

# Bulwarks and Middle-Management

Undeterred by the disadvantageous circumstances the merchant had no intentions to agree to an unjust deal, however he was still willing to accept a favorable deal for Velauhart. It would be an investment, in his vision it would pay out in the long run to have a foothold in the growing hamlet, besides he could still make a great profit out of the new goods he had secured. The only thing that caught him off guard was...

- "With all due respect, we are not interested in coins at this time."

Although initially stupefied, the reasoning made sense. There was little value in coins when one did not have a place to spend it. This was true for most secluded settlements where bartering with foodstuff, especially with pouches of salt or bags of grain was a common occurrence. After some discussions his traders would instead bring tools, seeds and other commodities of equivalent value to pay instead. Request for conventional items such as bricks, tiles, glassware, gypsum, grains and seeds, and tools were all predictable but then it turns out that he would gain great benefits if he were to bring bizarre objects that proved useful from unusual ores to saplings of trees not native to the lands. It wasn't rare for those of lordly birth to seek out outlandish amusements; he on occasions fulfilled some of those as well, thus it didn't come as too much of a surprise. He had few ideas on where to look and although he had some questions, he kept it to himself. In return he would get pelts, tusks, meat, cheese and linen along with more sought-after goods such as honey, high quality if exotic clothes and of course silk. And with those in mind Albertini rode out on his carriage early in the morning, with some 'gifts' loaded onto his carriage.

With the concerns of securing a channel for mercantile activities taken care of, Alicia could breathe easy, at least in the short run and shift her attention elsewhere. In just a few days a large caravan of traders arrived at the edge of the forest, bringing with them a huge stock of wares. They had traded nearly all of their cargo for low volume, high value luxury goods. With how hastily the wares were gathered, there was nothing that could be considered, out of the ordinary among the items by the standards of the new world. The reason for Alicia's requests for the unusual was because that she might 'rediscover' something from her old world; coffee, cacao, anything.

Her other guests were starting to adjust to their new surroundings. She had personally overseen the refurbishment of the second storey's floor space into a high class residence suitable for their stature to the best of her ability with limited timespan. Now, thanks to the access to more building materials and furniture she could afford to have more liberty. Considering the lack of stone processing tools Alicia had made a large bulk purchase of limestone blocks for reinforcing some areas of the lodge, in addition to placing an order for sandstone for the next shipment. Limestone was comparatively soft to other stone types that were also available, such as granite, slate, basalt and so on, and could easily be processed into bricks and blocks of varying sizes depending on the need for the construction. Despite its softness it was still durable enough to be used for future expansions. But most importantly, limestone was integral for making mortar and cement for producing concrete. Though expected, but nonetheless disappointing, there was no smithy that created steel reinforcement bars - or rebar - that Alicia wanted for creating reinforced concrete. For now, the lack of tensile strength and the brittleness of stone hadn't become an issue yet, nevertheless the acquisition of rebar remained an important bullet point to address down the line. As for the sandstone, if she could process the limestone with heat, Alicia wanted to try her hand at creating quartzite, a much more durable product of sandstone created under high temperatures.

She had limited exposure and little reference for the interior design style of Pyrinia's aristocracy and therefore decided to keep things neutral and minimal for the time being, placing an emphasis on spaciousness. Much to Alicia's relief, it seemed that both Rosalia and Stefanos had a favourable opinion of the suite though they were puzzled by the decision of placing the private chambers on the higher floor. It was a diehard habit of Alicia to plan for and place luxury suites on the higher floors as people preferred the view, natural lighting, ventilation, security, privacy and less noise pollution offered by higher floors and hence had a considerable price tag on them. Of course, none of those were as highly prized in the new world, to her discovery.

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It was soon becoming a very real possibility that the small community surrounding Dryssia's great oak could develop into a settlement. A formation of society meant for a need for security be it from

threats natural or man made and order. Alicia was fairly confident in providing the security part, her Araneae led by her adjutants were more than enough for competently dealing with most threats and were flexible enough to accommodate for most complex situations. What she was worried about was the law and order part of the deal. City planning, infrastructure development, maintenance, bridges and roads; these made sense to her. Legislations and edicts on the other hand were simply out of her league. While she was under this predicament, Rosalia, anxious to do something to return the favour of taking them in, in spite of apparent threat posed from unknown sources approached Alicia. Here a spark went off in her head.

Rosalia, despite her youth, had an indisputable knowledge of governing the masses as owing to her aristocratic upbringing, and most definitely familiar with the process of issuing decrees and enacting law. Alicia was all too eager to dump all the responsibility on her. Of course she wasn't going to leave all the executive burden onto her. Alicia wanted her to draft up a set of laws based on the laws of Valtima region specifically as a starting point to then make changes to it as needed, so she wouldn't pass on something that would cause significant culture shock and it would have some familiarity to the current residents. Before Rosalia diffidently took on the request, she had often been seen spending time with the twins and along with Charlie stalking her every move, though she didn't know that. As she was the older one compared to the two by both age - by a decade and a half, chronologically - and by maturity Rosalia had naturally leaned towards a role of an older sibling. From here Alicia discovered a new spell. Although she didn't know when or how it happened, it seemed that Rosalia had identified the two's aptitude for magic and decided to help them, by teaching them the first spell any mage should learn, be they someone from noble descent under tutelage of respected masters or lowborn with fortune's favor: Ward.

Although Rosalia herself wasn't particularly talented with wards she understood its necessity well. Also known as the wizard's shield or mage armor, wards were a front-facing barrier usually formed from the user's correspondent elemental affinity that repelled attacks against the caster. They were often formed with the image of a shield or a wall to help novices to learn quickly. It's only downfall was that it was terribly ineffective against physical attacks. While abysmal in performance compared to a proper

armor or a shield against physical blows it did not mean that it was not some otiose diversion either. Despite its faults it could be used in an emergency situation to just barely deflect an arrow or divert the course of an oncoming blade but where it excelled was the protection from the mystical. Against attacks of magical nature depending on its application it offered significant protection, especially against hazards that can't be dealt with in a conventional manner. Spray of acid, snaking flames, supernatural frost, surge of lightning and so forth, rare as they may be, traditional armor simply fails to defend against these.

Bringing up the topics of wards to Llynbel revealed its age, or lack thereof. Although barrier type spells existed since antiquity, they were usually on a large scale and took months if not years of setup to form, often with doubtful efficacy, wards did not exist when Llynbel was at most active, meaning that it was a fairly recent development. Wards were most likely a more refined, practical application of the barrier family of magic. Goldia picked up on it immediately with just a single demonstration, her sister on the other hand seemed to struggle with it, though eventually she picked up on it after some conflagration related incidents where the local naiad had to step in. Seeing the merit of the magic Alicia tried her own hand at recreating the spell.

*'Hm hm? I think the reason why it is terrible at protecting against physical attacks is because there's nothing to absorb the blow. It's basically an angry wind that's protecting you from a very real weapon, by saturating the air in front of yourself with mana. The 'ward' doesn't have much to work with, now if it was a sturdy piece of boulder... well that would be cheating now wouldn't it...? Not to mention it wouldn't be very prompt. It's like trying to stop a bullet aimed at you with only your hopes and dreams... not very effective. Is it just destined to be bad...?*

After hours of mulling over the problem trying to change her approach, she had achieved various other solutions but they were not to her satisfaction.

*I need to take a step back... What makes the bullet or a sword for that matter dangerous to me in the first place? Kinetic energy isn't it... If I can give something kinetic energy enough for it to fly, I should be able to take away the kinetic energy, or apply force in a different vector to deviate from its course away from myself. Instead of the ward being a shield that fails to stop anything, why not a wave... a flow perhaps, that redirects attacks. It shouldn't affect its performance in regards to magic, but against a sword blow it should*

*fare far better than trying to stop it...*' As she tried to put her new theory to test something interpolated into the process.

>Common code identified. 67.2% Match. Retrieving archived data. Restoring sector corruption...

As she harnessed her magical energies to cast the spell and modified it, the automated system had completed its task before any questions or objections could be raised.

>Recovery successful.

Safeguard
A steadfast ward, breaks not to wand or blade. Project protective repulsion territory. >Harmonizing Gains elemental properties of caster's energy signature.

Translucid, effulgent, structure with self repeating pattern formed around her. Looking closely it appeared to be interlaced hexagonal cells, creating a mesh web, intermittent glows of light coursed through the lines. As it completed its formation it returned to complete transparency, as if it didn't exist at all, however the slight warping and bending of light around her made its existence undeniable to an attentive eye.

>Telemetric support available. Heads-up display access needed.

>Requesting heightened access.

*'Uhhh, normally I wouldn't question your suggestions, they've been keeping me alive so far but what kind of permissions am I giving here...?'*

>Access to occipital lobe and optical organs. Required for Heads-Up display of telemetric data.

>Management of limbic systems.

>Partial access to the amygdala allows emotional monitoring and correction.

>Direct control of the pituitary gland for hormone modulation.

>Neurotransmitter regulation.

>Assistive motor functions support.

*'Those don't sound too bad...? Can I go back if I feel like it?'*

>Administrators reserve the right to revoke access at any time.

*'Eh, try everything once right.....'*

*Granted.'*

What she heavily relied on disappeared for but a moment, yet it left behind a stifling hush leaving her in an unnerving silence.

>Rebooting in heightened access state.....

>POST diagnostics complete.

>Initializing.....

When it returned, it sounded closer somehow, strange considering that it was always in her head. Even the tone seemed by the smallest margin... warmer, in a kind of way.

>Establishing connection.....

The preference for the machine-esque parlance however, remained unchanged. Though Alicia almost hoped something would have changed, she was also relieved that it hadn't.

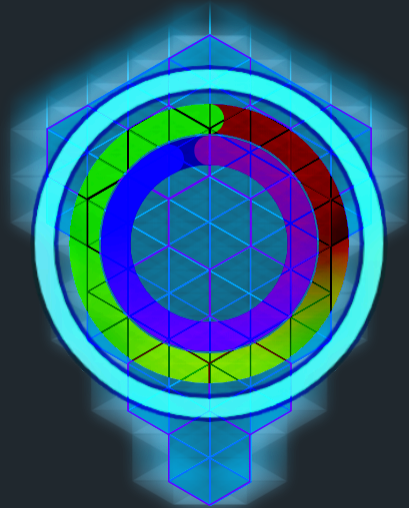
>Adjusting visual offset...

Her eyesight went bleak as Alma tweaked her visual perception. At this point she was getting used to her sight being tampered with, no small thanks pallesthesia which became her third eye of sorts. For the most part of her life eyesight wasn't a necessity for her, it was just a vestigial remains of her human nature to maintain visual contact with her surroundings and what she was interacting with. It simply felt comforting to her, to see. Otherwise it felt as if she was walking in the dark of her own home. Despite knowing where everything is and where they should be... one still doubts themselves at times.

>Heads-up display active. Contextual mode.



>Updating interface.



When her vision cleared up, at the edge of her peripherals the familiar condensed version of her general health and energy reserve could now be seen with a new transparent ideograph of a barrier encompassing it along with a tertiary bar to represent its remaining strength. It was tucked away at the corners of her vision that it didn't obstruct anything and almost seemed to disappear. But when she consciously focused on it, they returned to opacity. *'It's like how people can see their nose but forgets about it...'*

In terms of energy expended, forming the ward was the most demanding compared to maintaining it. Though after it was formed, its durability was constantly being corroded, bit by bit just by existing, necessitating constant maintenance, a tax of magical energy so long as it remained up. It wasn't viable as a 'permanent' armor. *'Can't help that eh...'*

There was no doubt that if she was under actual attack the strength of the ward would wane meaning that she would need to divert even more energy to maintain it. Mana which could be used for something else.

*'Resource management... great. No matter the world, the office work always haunts me. No, this is even worse, because I'm juggling with resources that directly affect my survival. Terrific...! Speaking of strength... how strong is this barrier...?'*

As she reached out to try and touch its surface she could feel the ward extending outwards. As it did its structure shifted and expanded to accommodate for her movements. Here another discovery was made, although she didn't notice it, the Ward's stability had suffered; it was small enough to go unnoticed by her but it was still measured by Alma as the HUD showed a slight dip in its stability.

*'Huh... At Least it's flexible enough to bend... Could angle it in a way that redirects attacks effectively... It's not like I would know how strong this thin veil is by knocking on it. But I'd rather not try by letting something hit me. That's like testing the seatbelts and the airbags by crashing yourself into traffic. It's good if they work, but I'd rather not get to that point. Let's just leave it at this for today... I can limit test this later.'*

As the energy supply subsided, the hexagonal cells gradually faded away, along with the distortion of light. Content with the results of the experiment Alicia concluded her research for the day. As she was stretching:

- "Thank you for the hard work, mistress. An impressive feat you have accomplished."

Woman in a milky white suit called out to her.

- "Bloody hell you almost gave me a heart attack! When did you get here?"
- "Just now."
- "What is it then?"

Playing coy;

- "Why I only wanted to see my dear mistress... is that too much...?"

Mirthlessly

- "Oh I'm flattered, but you? You don't come to me unless it's trouble or something big."

Still burlesque:

- "Aah, you're so cruel...-

Then abandoning it the very next second.

-but that is correct. Can't hide it even if I wanted to."

- "Go on then."
- "Gamma has completed most of the sewage lines as requested. Unless you want it to be lined with silk and web, we'll need some bricklaying for the waterways and the walls. She's moving onto her own projects. Grain seeds have shown favourable results in the testing period, we can move on to large scale cultivation however we need the appropriate land for it, currently there's not enough in the forest floor.

Along with the first caravan of goods came a small amount of seeds of various grains. Although food was not a concern right now thanks to the rich bounty of the forest, it would be better to secure a more consistent

supply of it in the form of sustainable farming. Alicia had entrusted some to Llynbel to let her find out their preferred soil type, moisture levels, growing climates and so on.

-Our zone of control has expanded greatly, however we might need some assistance in some areas.

Lastly, it is unfeasible to keep hiding our identities from the merchants and outsiders in the long term so long as we keep in contact with them. Many of them are still skeptical about entering deep into the forest or coming here in the first place. We also have no way of verifying the validity of their information.”

Problems nestled within problems. But in the way Alpha delivered the last report it seemed that she had something to say.

- “You got an idea...?”
- “An option. Establish a settlement at the outer edge of the forest. We can reappropriate and work on land reclamation of the marshlands in the area. Soil should be fertile enough for our uses.

Once it is developed enough the settlement will serve as an outpost for the merchants, dispelling the obstructions caused by their fears of entering the forest. If all goes well we can develop it to become our satellite city state.

Having a forward base of operations closer to the humans will help develop our own intelligence network. We can abandon it at any time and retreat if needed.”

Although she held some concerns, especially with the later development plans she held off from voicing it, she thought that was too far ahead in the future to worry about.

- “Sounds good... anything else...?”
- “If I may, I would like to nominate Charlie and her brood for the intel-gathering.”
- “Go ahead... oh right, we still have our associates in Viveria. Let her take over control of them.”
- “As you will. That will be all for now.”
- “Alright, thanks, take care... Bricks... bricks... bricks...”

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Muttering this to herself Alicia’s thoughts shifted to stone cutting and masonry for the sewer systems not knowing that she had just given an order. As Alfred left her mistress in contemplation she had their first

mission at their hands. 'Let Charlie take control over the 'associates' in Viveria.' The said associates were part of a criminal organization known as the Devil's crown, although Alicia meant it to let Charlie take authority over the current band under their control, Alpha didn't bother to make that distinction.

They were all part of the crown and that meant either they will all serve... or else. As Charlie lacked any subversive skills like Whispers or Domination nor did she have the right attitude for such actions. It left only a hostile takeover the only option. Still even without such skills, the threat of death would prove quite persuasive. Since it was for the purpose of information gathering, it had to be done quietly, something that they were all quite familiar with. And thus a bloody reckoning was set in motion for the Crown... though to Alpha, it was only a change in leadership of the subsidiary.