

Viv spent her first evening doing what would (hopefully) become routine. Lady Azar's aides briefed her on what they had learned that day, mostly who was talking to whom. Afterward, she gathered the shadow group to decide how they would rescue King Sangor's son.

"Our first and absolute rule is that no one must die," she started. "This place is sacred. We can get away with shenanigans but not with violence."

Irao and Solfis agreed, though she suspected it was only because they enjoyed a challenge. Sidjin remained quiet.

"It is a rescue," Irao said with delight.

The concept was still novel to him. It was probably the first time in his long career he would break into a fortified area to save someone.

**//It would be best not to antagonize the gods any more than we have.**

**//The less evidence we leave, and the harder it will be for our adversaries to pin the blame on us once the escape is inevitably noticed.**

"We are in agreement then. My plan is rather simple."

She enfolded a map on the central table of her council room. It showed a large, three-stories building with parts of the sewers below it. A snap of her fingers and the map turned into a three-dimensional display. Irao's eyes widened. Viv didn't have the heart to tell him earth technology most likely already managed that back on earth.

"This is the Hidden Smile, Mornyr's prime bordello, dedicated to Sardnanal. Upon my recommendation, King Sangor will hold a masquerade there on the second day of the summit. We will extract the hostage then and have him leave with one of the artistic troupes who will attend the show."

"Is there a specific reason as to why it happens at that time?" Sidjin asked, though it wasn't a challenge.

"The vote to decide Harrak's status starts the summit. We will be either accepted as part of the alliance or spurned then. There is a remote chance the first vote will be postponed by a day and I do not want to take the chance to ruin it. If our adversaries suspect something, they might be able to ruin our chances, but if the vote is already passed, then they will struggle to cancel it."

"Okay."

"It will also be one of the busiest times of the Summit. Security will be tight around key buildings. I am counting on this to act as a distraction. Our best bet would have been to rescue him long before or after the event, however..."

**//Our guilt would have been too obvious.**

“Precisely. Here, Maranor’s church will hopefully blame Sangor and find no proof. If we were the only delegation around... But enough of this. The masquerade’s purpose is to hide our infiltration of Maranor’s compound. There is a semi-direct path between the bordello and our target via the sewers. We will have to go through a wall.”

“I will handle this,” Sidjin assured. “A trivial task for someone like me. The wards are not, however. They will have barriers in the most sensitive areas. Such barriers are fed by divine mana as well, which means that the goddess... But I digress. I assume you have a plan?”

Viv nodded.

“I had a look at those wards and I think they can be tricked into letting bodies through with careful manipulation, which I am capable of. We still have three problems. One, I need to study the wards before the events.”

“I can draw them,” Irao said.

He tilted them as if listening to some ghostly council.

“Reasonably well. Not perfect, like a caster.”

“It should be good enough. That leads me to the second point. We need to know where Sangor’s son Gil is. We also need to know their patrols. We can’t do that without being, ah, on site.”

“I can perceive them through the walls,” Irao said.

**//Similarly, I can study the compound’s exterior and extrapolate a patrol pattern.  
//We merely need a few days of preparation.  
//We will also need to be present there on the first night of the summit in case they increase their security measures.  
//One last thing.**

“Yes?”

**//Divine barriers are exhausting to run.  
//Temples will only maintain them in the most sensitive areas.  
//I expect we can... circumvent most of them with a little creativity.**

Viv nodded.

“From below?”

**//That might be feasible.**

“I will design an adapted spell with Irao,” Sidjin said. “Brown mana is one of my domains of expertise.”

“Then it’s decided. You two get started on recon, then we act. After we have returned to the Hidden Smile with Gil, Sangor will extract him with a group of comedians leaving the city, hopefully before his presence is missed.”

“How likely is that?”

“Unless they constantly check on him, it shouldn’t be until the next morning. By that time, he will be gone.”

“Let’s hope things go to plan.”

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Viv’s second day in Mornyr started with physical training with Rollo. She could no longer practice darkness magic here as it would be suspicious, so learning how to use a physical presented a useful alternative. The knight was a complete asshole, or so Viv believed when she was tossed to the side by a zweihander blow, but he sure knew his shit. Her improved physical stats helped her greatly but they couldn’t make up for skills and technique honed to a vengeful perfection over decades of merciless practice. Weirdly, her men seemed to respect her more for that even though the exercise didn’t put her in a very good light. A ruler had to look untouchable. She could only assume the Harrakan elites had come to see her as a leader as well.

After she was down scrubbing off the dust, Viv checked the answers to her different petitions.

The key goal of this visit was getting official recognition as a nation. It would protect her merchants, give her nobles a status, and generally would make it diplomatically costly for anyone to fuck with her. Her acceptance to the Paramese Alliance would depend on a vote. She needed the majority to pass rather than a unanimous approval like some of the defensive alliances of her world since the organization’s goal was also to regulate large conflicts. This provision took into account the adversarial relations most nations held for one another. Basically, if anyone wanted to join the alliance, their neighbor would most of the time vote against it. It also bore mentioning that the latest addition to the alliance was thirty years before with the port city of Zeshtanet, far to the south of the continent beyond leagues of savage lands. New admissions were exceedingly rare.

Given Viv’s history with the northern cities, it was fortunate that votes depended on financial and military contributions that followed an obtuse calculation system handled by Sardanal’s clergy, rather than just one entity, one vote. Most northern cities had no votes since their contributions were minimal, though they still enjoyed the rest of the benefits. Baran had seven as Param’s dominating power and a main contributor to stopping the Hallurians. Enoria had three though they would be ramping up soon. Mornyr had two on account of shameless favoritism. Zeshtanet had one. Glastia had one. The Pure League had two because they were a bunch of assholes who claimed to fight against savagery. Helock had two because their war archmage’s contingent was pretty much a continental strategic asset. As the newcomer having already contributed to the community, Harrak would have one vote. Viv thought it was weird an outsider would get a vote but Lady Azar had clarified it was not a

given, rather an incentive for candidates to help first and ask to join later. If Viv hadn't helped Jaratalassi at the Battle of the Pass, she would have come with zero votes.

Baran would vote for her, Zesthanet would vote with Baran as they were almost a client state. She would have her own voice and that total amounted to nine. Meanwhile, it was expected that the Pure League, Glastia, and Helock would vote against her, possibly Enoria too for a total of eight. Unless something dramatic happened, Viv already had the majority. It didn't mean she wouldn't try to secure more votes. There were still some possible shenanigans, like the remaining northern cities banding together to gather one vote. It had happened before. From an outsider's perspective, her accession was not a given, so it would be weird for her not to ask around for more support.

People naturally didn't know Sangor would side with her and the vote was pretty much done. She wanted to keep it that way, so she had contacted Glastia and Helock just in case.

The answers came as surprises. Helock naturally refused to help her, but the ambassador's answer was much more polite and nuanced than she had expected.

*"Your Majesty Viviane, Empress of Harrak.*

*Although it pains me to do so, I must decline your offer for a meeting. Our meeting would be disadvantageous at this junction. The unfortunate demise of archmage Elunath still lingers in the minds of my fellow citizens despite your excellent standing at the academy. The matter of your departure also remains a painful low in our mutual relationship. We hope to resume normal diplomatic relationships at a later date, if it pleases you. In the meantime, I wish you much success in your other endeavors.*

*Respectfully yours,*

*Ambassador Claron."*

Viv read between the lines. The Academy still supported her and with some time and some official reparations for having thrashed their palace on her way out, Viv could expect to normalize her relationship with the capital of magic.

Naturally, her clashing retreat across the floating stones of Helock was due to some fucking asshole arresting her with no legitimacy whatsoever. Sadly, national interests trumped honor and integrity almost every time, everywhere. Helock was slighted so Helock would ask for concessions, and for the sake of Rakan's pupil who would come of age soon, she would grant the reasonable ones. Access to the greatest institute of learning was worth a few trade treaties.

It also didn't help that Helock didn't need her. They had a contract with Sidjin, meaning there were already operational portals across their domain. Viv brought nothing new. She had to keep this in mind.

In any case, Helock would be voting against her this time. That was what 'I wish you success in your other endeavors' meant. The ambassador was telling her his official position was that he hoped for her bid to fail. It was, at the very least, honest.

The other surprise was that Glastia agreed to meet. Only, they wanted to meet with Sidjin.

"Are you sure you want to go?" Viv asked with obvious concern. The fallen prince's emotional scars could reopen in an instant, as they had in the past.

"I am most certain I do not want to go, however I have a duty to you and our shared dream, and I will not back down from a conflict out of fear."

"They could be really mean."

"Oh no, anything but mean!" He mocked her with a smile.

Viv bumped her fist against his shoulder — lightly — and he returned the gesture with tenderness. His hand lingered there until she could feel the heat of his presence on her skin.

"I know I can face them because I know that after we are done, I will return here and so will you. And besides, there are no reports of the presence of Medjin. Maybe I can meet one of my less problematic relatives for once. I shall let you know what I learned."

"Ok. Worst come to pass, blast them to oblivion and we escape in a cataclysmic ride."

**//Please do not joke about it.**

**//The gods are listening.**

"Wait, they are?"

**//They are always listening.**

"Perverts."

Is it time for a new title yet?

"What I mean to say is that they have probably grown beyond the biological imperatives of peeping, having achieved enlightenment."

I no longer even have a physical body.  
Your fleshy bits are of no interest, yet they are often exposed.  
Why do people feel compelled to consult their status while moving their bowels?

"They think you're dead," Viv grumbled under her breath.

“Darling, are you alright?”

**//Your Majesty.**

**//I recall you saying their only path towards enlightenment.**

**//Would be to catapult themselves into the sun.**

I am telling Neriad.

“Snitch,” Viv whispered.

**//Are you being threatened?**

“Moving on, I need to go as well. I received an invitation to a meeting with Neriad’s Knight-Principal.”

The others nodded. The Knight-Principal was basically the pope of the temple, but with more Deus Vult tossed in it. He was a warrior first and foremost, by design. He also represented the local government until the next rotation at the end of the year. Such a meeting could only mean one thing.

Mornyr might vote for her.

Viv found herself in the strange situation where she had to buy votes she didn’t need because she couldn’t afford to ignore, and perhaps even offend, her potential allies. The only reason Baran supported her was because she was a potential thorn in a resurgent Enoria’s side. If the Baranese figured out Viv would sign a defensive alliance with Enoria, they would turn on her in a moment. If the Pure League thought she might get overwhelming support, they might band with Helock and Glastia to delay her on technicalities. She had to maintain a careful, polite underdog persona or risk attracting the wrong sort of attention.

“I will be going alone.”

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It was a familiar view, an echo of the first vista Viv had seen on Nyil. The same steps led to the same terraces decorated with statues and passages leading inside, the same arrogance in not just having the highest pile of rock in the city, but also spreading it all over the place in a display of careless power. Mornyr’s ziggurat carried the essence of Harrakan culture down to its most despicable features, but the resemblance stopped there. The steps were polished, not dusty, and the top oversaw a vibrant city merging various cultures and faiths. By contrast, Harrak City had been a monolithic, brutalist affair designed from end to end to inspire awe.

Viv watched a civil servant enter by one of the side entrances. The hurried lady wore a northern robe with cloth pauldrons in the fashion of Helock. Harrak was long dead and its people had died with it, yet it still chafed Viv to see a foreigner violate the sanctity of what

should be hers. It didn't matter that she had taken the mantle of that old nation on a fluke, driven by necessity and a grumbling old golem. What mattered was that... it had become hers.

"Pull your wings back, young dragon. You are not ready to fly yet," a voice said behind her.

Viv turned, realizing her aura was leaking. Draconic intimidation influenced her thoughts, it seemed. It didn't affect the old man walking towards her with a kind smile. It didn't affect him at all, and it was not difficult to guess why.

Viv didn't use inspection. Her skill was too low not to be noticed. There was not really a need either. The man standing in front of her in heavy plate armor exuded the same sort of controlled aura Solar had. He was no mage to make demands of the planet with glyphs and emotions, but Nyil listened anyway. A sword rested on his hip, and a golden cloak covered his broad shoulders. It was the only concession to luxury he tolerated on his person. The rest was military cleanliness and order down to the last hair of his beard.

"You must be Knight-Principal Gram. Thank you for inviting me."

"And thank you for coming. Inquisitor Denerim spoke highly of you, young lady. I thought it best if we could meet face to face."

Viv nodded, the most respectful act she could afford as a ruler. Gram came to stand by her side with his arms crossed behind his back. He, too, looked at the city at his feet and the walls beyond, but he also spared a glance to the massive shield tower standing proudly in the middle of the city as a reminder of the power of the gods.

"First, let's get the politics out of the way so we can have a real talk. I represent Mornyr in this meeting. The city will support your bid."

"Really?" Viv asked. "Just like that?"

"Just like that. We warriors of the temple stand as defenders of faith and civilization. By stopping the Empire of Dawn, you have done more for Param than most princes alive. The churches also fully support your attempt at reclaiming the deadlands. I tell you this as the representative of Mornyr. Now, as the head of the Temple of Neriad on this continent, I will also remind you that you have made our faith your state religion. Of course we are on your side."

"Things are seldom this easy."

"We are the good guys, the not clever good guys, Viviane the Outlander. I will leave plotting to Maradoc's followers. Now that this is out of the way, I have three questions and one request."

"A request?" Viv said. "The timing is a little suspicious."

"I assure you, it really is a request. I cannot force you to come but, to tell you the truth, we are going to need your help."

"When?"

"The winter solstice. Are you afraid of the sea, outlander?"

"Err, no, it's drowning and the giant squids that scare me."

"A fair judgment. There is an island off the coast of Vizim that hosts a great temple. Sardanal's birthplace, actually."

Viv frowned. She remembered reading that Sardanal was one of the only gods of Viziman origin. She also remembered who had mentioned it first.

"Wait, Denerim told me Octas was trying to sink it."

"And she will try again during the winter solstice. If we do not receive reinforcements... she will succeed."

"I assume it would be bad."

"The complex was one of the first beacons of civilization for mankind. Gods work with symbols, and Octas destroying that island would significantly empower her. She has a stronger grasp on the Shadow Lands than she does here. Her resources are... significant. Ours are not. We are overstretched because she found our point of failure."

"Logistics?" Viv wagered.

It was, after all, an island.

"Ships, specifically. She has managed to get control over sea monsters. Our resupply vessels have been sunk with all hands. The losses were... catastrophic."

He gave her a long look.

"We can probably get a warship through but we need a blade to its shield."

"Me?"

"You. It will be a lonely adventure this time, I'm afraid. We simply do not have enough room for your army, but if you could come with us, we could save that place."

"So in half a year?"

"Before. It will take some time to sail there. We would... really appreciate it. There are very few people here who can match your raw destructive power."



“Bah. Alright. Fine. I just hope there won’t be any urgent crisis until then.”

“You can call for help if there is. Remember. We are on your side.”

“Alright. I’ll prepare for some high intensity fishing. Now, what was that about your questions?”

“Farren. My pupil. How did he die?”

Viv sighed, caught off guard.

“Aaaah fuck.”

“Not well, I take it?”

Viv had a very ambivalent feeling on the question so she said as much.

“He died for his principles but I told him exactly what would happen, didn’t stop him and saw it come true and I... have regrets.”

She recounted the scene. Farren riding down the hill alone to extend his hand to a faction known for fanatical hatred. The subsequent battle with Efestar’s avatar. When she was done, both of them remained silent for a while.

“I do not believe we should decide the way people live or die. We can only advise and hope for the best, and besides...” Garm began.

He struggled with words while Viv looked on. It was clear the old man had held Farren in high esteem.

“Sometimes, people die and the meaning of that sacrifice is only felt years later. Sometimes, a fool changes the world against the wisdom of others. It happens rarely but it does happen. The temple in Harrak reports that your Hallurian refugees consider him a holy person. Some want to return and spread the word of his message, and the reality of life beyond the Baranese walls. Have you talked to them?”

“Not much. They are under the care of Abenezigel, not mine. I have been busy and...”

“A little vindictive?”

“I concede that point,” Viv said after a brief moment of introspection.

“Do not hold it against them. This isn’t what Farren would have wanted. Many of those captured foes want to join your banner. You should let them. Prove to the world Hallurians can be redeemed if they can be made to listen first.”

“I’ll... do it as soon as I return. This was an oversight on my part.”

“Denerim was right. You do know how to listen and you do mean to help.”

“Well, don’t get used to it.”

Garm chuckled. Below them, a bell rang to signify the mid-morning break. A few civil servants gathered on the terraces, sharing slices of fruit and tea in tiny cups.

“My next question is a little more delicate. A certain secret keeper told me someone came with you on this trip. That someone has proven themselves to be quite hard to catch. Now, one may wonder why a visiting dignitary would bring a war golem who leaves no traces and a master infiltrator on a diplomatic trip, so I have to ask... are you here to kill someone? Because as much as I am loath to oppose you, I cannot let that happen.”

Garm’s expression turned steely. It was no wonder he had saved this question for later in the conversation, and Viv knew there was a core of unshakeable belief under the kind demeanor of the Knight-Principal. He might not kill or arrest her but he would fight her every step of the way if her answer didn’t satisfy.

“No, I am not here to kill anyone. I will not tell you why Irao accompanies me, but I will tell you I hold the strong belief that my cause is just.”

“Tell me what you are here for. No details, and I swear it stays between us, but tell me.”

“To save a hostage,” Viv said after a little hesitation.

Garm’s face formed an ‘o’ of surprise, then his eye shone with a mischievous twinkle.

“Aha! Yes. Yes! That certainly sounds like a good cause, though obviously I cannot be sure what you are referring to. Say, is there anything the temple can do for you? To completely change the subject.”

“I would love the opportunity to play with a ward fueled by divine mana.”

“Why of course! I am myself capable of weaving one, although it will be temporary. I am sure we could meet at the complex, say, tonight?”

“With pleasure. And... you had one last question?”

“Ah yes. To be perfectly honest with you, traveler, I expected you to storm off two minutes ago.”

“My reputation for explosive bouts of anger is wildly exaggerated. I only lose my temper for good reasons, like princes selling my people into slavery or some asshole eating my dessert and drinking my wine.”

Garm kept a contemplative silence for a moment, his gaze fixed on the distant gates of the city. The Baranese delegation had just arrived, their coming announced by loud trumpets.

"I find your reply strangely relatable, only I will add the administrative branch of the temple arguing in favor of the 'rational and pragmatic approach' to the top of the fury-inducing pile. As for my last question, it relates to a dark god."

The temperature dropped. Viv felt a chill crawl up her spine.

"You know of whom I speak. You two talked during your fight. We have concerns. Deep concerns. He's a devious and powerful foe. I strongly advise you to reconsider. The dark gods are the enemies of mankind. You cannot trust them."

Viv was about to shrug. The truth was, it wasn't that simple. Unfortunately, she had sworn an oath to the gods not to spill their secrets. Even now, the bindings on her soul tightened to remind her of the cost of transgression.

She could still ask questions though.

"How much do you know about Efestar?" she asked, the hidden question hanging between them.

Garm looked around, worried for the first time since they'd met.

"Do you have a quiet spell?"

Viv activated it with a thought. Suddenly, the drums of the Baranese fanfare were silenced.

"Right. Only a few members of the temple are aware he and our god used to be brothers by blood pact. And... how he came to fall."

"Then you know he's different from the old ones. Efestar was betrayed and slighted but his original purpose was the same as that of the other light gods."

"He has been consumed by revenge."

"Not completely, at least, I do not think so. He has much to answer for but perhaps there is a chance. I will keep talking to him yet refuse all his offers. He cannot force gifts upon people."

"The gods will not like that."

"There are many things the gods do not like. Apologizing for their wrongs is apparently one of them."

"You are getting dangerously close to blasphemy," Gram warned.

"Kinght-Principal, no one can deny Neriad is fighting for justice and the greater good, but honestly? If your sworn brother betrayed his word, even for a good cause, would you not feel cheated?"

"I would not destroy countless lives as revenge."

“You are a better person than he was. It doesn’t mean a path to redemption doesn’t exist. This world is crammed with dangers and horrors. I see no reason not to try to remove one without killing it, for once.”

“Viviane. He is a monster. You do not know what you are talking about.”

“Right,” Viv said with some impatience, “what did you say about Farren, earlier? A fool may change the world against the advice of wise people?”

The knight massaged the bridge of his nose with a gauntleted hand.

“I hope you know he is ancient and cunning.”

“I am not trying to outwit him, or trick him. That won’t work, not just because he’s devious but also because this is exactly why he turned in the first place! Neriad may have a chance to make amends for the sake of his sworn brother.”

“No longer his sworn brother.”

“By his own doing.”

An uncomfortable silence filled the air. It was clear Garm was worried. Very worried. Viv couldn’t blame him. There was a part of hubris in thinking she could change a divine status quo that had lasted for possibly millenia. Someone trying to turn a dark god would get turned instead in most cautionary tales. There was also an old red flag and relationship advice Viv was consciously ignoring. A law as old as humanity itself.

If someone tells you they’re an asshole, believe them.

In normal circumstances, Viv would not have bothered. But this was a god. The reward was worth the investment.

“I pray to Neriad that you are right.”

“Thanks. I hope so too as well.”

“Yes. Forgive me but I must take my leave. I wish to withdraw for a little while, I am sure you understand. I will see you tonight?”

“See you then, yes.”

Gram left but Viv remained at the top of the ziggurat, standing alone like some edgy dark lady. The temperature kept dropping.

Wait for it.

Wait for it.

One of the statues by her side shifted. It depicted a young warrior in heavy armor, his hand carrying a steel spear. The eyes turned black, then bled inky darkness over the cracked stone face.

“They will never listen to you.”

“Here I was brooding over a monument to arrogance and look who shows up. It’s nice to see you again, Fefe.”

The face tilted to the side. She heard a crack.

“You mean those words. How precious.”

“I do believe in you. As naive as it may sound, I believe there is still a heart under all that scorn.”

“Your servants do not share your belief, although I will admit that they have proven extraordinarily hard to convince.”

“What can I say? Hope and scorn seldom mix. Speaking of which, have you given any thought to being happy again?”

“INSOLENCE!”

The air shook, but Mornyr’s aura dimmed the dark one’s wrath. Viv remained unfazed.

“Do not pity me, elemental. You are still so young. Yet to have to be broken by life, but the time will come as it always does to those who live long enough to see their dreams collapse. I heard you wanted to see wards?”

“Eavesdropping, are we?”

“I could help you, freely. Few know more about infiltration than I.”

“Just forfeit your throne of hatred, join the ranks of the light gods, and we’re in business.”

“Never. They have proven their hypocrisy time and time again.”

“You must learn to forgive, Fefe. You don’t even like your present company. The dark gods are the ones who slaughtered your family.”

“AT LEAST THEY ARE HONEST. The others, they have never, ever even apologized!”

“Would it help?”

“What?”

“Would it help if Neriad apologized? If he acknowledged that he wronged you and failed you in your hour of need? Would it help to know he always felt the pain of having to choose between mankind and his friend?”

“I care not about that happy birdbrain. He is nothing to me.”

“Hmmm.”

“You doubt the gods at your own risk, traveler.”

“It’s just, there is just something I don’t understand and I hoped you could enlighten me,” Viv said, channeling her inner Columbo.

“Oh? Humility? From you?”

“You were an assassin, yes?”

“You know this to be true. Stop wasting my time.”

“So I assume you were moving in clothes that helped.”

“I was.”

“And yet now you wear black full plate with pauldrons. Your avatar is massive and heavily muscled.”

“I was muscular as a mortal.”

“I’m sure,” Viv said, knowing the builds were simply not the same. “It’s just like you’re some dark mirror to a certain himbo.”

“You believe you understand me. You do not.”

“Then talk to me.”

She spread her arms, encompassing the brightly lit city around them. Although it was cold near the avatar, his aura of control could not dispel the warm light of summer shining all around them.

“Isn’t this place nice? Palaces, temples, merchants, all the trappings of civilization mixed in a harmonious whole. There would be room for you if you wanted.”

“It is too late. You are wasting your time.”

“You could try one act of kindness. A vengeful yet beneficial one. Bring justice to the oppressed. Become not scorn but hope for those who have lost everything. There are plenty of people down here who could use a second chance at life.”

“You think gods can change, mortal? YOU KNOW NOTHING.”

Crushing pressure, but once again, Viv didn't feel so oppressed. She had backup, she realized.

“I know they can,” she affirmed with absolute conviction.

It would be the height of stupidity to reveal Emeric's existence, or the fact he'd come to regret his actions. That didn't matter. Efestar knew she believed every word she said.

“Just give it a try. You have nothing to lose but the bitterness in your heart.”

The statue glared. Abyssal blood reached its throat and more of the statue crumbled.

“Please?” Viv asked. “This planet is a mess. We could use another champion.”

“I will... I...”

She almost had him.

And then, the statue crumbled.

Viv sighed. Shit timing but it was already a miracle the piece had lasted for so long. Heat made a vengeful return on the bright platform as the last dregs of power evaporated. There was no recovering the statue so Viv annihilated the tainted shards. After she was done, she prayed to Neriad.

It was easy, really. Just focus and mana would start leaking. She pushed it, feeding enormous amounts of energy into the link until the part of her that was her soul felt the attention of the god on her. She didn't make demands. She didn't talk. The only thing on her mind was a simple request.

“Help?”

The energies around her took a light golden hue. Rather than an answer, emotions filtered back from the link. It was strange, associating the immense power of the planet-sized presence in her mind with doubt, grief, fear, regret, but it was Neriad. He was a good person.

The last emotion to pierce through was a tentative agreement. She took it as a good sign and walked down the stairs, taking her time after a rather challenging encounter. Sidjin was waiting for her at the bottom, expression unreadable.

“How did it go?” she asked.

“Glastia will support our bid. They also agree to reinstate me as a prince, though my claim to the throne is completely forfeit. My father also gave me his blessing to be your paramour.”

“I sense a condition coming.”

“Glastia will push out of the wall next spring. I am to help with the assault. There are reports that beastling shamans have sustained their troops thanks to the dark magic of Gomogog. We can no longer afford to wait them out.”

Viv didn't challenge him on the 'we'. He was still a Glastian at heart.

“The Paramese alliance will mobilize, I assume?”

“Yes. Several knight orders already agreed to join the effort, including the White Orchard and the Golden Order. I want to, no, I need to go. I need to see it through.”

Viv sighed. Her schedule was getting busier by the minute. She still had to travel to Harrak to recover Solfis' original body and allow him to, ah, spawn.

“Of course we're going, it's just that I agreed to cross the ocean this winter to kill sea monsters and stop Octas from sinking an island.”

“Pardon me?”

“It's just my luck.”

Viv discussed details with Sidjin on their way back to the embassy though everything was still very far. She wasn't sure what state Harrak would be like next year. Not like she could ignore the expedition anyway. Letting her boytoy go alone into that den of vipers? As if.

Solfis was unexpectedly waiting for her at the entrance. He strutted to her as soon as she was within acceptable distance. If she didn't know better, she would say he was excited.

**//Your Majesty!**

**//Look!**

So she didn't know better. The golem clutched a breastplate in his clawed hands, a familiar make she quickly identified. Her fingers brushed the steel with bafflement. The quality wasn't great but there was no mistaking the design. It was the same piece of gear the Mountain People used before they had joined the heavies, leftover equipment from the days when Harrak had a regular infantry.

Except, it was clearly recent. The steel lacked the patina of age and heavy use.

“Someone is making Harrakan knock offs?”

**//No.**

**//This was sold on the Zesthanet commercial district.**

**//I asked the salesman.**

**//They traded those from a city directly to the west of them on the shores of the White Sea.**



“No fucking way.”

“It can’t be,” Sidjin said. “Nothing made contact for three hundred years.”

**//They did.**

**//With Zesthanet.**

**//The Frozen Peninsula extends to the south west of the Harrakan heartland, beyond the mountains.**

**//The cataclysm could have stopped with the mountains.**

“Then...”

**//Yes.**

**//There were outposts and cities there.**

**//Harrak... has survived!**

**//...**

**//What are you doing?**

“Writing it down on the damn list.”