. She returned her efforts to making sure Arthur could not see the damage. In vain. The dragonette was already stronger than her by an order of magnitude. She managed to free herself gently and looked at the damage.

“Squeeeeeeeee.”

“It was an accident, alright? I will be fine.”

“You will have a scar,” Denerim corrected.

“SQUEEEEE!”

“By the gods man, will you shut up? Ugh.”

“Sorry. Not used to kids.”

“Ahem,” Farren said. “I feel like an idiot.”

“You don’t say…” Viv replied. She could not help herself. Her annoyance was getting to her.

“Not for my previous statement and I stand by it. It just occurred to me that with all the implausible strangeness related to you, the golem and sorcery and everything, it simply never occurred to me to take a closer look at your drake. Now, I assumed it was a marsh drake since it’s a relatively easy species to tame, even without skills. An albino drake, to be precise. Something a rich heiress would have. I assumed it had been teleported with you and that its status was obfuscated to mask your origin. Now, I feel like a complete imbecile.”

Farren smiled. It was fake as hell. His eyes had grown manic.

“This is not a marsh drake.”

“Indeed not,” Denerim said, still working on Viv’s arm.

“Marsh drakes don’t spit fire. No magical species with scales and wings spit fire except for that specific one, and now I know for sure that you are a traveler.”

“Oh?” Viv said, “Finally figured it out, did you?”

“I had suspicion like half of the leadership of the camp I suppose, but now I know for sure. No native of Nyil, not a single person, not even a madwoman, would act like that towards a fucking dragon.”

“Squee!”

“Language.”

Farren blinked and realized that the hard-breathing and slightly off put dragonette could follow the conversation. Arthur huffed and closed her eyes before catching Viv again in a hug.

“You are completely, fully insane and you will be vaporized just like everything in a league’s radius when the old ones find out, but right now we cannot do without you, and there is no adult dragon around here anyway. I just pray that you are not in the village when it happens.”

“So you must see why it’s also in your interest that we delay the expedition for a day, right?”

“.... No?”

“Alright, just imagine that an ‘old one’ figures out that you mistreated a young dragonette by leaving her alone in her hour of distress?”

Farren swallowed his saliva with some difficulty.

“I’m going back to bed and when I wake up tomorrow, everything will be better. Goodbye.”

He left.

Arthur and Viv had been successfully distracted for half a minute and went back to their previous activity: squealing and trying very hard not to do so, respectively. Denerim was done anyway. Viv’s burnt tissues had been melted off and only healthy tissue remained. He spread half a flesh-mending potion on the wound and had her swallow the other half. It tasted like lukewarm herbal ass. Or freshly regurgitated cow vomit perhaps. She gulped it down anyway.

“Lots of folks make the mistake of applying flesh-mending potion directly to burn wounds. It just makes the flesh hard and scarred. You would need a healer for a full recovery.”

“Are there burn-specific potions?”

“Of course there are but flesh-mending is general purpose so potions are far more common. In any case, it appears that young Arthur’s fever was related to her biology. Congratulations on your growth, young one.”

“Squee!”

“I just hope that there won’t be too many more surprises along the way,” Viv said.

“You can always write a book on proper draconic education and health,” Denerim deadpanned.

“Squee.”

“She likes books. In any case, if you feel better we will leave soon but I think that you should sit that fight out,” Viv said.

“Squee?”

“The enemies have bowmen, Arthur, and you are still weak. You should rest.”

“Squee!”

“Of course you can come with us. I'm not leaving you here alone. Let's go to bed if you're getting better. Your mother needs her rest.”

It felt incredibly weird to say that word out loud, but Viv was okay with it, she realized. She also wondered how dragonlings managed in the wild. Did they instinctively find a lair to huddle in? Or did their mothers usually watch after them for long periods of time? She didn't know and suspected that the research on the matter of dragon-rearing simply did not exist here, just as Denerim explained.

Viv collapsed in her cot and Arthur became her weighted blanket. They were woken up halfway to noon by Marruk.

“The convoy has started though people have decided to let you sleep a bit more. We've got horses and an escort. You can nap a bit more and then we'll catch up.”

“Alright.”

When Viv was ready, the mines stood empty. She noticed that people had taken the time to clean and organize before they left, and the familiar ground now stood halfway between the dusty wreck they had first found and the survival base it had become. Outside, the greenery would remain for a while. The Suncult Marea on Varska's memorial was still going strong and the Yries had agreed to take care of it. They would send a few of their own here to secure the entrance.

She looked at her progress.

Current status:

- Mana channels (mage)
- Extreme compatibility
- Divine spark: luck
- Draconic Surrogate Mother

Mana distribution:

- Black 100%

Current attunement: 24.3%

She was strong now, almost as strong as Varska had been in terms of battle potential. Less flexible, but much more devastating. Varska had not been a battle specialist, after all.

Physical		Mental	
Power	16	Focus	35
Finesse	20	Acuity	35
Endurance	23	Willpower	36

Both endurance and willpower had increased by one. She didn't have a baseline but she thought that it was not great for such a long period of effort. Solfis had mentioned that strenuous circumstances (as in actively being in danger) or targeted exercises would allow rapid progress past this point, but not to expect miracles. She has grabbed all the low-hanging fruits. From then on, it was a question of commitment. That was fine though. Under Solfis' advice, she had focused on controlling her abilities instead of expanding them. She could already shear a man in half from fifty meters away with the strength of her mind. There was no need for additional firepower. Now, it was about using it properly from afar and then living to tell the tale.

Class skills			
Meditative Trance	Expert 2	Mana mastery	Novice 7
Arcane Constructs	Beginner 3	Danger sense	Beginner 6
Leadership	Beginner 8	Intimidation	Intermediate 5
Acuity reflex	Beginner 5		

She had seen progress around the board except in intimidation. It wasn't fair that Farren had not been scared by the revelation. She supposed that he was mad more than anything else. In any case, she had the means to protect herself from snipers and the like. Unless Lancer had left a nasty surprise, they had a chance.

General skills			
Polymath	Beginner 3	Athletics	Intermediate 2

Survival	Intermediate 1	Householding	Apprentice 8
Hand to hand combat	Apprentice 6	Pain tolerance	Intermediate 9
Small blades	Beginner 7		

This had not changed except for pain tolerance. She discreetly pulled the sleeve of her enchanted robe and checked her arm. All the hair was gone and some parts remained a little bit red. She also had a scar. It was more a light discoloration than something truly mangled, luckily for her. In a way, it looked like a flying dragon looking down. Viv shrugged and chose not to think about it for now. It was a scar. Fine. She had other scars. She would have more scars before this was all over.

It was time to go.

With one last look at the abandoned base, she rode out.