

From closer, the aberrant was even worse. The striated disc of its upper body was a malevolent, cancerous mass of vile matter covered in bulbous growths and bony spines. It looked tough too.

“Why would we ever attack that thing?”

//First, the aberrant is on a course to the edge of the fertile strip.

//Should it arrive there, it will kill villagers until we can stop it.

//Second, this is good practice for you.

“I can think of better ways to practice.”

//None so efficient as real world experience.

//Additionally, the aberrants are particularly resistant to mana intrusion.

//It will be good practice for you.

“I’m not sure about that.”

//Please create a workable plan to take it down.

Viv stared and saw the creature suddenly lurch forward and pin something on the ground. A second later, it lifted the carcass of a tree and Viv thought she saw a sort of maw on the thing’s underside. She also realized that the captured tree hovered at a maximum height, away from the disc.

“That’s fucked up. I think it can’t reach its own mouth.”

//Accurate.

//In addition, the flesh is too compact for the aberration to possess a digestive system.

“Wait, do you mean that..”

//It will starve endlessly until it is put down.

//Aberrations have a lot of mana, hence why they are so dangerous.

//Now, can you think of a way to kill it?

Viv looked around and saw only trees as far as the eye could see. Actually, that was not quite correct. Some of the tallest specimens were taller than the aberrants.

“You could —”

//I do not need your help to kill a newly born aberrant, Your Grace.

//You must find a way to kill it yourself.

“Well, hmmm, can you at least carry me around?”

Viv was definitely on the dangerous scale of things. She was also fragile and slow. No amount of trudging through the forest would let her keep pace with that monster, or at least not within the next decade.

//I will agree to transport you.

//However, I will not attack the aberrant.

“Alright. So if the thing can’t bring food to its mouth, it certainly can’t touch the top of its head.”

The articulations looked messed up on the tall, spindly things the creature used as legs. They were black and smooth towards the tip, but the farther up one went and the more organic and sickly they became.

“If we can lure it to any tall tree, Solfis can jump on top of it and dig in. With this, the creature should be unable to dislodge me while I use short-range high-powered spells to slay it.”

Solfis and Orkan stared at her.

“I will act as a lure. It’s very strong but not too fast,” the inquisitor offered.

//How can you fleshy beings always come up with plans that appear as both stupid and likely to succeed?

“If it’s stupid but it works, it ain’t stupid.”

//Is that the wisdom of your old world, Your Grace?

“Yep.”

//New sensation redefined as disappointment.

//We are ready to proceed.

“Wait, what was your plan then?”

//I did not have one, Your Grace.

//The optimal path would be for me to kill it.

//However, several training manuals agree that letting young war mages face true enemies under careful supervision provides the best results.

//We will follow your plan and hopefully not suffer casualties.

With his, the golem moved away and Viv reluctantly packed her unfinished lunch. What kind of barbarian interrupted lunch for physical activity? Someone without a digestive system, that’s who. Nevertheless, she followed Orkan on his way to the aberrant.

They moved for only a few minutes, then gave the creature a wide berth. Viv selected a tall lonely tree close to its path and gave one last series of instructions to Orkan.

“This is just practice so don’t take any risk, alright?”

“I’m not playing hero. If I get hurt or overwhelmed, I will retreat.”

“Good.”

Viv climbed on Solfis’ back while he crawled smoothly up the rugged trunk. She noticed that he did not disturb any branches with his passage, nor did any bark creak or fall. Only sight or the terrifying weight of his gaze could betray his presence. They were soon in position, waiting for Orkan to engage, and he did.

Viv heard the clang of metal, then the aberrant let out another pitched scream and rushed forward towards them. She caught sight of Orkan running backwards. He was focused on the leg trying to skewer him, both blades maintained before him. The aberrant stabbed blindly in front of itself and left deep furrows in the ground. It was definitely fast, but not fast enough to catch up to the wily and cautious inquisitor.

“Almost there, get... what was that?”

Viv’s attempt aborted as soon as she heard a confusing yet familiar sound.

“SqueeeeEEEEEEEEeeee.”

There was a white blur, a sound in the middle between cough and barf, and then the top of the aberration caught on fire.

It roared an ear-splitting shriek of rage and pain.

“Motherfucker.”

//That is unexpected.

The creature stopped and shook itself, sending burning embers around, but the fire would not let out so easily and Viv felt a hint of phantom pain from the scar on her arm. Arthur’s fire was *hot*. Flamethrower hot.

Orkan had wisely decided to leg it, a salutary idea when the creature squatted as close to the ground as it could.

Then, it jumped.

Viv looked up to a nightmarish, four-legged flying saucer of fuckery until the thing landed and planted itself into the ground. The tree shook. The aberrant was still on fire.

“Can you get us on the side of the disc?”

//Yes.

The creature jumped again, going after Orkan's fleeing form. The inquisitor changed direction mid-race as the creature almost overtook it. Solfis jumped just as the creature landed.

Viv resisted the urge to scream when they approached the disgusting disc. It was even nastier from up close. The aberrant had no biology, it was just a revolting amalgam of flesh.

They landed. Solfis smoothly clamped all limbs on the creature's side. It barely shifted under the attack.

Viv fought the urge to retch. The aberrant was not just malodorous, its mana felt horrid and sickly. Her improved senses worked against her as she did her best to fight the influence of a nauseous vortex of corruption. The dyes were still there. They were just moving in a... wrong way. Unnatural. Toxic. The will of the world swirled in a vortex centered around the middle of the disc, and Viv knew that her purge spell would barely peel off a layer of pointless flesh. The aberration was not magic-resistant. It was magic-absorbent.

The thing lurched and shook, but Solfis offset the movements with lazy grace. It gave Viv the window of opportunity she needed. She focused and drew as much power as she could in a single sphere above her right shoulder. The spell was simple, a powerful version of her basic purge overcharged to as much as she could contain. Even though the black mana was hers, even if it liked her, she still felt a tug as the aberration pulled greedily at it.

"Purge."

A thick beam smashed into the creature's center. It sent bubbling blood and pieces of foamy bone to the side as her attack mercilessly dug into its flesh and then... stopped. The attack had smashed through the creature's resistance to reveal a pulsating blob of flesh. Unfortunately, the pain sent the aberration into a frenzy and it stumbled around, stabbing madly with its legs.

"Need more focused power."

Viv decided to try a spell she had designated as 'stupid' before. She took out her silverite dagger and drew a massive amount of power which she focused on the enchanted blade. A dark coating soon engulfed the powerful metal. She even drew power from the core to hasten the casting. The aberration had finally realized that something was clinging to it and shook like a wet dog. Viv supposed that being set on fire had distracted it. Until now.

She did her best to cling to Solfis to prevent her neck from snapping with the haphazard movements. A sword-like blade as dark as the void now extended from her focus. It was charged with destruction. It hissed in the air, eager.

The aberration toppled on the ground, perhaps hoping to smush them.

Solfis jumped.

Viv slowed down her perception. She roared and used her increased strength to slash upward. A massive surge sliced cleanly through the pulsating flesh and the edge of the creature, almost cleaving it in two. It died then. Viv felt the hungry vortex collapse.

The massive aberrant shook the earth with its mass while Solfis landed by its side with the grace of a gymnast. Viv watched the creature in its death throes. The legs were thankfully angled away, because the havoc they wreaked on the nearby trees was a sight to behold. They had already formed a clearing of shredded trunks.

Viv took a step back when the coming of a draconic dive-bomber graced her ears.

“SqueeeeEEEEEE**COUGHE**eeeeee.”

A few goutts of tenacious flames landed on the open, pus-filled sore that was the main body. Its legs finally contracted in one last dreadful grip.

Arthur made a U-turn, flapped once to slow down and finally landed majestically in front of the carcass. She stood on her rear legs and spread her wings as far as they would go.

“Squee!”

Viv could, of course, not resist such a heroic display. She trotted forward and patted the victorious dragonette on her warm chest.

“Oh yes you mighty hunter you, how good that was. Good good good. You came like the wind and burnt it to a crisp!”

Viv congratulated the extremely proud dragonling for a while. To be honest, she would have preferred to include the smart being into the briefing but she was not even sure if Arthur was following. She was free to do her own thing, mostly hunting by herself. Arthur saw Viv in battle and joined. It was Viv’s fault for not being vigilant enough.

When she turned around after much adoration, it was to Solfis blase expression. She wasn’t sure how someone who had no facial features could look so tired with life but Solfis managed it.

//It would appear that, due to the aberrant’s limitations, Arthur could have killed it alone.

//I must reevaluate the juvenile dragon’s battle potential to account for flight.

//I must also reevaluate the mortal’s use of cheap tricks to achieve victory.

“It’s called tactics.”

//I have much data on tactics.

//Piggy-backing golems was not mentioned.

“That’s because the best tactics are situational. Like how the aberrant could not strike up. Know the enemy and yourself and you will win a thousand battles.

//This is... surprisingly insightful.

Viv nodded and omitted to mention that she was merely quoting Sun Tzu. Let Solfis believe that she was smart and resourceful.

“So, hmm, do we need to burn it down?” Orkan interrupted, eyeing the carcass.

They moved around the body to inspect it. The aberrant had a large toothy opening under the disc, but it had no way to close and didn't lead anywhere. A saliva-like liquid coated the underside. Arthur's fire stubbornly gained in intensity and the humans had to back up a bit to avoid inhaling fumes.

//Standard protocol is to burn aberrants to dust in order to avoid unexpected regenerative or toxic effects.

//In this specific case, I can confirm core destruction.

//Total incineration is not required.

//I would normally advise it.

//Some aberrants are very tenacious.

//All of them are dangerous.

//Unfortunately, I failed to carry my point across since we disposed of it too easily.

“It's ok Solfis, you don't have to tell me to take the five-Vivs-high unnatural quadrupedal saucer of doom seriously. I could tell that it was dangerous. What with stabbing things and moving faster than a galloping horse. Is there anything to loot on this?”

“All aberrant body parts are vile. They cannot be used,” Orkan explained. Viv had not known. Those really were shitty creatures then. At least monsters were delicious.

//We should check for the creature's point of origin.

“What do you mean?” Viv asked.

//This aberrant was newly made.

//It would be good to track down its point of origin.

//And determine whether or not we should expect more.

“Huh.”

It was early afternoon now and Viv didn't look forward to spending the night in the forest, but the golem had the right to it. It was common knowledge here that aberrants often happened in places of misery. Better check what this was all about. They moved quickly through the forest, following the tracks the creature had made. It was pretty easy.

It took them two hours at a brisk pace to reach the main road out of the Deadshield Woods. The tracks ran parallel for a while. It didn't take long for Viv to realize that Solfis had poorly prepared this time.

“We only had enough food for lunch and a light snack. If we keep going, we’ll have to sleep on the loam and break our fast on soft bark,” she remarked.

//How very lyrical, Your Grace.

//Fortunately, my sensors indicate that it will not be necessary.

Viv did not have to ask what the golem meant. Orkan pointed silently forward and she soon heard it too, heavy footsteps. It wasn’t long before a group of soldiers appeared from behind a bend.

Viv felt a sense of urgency for a brief moment, only to remember that troop passage was common. There were still soldiers going to and from the deadlands to keep their centennial vigil, despite the recent troubles. These wore the white colors of Baran, with the officer showing a horse on his tabard. They were dirty, dusty, and exhausted. More so than usual.

The head officer was younger than Cernit had been and lacked his rough edge. He spotted them immediately and stopped the convoy with a raised fist. He made sure that his sword was free in his scabbard — which Viv found adorable — before moving forward to meet them. His eyes went from Orkan’s inquisitor uniform to Solfis’ threatening figure.

“Hail and well met! I am Lieutenant Solani of the Baranese Corps of Volunteers! At your service! May I inquire who you might be?”

The three introduced each other in turn.

“We were trying to find the origin of an aberrant we met earlier.”

“Yes, a mighty one and of good size! We must hurry and warn Kazar!”

“That won’t be necessary,” Viv said with gleeful haughtiness, “we already took it down.”

The officer was shocked. He waited to see if they were perhaps joking then bowed smartly, on fist over his heart.

“Neriad and Enttiku smile upon us today. Well done, mighty warriors.”

Far above them, something squealed. Sonali frowned then dismissed the strange occurrence.

“As for how it was created, you need no longer trouble yourself. The answer is right behind us.”

He turned and waved. There were thirty soldiers in a vanguard with wagons that should still have some food but quite obviously stood empty. Behind, the first of the civilians crossed in an exhausted shuffle.

Viv had not seen such a sorry lot since she had left Afghanistan behind. They were filthy, sick, and malnourished. The men were too old or too young to fight and the women’s eyes

were made deep-set by misery and starvation. The children were silent and clung to skirts with hounded looks. The civilians slowed when they saw the trio, and a few started to cry at the sight of Solfis.

Viv could hardly blame them.

“Those are Kazaran elites, not necromancers! Everyone please calm down!”

More and more people joined including maimed soldiers walking on crutches. There were, all in all, a good fifty refugees.

“You are fools to travel so,” Orkan said with more amazement than anger.

“Not fools. Desperate,” Solani retorted. “We picked them up as we went. Better than to leave them to add to the ranks of revenants, don’t you think? Even then, we missed many. The aberrant was one of theirs. He or she starved to death. We found...”

His voice lowered to a whisper.

“We found a fire. Children’s bones. They committed a heinous act and died anyway.”

“Cannibalism?” Viv asked calmly. She wasn’t too surprised.

The lieutenant nodded.

“Normally, we are forbidden from interfering in local affairs. I just could not push myself to...”

He waved at the refugees.

“I understand,” Viv said, and she did. “We’ll just have to find room for them, I guess.”

It was lucky that they had a surplus of food right now. If their situation had been critical, Viv and the Kazarans would have been forced to take a terrible decision. She was lucky that it would hopefully not come to that.

She really hoped it didn’t. There were few things worse than sacrificing an innocent for your own survival. With her around, new areas could be easily freed and it’s not like they would run out of building material anytime soon.

“Thank you,” Solani said with palpable relief.

“What’s with all those refugees anyway?” Viv asked, “isn’t it a bit early in the war to see them?”

“Oh, the main battle is on its way, or that’s what my reports say. It hasn’t stopped raiders from getting a little preemptive action. Lots of Enorians in Baran right now. People wouldn’t go to Kazar either before, but apparently...”

And his expression turned a bit hesitant.

“The city is in open rebellion.”

Orkan and Solfis both studiously ignored Viv.

“That it is,” she confirmed. “So all these good people decided to brave the woods because of that? It feels... extreme.”

“Only those with no extended families have come. So far. That civil war is looking to be a real bleeder, I think. The mutual hatred between both sides could summon Efestar the dark god of scorn, if they didn’t aim it at each other. Neither side will back down until the other is dead, and both parties have been building up for thirty years. Expect a tide of revenants over the next few months.”

Viv felt a bit sorry for the poor bastards, but on the other hand, maybe the prince would just up and die and wouldn’t that be acceptable? She wouldn’t count on it though.

With that, they decided to escort the refugees back home. Solfis took to the woods once more and Arthur caused another panic when she landed in front of Viv. It didn’t take long before she started a dragon cult among the children and it seemed to make the adults relax.

Viv thought they were naive. Arthur was just selecting the best specimens for her future gold-mining empire. Anyway. She asked another question to Orkan.

“So, they are fools to travel in large numbers?”

“No, but they are fools to travel in large numbers without cornudon-drawn armored carriages. Single travelers probably have the best chances of crossing the woods uninterrupted. Larger groups are noisier and slower. If those guys had come across a beastling tide, even one a quarter as small as the one you guys defeated, they would have been slaughtered. Same for any sort of powerful beast. They can just get in, grab a kid, then get out. Those soldiers could have done nothing.”

//The Harrakan throne decreed that tunnel be dug through the mountain range.

//Because it was easier to bore through a hundred and fifty leagues of rock than to secure the Deadshield Woods.

//At least for larger convoys.

//They dug several such tunnels.

Viv thought that perhaps her perception of monsters was skewed. She had to remember that the average local couldn’t cut houses in half. The poor sods.

The trio, plus Arthur, escorted the group back without issue. They still had to sleep outside but were brought camping supplies by an amused Two-Six. The Hadal woman had spotted the convoy but since it wasn’t deemed a threat, it was left to arrive on its own. They reached Kazar early the next morning and Viv lost another day handling the resettlement of the refugees. Not only would she have to clear another section of the deadlands, but the

refugees themselves were so exhausted and malnourished that even stats could not help them. They needed rest first.

The outing remained a pleasant diversion and Viv felt that she made faster progress with the 'change' meaning afterward. She agreed to do it again. Hopefully, the monster would be edible next time.