

The council was split on the whole thing. Denerim and Orkan, the inquisitors, supported Viv's initiative fully. They argued that having the Hadal idle in the cave somewhere doing their thing was the best possible outcome considering how dangerous they could be. The idea of having Hadal strain scouts also gained traction with Tars, and her subordinate Michar who was in charge of the scouts.

"My people are exhausted running around and looking for threats above and below-ground. Let those freaks —"

"Don't use that word," Viv interrupted.

"Sorry ma'am. Let the Hadal whatever they call themselves stick their necks in monster lairs."

Brenna objected on the grounds that they didn't have enough food, but apparently the Hadals had brought some stuff for themselves. It would be a small increase in consumption, one that would barely make a dent considering they had over a thousand mouths to feed. Farren was supportive, if surprised, because he had something to atone for. In the end, the council agreed to officially accept the strain if they kept to themselves in the forward cavern the expedition had found the first time. Viv was reminded of things like 'equal yet separate' and Jim Crow and some of the stuff that Mouq had shared about being an Arabic woman in the predominantly white and male armed forces, long before Viv had enlisted. But it was another world. And the Hadals were not well-known, so they would start like that and get to know each other. Viv was reasonably confident that things would be fine as long as mysterious murders didn't happen.

As for how to disseminate the information, there would be no great announcement. Neriad church members would walk from group to group to talk about a group of refugees hunted by the Enorians. It was technically correct. Viv thought that all in all it was stupidly done and a recipe for disaster, but there wasn't much she could do to improve the situation. Irao had put her back against the wall. She was not even mad at him. He was just really bad at social stuff, of that she was sure.

Hopefully, the Hadal's contribution to the war effort would prove her right.

Next was the trip to the Yries' camp which would take a day or so. Viv prepared and left with only her usual suspects, plus Farren and a small escort. Hopefully, nothing bad would happen while they were gone. She made sure to pick up what she would need.

The trip started uneventfully. There was a single passage leading east into the mountain range and to the secondary base where the Hadal humans now dwelled. They turned left after a while and passed by the mirror of the people. Everyone stopped to look at their reflection, then at the ancient miners going and coming from work. They picked up water at the ancient cisterns.

For a moment, Viv panicked as she realized that their base was without a water source, but she calmed down immediately. Brenna had mentioned a few people excavating a well they had found near the entrance of the mines. Rocks had obstructed it, but they were being

removed and a few blue-attuned laborers had confirmed that they felt something coming from below.

It was not long before they reached the pit, where they had lost one of their members. The Yries had left marks of danger and safe passage. They followed it down the path that snaked around the pit for a while, sticking to the steep incline of the left wall. The chasm beckoned to the right. Not even the light of the fluorescent mushrooms reached its depth.

Viv was once again suspicious of how large the cave was. Her eyes kept going up, expecting the rocky sky to fall on her head any time. Not even one support pillar. That was so weird.

With the ground so open, everyone was on high alert. Viv was not surprised when they were attacked.

It started with her danger sense pinging. She had no need to warn the others. Swords and other weapons were drawn and a circle formed with Viv at its center. Arthur took to the air.

Nothing came at them.

The cave remained eerily silent. Only the drip of falling condensation brought some noise.

//Your Grace.

//Use your other senses.

Viv had a rush of panic as she remembered that sight was no longer her most important tool of detection. She was still so green. The mana around her was fluctuating but it was not yet automatic for her to analyze it, at least not while she was in danger. In a way, her earth experience was a hurdle more than a help. She set out to correct it.

The knights and Marruk emitted a bit of mana, just a trace. The background was mostly the brown and green Varska had loved so much. No wonder, since they were underground. Lots of brown and green, in fact. It was growing.

Shit.

“They’re below us,” she yelled, and sent a powerful spike through her feet. Her power expanded on a radius twice the size of their defensive circle, and met two balls of resistance. One of them was practically under her. It fought against her. It lost.

With a dreadful crack, the stone under their feet splintered like clay and a large clawed arm — larger than a bear’s — reached up to grab something. It barely touched the foot of a guard but the razor-sharp chitin still fell to the sound of cracking bones. Someone screamed. Viv shot a quick wire of destructive black and the paw retreated, bleeding freely. Another creature emerged with difficulty from the deadened stone around them. Farther afield, other creatures swam out as if through water.

Viv's basic spell maimed the closest creature while swords and spears ravaged its struggling form. It was half-trapped and could not fight and free itself effectively at the same time. It looked like a mole crossed with a mastiff if the mastiff was from some post-apocalyptic movie and also jacked on steroids. Its skin was mottled grey and pink, and its maw was filled with serrated teeth that looked like needles, angled inwards. It was screeching miserably.

Viv turned her direction to the rest of the attackers. There were more coming out of the ground. She cast a powerful purge and managed to skewer the skull of one of the beasts, which fell down without a noise. The rest were upon them.

The combat was incredibly fast and confusing. Without high stats, she would have been left in the dust, throwing pitiful attacks at shadows. As it was, she could barely follow. Heavy bodies impacted the shield wall and were amazingly repulsed. Solfis was everywhere. Marruk bashed something almost into the ground. Viv killed another mole-thing after it had dragged a temple guard to the ground. There was one jumping at her. She hit it mid air, missing the brain by a finger, then Marruk received the attack on her shield and threw the scratching body at another. Another human screamed in pain. She had to maintain the cover below herself to prevent the mole things from diving, as they sometimes tried to do.

Viv's danger sense screamed and she jumped aside. Something crashed onto her left leg. Something bit it. Pieces of meat and blood rained on her. Solfis stood above her, swinging his arms like a meat grinder. The coppery scent of blood overwhelmed her. The light spells failed. Arthur squealed in pain. There were screeches, so many screeches, like a hellish choir that pained her ears.

Arthur squealed in pain.

Viv grabbed the thing attacking her, some sort of giant bat, around the neck and drew her knife. She rammed the blade through its head.

A white form impacted the ground behind her.

The shield glyph seared itself through her mind as she stood like a devil out of its box. Both of her hands rose up.

Solfis leaned to the side and grabbed Arthur, then moved further and pulled a wounded temple guard.

“NOPE!”

Viv poured everything into the half-sphere of pure void rising a meter above her head. The circular shield was charged with the meaning of annihilation and it smothered the battlefield like a shroud. A deafening silence descended upon them. Viv felt her reserves plummet.

Then it stopped.

She waited a few more seconds just to be sure. If a mole thing were to attack them now, she could do nothing. She had nothing. All her focus, all her energies sank into that lifeline.

Then she let the spell dissipate and fell to her knees.

Danger sense: Apprentice 6

Viv grabbed a healing potion from a pocket on her chest. Her hand and entire robe were sticky with blood. The pungent liquid soaked her hair, plastering them to her neck and cheeks.

“Anyone need a potion?” she squawked. At least, Arthur was fine. She was busying herself savaging a bat carcass.

“Yea, Orman. Quickly please,” Farren said. He had spent most of the fight protected at the core of the formation, but he still had a gash on his forehead that was bleeding generously.

It was the guard who had been downed and dragged. He was bleeding heavily from his leg and there was a gouged out wound where his left eye used to be. She handed him the potion and he swallowed half of it, spreading the rest on his mangled limbs. She watched, amazed, as he picked his own eye from the ground.

“Well fuck,” he said.

Viv felt bile rising at the back of her throat and held it in. No barfing in front of the troops. No barfing. Can't even take a deep breath. The stench of offal and carnage would send her over the edge.

The expedition picked itself up with difficulty, except Solfis who had remained vigilant. They restarted their light spell at a weak power simply because there was no other way to see, and found a sort of alcove by the wall, barely more than a depression. Viv thought that it was not the best idea considering their foe could basically swim through stone but whatever.

Viv herself was fine. The bat attacking her had not had the time to pierce the enchantments protecting her leg. There was a tiny cut on her ear, perhaps from when she had stabbed the bat. It bled a bit but that was not too bad. Marruk was fine as well. Viv realized that she needed a fucking helmet, for sure.

The five temple guards had taken the brunt of the assault. All of them were heavily wounded, though with high vitality and healing potions they were ready to leave soon after. The man with the missing eye was still holding the discarded organ in his hand, not sure what to do.

Arthur had several gashes and two bites that were bleeding a bit. Viv had taken out her third and last potion, wondering what would the effect be on the tiny dragonling. Arthur precluded any consideration on different metabolisms and whatnot by grabbing the phial, literally biting off the stopper and gulping its contents. She tossed the empty bottle away and squealed with rage.

“Don’t worry,” Viv told her, “you are still the queen of the sky, just, there is no sky here. We are in a cave.”

Her baleful crimson orbs searched the heights with vengeful spite.

“We can come back when you’re bigger and depopulate the place.”

“Squeel!”

//Food.

Solfis spoke and everyone stopped what they were doing. The humans and one Kark stared at the battlefield again. There were four of the mole things lying inert on the ground, and at least three dozen bats in various states of dismemberment. Viv judged that they had at least three hundred kilos of meat around, if you counted edible viscerae. The mole things looked like mammals. They also had powers, and it made creatures delicious. As for the bat, it didn’t seem like a great idea but she knew that some culture in East Asia ate them, so where was the harm?

“Ok, but there is no way for us to transport the food,” Viv said.

“The base is not so far, only three hours on foot if we walk,” one of the guards said, “we can go there but there is no guarantee that anything will be left when we return.”

Viv thought quickly. So much food was worth delaying the expedition for. The meat was not just nutritious, coming from a monster, it was the sort of tasty boon that enhanced morale. Probably.

“You five return, you’re wounded anyway. The rest of us will guard this place against predators while you’re gone. Agreed?”

“Yeah,” Farren said, “we can’t afford to waste anything. I’ll go with them and return with the harvesting team.”

The guards picked themselves up. The dude still holding his eye was looking forlorn.

“Just toss it away man,” another said not unkindly.

“I don’t know. It just feels wrong. I know I can’t heal it, but...”

“There used to be a general in my land called Xiahou Dun,” Viv said. That got their attention.

Amazing how an improved memory could help now.

“He was shot in the eye with an arrow but lived. He pulled the arrow on which the eye was still stuck and ate it, saying ‘this is the essence of my father and the blood of my mother. I cannot waste it.’”

The guard nodded, considering it while the other four plus Farren looked on in unmitigated, stupefied horror. He was probably undergoing shock, Viv judged, though you never knew with how biology worked here. One gulp later, the man's legend was born.

Viv watched them leave, made sure they were off and only then threw up against a rock.

"You humans do the strangest shit," Marruk said with a frown. Then she bent forward and emptied her stomach as well.

Arthur looked at Viv with concern.

"Squee?"

"It's nothing. Just hmm, making more room for the delicious meat we're going to have soon."

"Squee!"

//Please try to lie better, Your Grace.

"Hush you. Anyway... what just happened?"

//Are you referring to the specific flow of battle?

"Yes. We were attacked from the ground then from the sky? What the hell?"

"Squee..."

Arthur looked absolutely dejected and Viv tapped her head, starting to get what had happened.

//I fear that our flying support gathered the attention of the local colony of bats.

//The sequence was as followed.

//We detected the rocksnout ambush.

//They attacked us anyway.

//Arthur took to the air.

//She was detected by the local bat colony.

//The rocksnout suffered casualties.

//The bat colony attacked Arthur, who withdrew towards us.

//The bat colony attacked everyone.

//The rocksnouts disengaged.

//You inflicted high casualties on the bat colony.

//The survivors disengaged.

//Our group was left in control of the field with light damage.

Viv had seen the things and they were to bats what chinchillas were to Rottweilers but fine.

"We're lucky the... rocksnouts was it? That they decided not to keep attacking..."

//Why would they?

//They followed their survival instincts.

//The loss of four adults is a catastrophe for the pack.

//It is likely that they attacked so viciously because you masterfully trapped the alpha.

“Wait, they would have given up otherwise?”

//There was no way for you to fend off the attack.

//Except by doing what you did.

“Waaaait,” Viv said, remembering Solfis’ warning. “You knew they were there!”

//Yes.

“Could have warned us!”

//I will not always be by your side, Your Grace.

//Rely on me too much, and you will die while I perform an important task.

//I am built and designed around surgical offensives, hence the ‘strike’ designation.

//All my combat intelligence routines are based around this function.

//I remain a poor bodyguard.

//Rest assured that I would have carried you away, had you failed.

“Who would have saved the temple guards then?” she asked, but she already knew the answer.”

//Failure always carries a price.

//Remember, they are secondary concerns.

//Their importance is inferior to that of your good development.

Viv would get angry but... it would be hypocrisy. She respected the guards a lot but they were not her friends, not truly precious to her. Besides, Solfis had been extremely clear from the beginning. He would prioritize her survival and there was nothing he could do to change that, it was a direct consequence of the rule-bending that allowed him to leave the dead capital. What would not be hypocritical, would be for her to protect them like they were protecting her. Their safety would be her doing. She did not need a fantasy murder robot made of bones to wipe her own ass. Which led her to...

“By the way Solfis, I acquired that skill recently...”

//Acuity Reflex.

//It is an unusual skill that allows its owner to substitute acuity for agility in reflexes.

//Essentially, you may not reflexively move but you may reflexively cast.

“Ah damn, I should have asked that before. I could have used it against the bat and saved myself half a second.

//We will be training this skill thoroughly over the next month.

//However, stabbing someone with a mundane blade as a mage is always bound to surprise foes that may resist spells.

//My prediction algorithm returns an inconclusive result.

“I can practice both in any case.”

//Yes.

With this, they settled to wait with the only movement being Arthur vengefully chewing on nearby wings. A large group of fifty people, half of them guards, returned with carts and gathered the remains under guard. Nothing tried to fight them this time despite the smell of blood and they soon left loaded with meat. Viv took the time to go back up and find a cistern for a quick cleanup. Some of the blood had already congealed and it was a bitch getting it out of her hair. She went back down with a new set of five guards and Farren and the rest of the trip to the Yries base was less eventful.

They followed markers down the pit, stone statues with inscriptions in a strange script that reminded Viv of Cuneiform. The Yries used them to orient themselves in the labyrinthine, cavernous depths. One marker eventually pointed to a side tunnel which had clearly been repaired and reinforced. The square, clear path led them further through the mountains until they turned into a circular Yries-made passage. A couple of hours was enough to reach a boundary-fort where they requested entrance by way of waving their hands around. A small male Yries let them in and it was not long before the reigning pair came to receive them. Lak-Nak the female stone weaver still looked nervous, barrel-like form hidden behind bulky robes. Meanwhile the warchief Gar-Gar looked at them with undisguised suspicion. The two, Viv realized, were taller than her, which was fairly uncommon. The male spat something in their guttural language and Lak-Nak translated in Enorian with clear hesitation. They were... not really good at hiding their emotions.

“Gar-Gar says you want to renegotiate the terms of our agreement.”

Ah, yes, he did mention humans being duplicitous. Farren gave Viv a tiny nod. She considered her approach. With those, it was probably better to be honest.

“We don’t want to change the agreement. We want a new one for different things.”

Technically the truth since the previous arrangement concerned iron ingots, ready for processing. This time they wanted weapons.

Lak-Nak and Gar-Gar talked in their strange language again, blinking their owl-like eyes in a way that would be comical if Viv was not currently surrounded by loaded crossbows.

“Gar-Gar asks if the new agreement alters the old agreement.”

“Listen, we want to buy weapons for money.”

There were numerous interruptions since Viv had been selected as the spokesperson for the human side and did not speak Baranese while Gar-Gar was the spokesperson for the Yries side and did not speak Enorian. It did not help that the big stone-weaver was as shy as a blushing maiden and apparently deathly afraid of confrontation while her boss smelled a fish and asked pointed questions.

“Yries do not sell their weapons to humans.”

“We want you to manufacture some for us, not give us your crossbows.”

“No weapons.”

“I understand that you do not wish to give us any weapons. May I ask why?”

“We find... humans.... treacherous... andwedonotwishtoforgethebladethatwillkillus, sorry!”

Blunt.

“Armors?”

“We would sell armors. Gar-Gar wants to know why you need armors.”

“Other humans have taken our city and driven us out. We want to take it back.”

This led to a long exchange and the expected reaction.

“So you do not wish to honor your previous agreement.”

“We want to. We were chased from our homes so we cannot. We are angry about that. If we can return home, we will honor the original agreement. Right now, we cannot.”

The warchief grumbled and searched Viv’s face with great efforts, as if it could allow him to detect lies. He pointed a gangly finger towards Viv’s solar plexus with the intention, perhaps in an intimidation attempt. Viv considered how to react but needn’t bother.

“Squee! HSSSSSS!”

The intimidation attempt was quickly aborted. Gar-Gar grumbled but he relented and Arthur settled protectively on Viv’s lap, glaring at the offender with malevolent crimson eyes. Viv patted the small dragon’s spine ridge. It was very warm.

“The agreement was food for iron. You have not delivered the iron yet so you have no right to ask us for food,” Viv said, striking the iron while it was hot. “Tell him I said that.”

Lak-Nak translated and the warchief grudgingly agreed. Viv could not believe how easy it was.

“If Gar-Gar really wants that food, he can make a deal with us. We are not even asking something for nothing. I said that we will pay.”

Some more grumbling.

“Gar-Gar asks if it’s money now or money later.”

In answer, Viv grabbed the chest that the banker had sent to her the night after Kazar fell and banged it on the table. She opened it to reveal rows of golden ingots. It was a very old-school gangster moment and made Viv feel all fuzzy inside. They were just missing Robert de Niro giving the Yries warchief a stare.

“This is the money now.”

The stoneweaver grabbed one of the ingots and whispered a few words. Viv felt brown mana at work. A few ingots were tested and the pair conferred in a low voice.

“Gar-Gar offers thirty basic iron armors. Helmet breastplate pauldrons gauntlets greaves. One per gold talent.”

It might be a steal, Viv thought. It sounded like a steal.

“How basic are we talking?”

“Like the young males wear but without chain mails. You wear clothes or gambeson.”

It was a steal. The armors were pretty decent, though they would not stop a direct blow with how strong the average soldier was on this fucking planet. It would still help with glancing blows. And Twenty-five iron bits were around a kilogram of metal so a gold talent was around... two hundred bits so that meant that a single gold talent was worth eight kilograms of iron. Those armors were definitely more than twice as heavy, and it was not even counting compensation for the work. On the other hand, the Yries could just bend down and pick up rich ore around here so their costs were down while gold was always valuable for trading.

They went back and forth for a while and settled for thirty armors, and thirty shields. There would be six more free armors if they could provide a large supply of skin to make leather with.

“Hold on, how do you get leather down there?” Viv asked, suddenly suspicious.

“You don’t want to know,” Lak-Nak answered. She didn’t have to consult her partner this time.

Viv thought for a few seconds and decided that, yeah, nah, she really really didn’t want to know. In any case, it was time for the main event.

“There is something else I need from you.”

She exposed her idea.

“Absolutely not,” Lak-Nak said, “out of the question. We will not give you one of our drills.”

“Not giving, renting. It will also be piloted by one of your own.”

“What is renting?”

“It means we have it for a fixed time. Here the fixed time is: until we have used it to breach the walls of Kazar. Then your driver takes it back.”

The pair discussed. Gar-Gar waved his slender arms around in shock and dismay, then more questions came.

“You don’t want to copy the designs?”

“I mean, I’m curious but not that curious. Besides, there is no way for us to reproduce the design here, and it would really hurt our chances if we mess up. I really want to dig through that wall.”

“And you would return it, just like that?”

“Yes. Your pilot will drive it back.”

“It is not designed to operate above ground.”

“The point is never what the tool is designed to do but what it can achieve.”

“Hmm. You are annoyingly correct in this instance. But you have no more gold. What could you possibly offer for this service.”

“I have silverite.”

More specifically, the silverite used for the Harrakan golems, the very same she had dragged across half the deadlands as skis under her sled.

Lak-Nak’s jaw practically crashed on the ground. She turned to the warchief and spoke in excited tones and it was absolutely obvious that Viv would have that drill.

“How much? How much silverite do you have?”

“Four measures.”

That was one ski, but considering that each ski was worth four hundred gold talents in human nation if it could be found at all, she was certain that her argument was convincing.

“I won’t give you more than half a measure for that though.”

“I need two measures. Two measures to make my staff. We can talk.”

“You can make a staff out of silverite?”

“Yes. With a core on top, it will allow me to store reserves of energy with almost no loss. And I can enchant it as well.”

It was all Viv could do to school her face. Solfis’ eyes flashed.

“Squee?”

“Shh.”

Viv gave a diplomatic smile as the stoneweaver argued with the warchief. Vehemently.

It was time to put the nail on the coffin.

“You can tell the warchief that it is also in his interest as well if we take the city back. Beyond the food questions, there is also the matter that our enemy will not stop there.”

Well, he would for at least a season, possibly a year, but there was no need to tell them that.

“His name is Prince Lancer and he is greedy beyond measure.”

It was such an amusing moment to see the two owl-like beings freeze in their tracks.

“What did you just say?” Lak-Nak blurted, angry for the first time.

“I said that our enemy could come here next...”

“No, not that. His name.”

“Prince Lancer.”

An eruption of squawks and grunts came from not just the pair, but the other Yries as well.

“Why did you not say so sooner?”

Because you would have been suspicious.

“I was not aware that you knew him,” Viv lied.

“We will help you but we will not send soldiers. You will have your drill. You will have ten more armors. We will give you twenty crossbows as well, simple but efficient models. You will give us two measures of silverite.”

“You make a rod for me with the remaining two, you provide instructors for the crossbows and help us adjust the armors, you give us forty heavy spears, fully made out of iron. You

modify the drill so that it can move fast enough to keep up with us. You help us get a reliable water source on our side of the mines. Solfis?”

The golem dropped the ski, tantalizingly close. Lak-Nak elbowed her boss, who nodded.

“We say that you have yourself a deal.”