

“Thank you for agreeing to come. Those are... peculiar circumstances, and we apologize for the hiccup,” the priest of Maranor said.

Viv sat back into her comfortable chair, making sure not to look at Selyen to the side or she was liable to throw something at him. The receiving room was pleasant enough. High priests from all the churches stood at the back as witnesses, officially on her side. There were refreshments, but Viv was still pissed off. Not about the attack on her men, not anymore. She was pissed off at herself.

By her side, Sidjin shifted in his seat.

He had chewed the fuck out of her and she was still feeling sore. Mostly because he was right. She'd been stupid by thinking the council wouldn't stop for something as important as an embassy being attacked by the forces of a sovereign nation. This was the first time in two centuries, and the last one had been a fisticuff. Obviously that took precedence.

She'd also been selfish to leave him behind. This was a team effort. Either he was part of the action or he was not. Sidjin wasn't a diplomat. He was a war mage and her paramour, so she should have said 'let's go' and that was it. She failed to do so and Sidjin was forced to remain with the other envoys because she'd requested it and because he couldn't refuse without her losing majesty. He'd been furious and Viv was now sulking, having been told off.

The Priest of Maranor met her eyes and though he didn't flinch, he was clearly not relaxed. He was the same guy who had officiated the diplomatic meeting and Viv felt he was doing a good job smoothing feathers despite her misgivings. Selyen crossed his arms in a gesture of pouting dignity she would have mimicked if she didn't have to look like an Empress.

“I would first like to clarify that I am speaking as the representative of the council and that Selyen acted with Mornyr's benediction in this instance. He is the current head of the, ah, fast response team with Baran's approval. His role is to stop conflict by disarming the opponents with overwhelming force. He is perhaps not the most diplomatic person but I will ask you to forgive him as he was playing his role and, more importantly, none of your men were slain. His instructions were to avoid any and all deaths unless absolutely necessary.”

“That last attack of his didn't look harmless,” Viv said.

“Your men are pretty good,” Selyen said. “Better than I expected from border grunts. I was going to hurt them but I wasn't going to kill them. If I wanted them dead they would be,” Selyen said with a bored voice.

Viv bristled but he was right. The artifact hanging from his large shoulders would be enough to slice through even runic armor with ease. She wasn't even sure she could beat him in a straight fight if he were to use it considering the Sword of the Dragonslayer was the most powerful offensive artifact of the continent.

“You should not have attacked them to begin with,” she retorted.

“Just following orders.”

“Empress Viviane, please. I acknowledge that the situation is complex. There will be reparations but Selyen is innocent in this matter. He was merely enforcing the law to the best of his knowledge and abilities.”

The way the priest pointedly said the last part of the sentence made her realize what he actually meant, merely that Selyen was an arrogant bonehead and that he had done his best. The attack had taken place at the fucking front gate of her manor. No one should have thought the Harrakans the attacking party, so the priest was saying Selyen was just a dumbass.

She considered the solution. He acted like he was on her side and wanted her to drop the matter that involved Mornyr directly, and through the city its servant Selyen who was basically a riot cop on steroids. Viv could press the issue but she was more interested in getting even with those who had started it to begin with.

“When you say reparations, I assume you are referring to Luten’s attack on my sovereign territory.”

Viv expected the priest to try and smooth things out but she was completely wrong. He was a priest of the goddess of order, and she applied her wrath with equity.

“Their behavior was utterly unacceptable. The Pure League has gone too far this time, just as I fear they eventually would. The misguided belief they alone stand for the future of mankind has made them arrogant beyond compare. It goes without saying that their entire delegation is expelled from Mornyr effective immediately. The temple guards of various churches are carrying out this order as we speak and they will be further punished by a loss of their voting right until they atone for what they have done. Such brazen disrespect of our rules! Utterly scandalous.”

Viv surveyed the man who waited for her judgment. Getting those fuckers expelled was a good start but it was for the insult they’d done to Mornyr and its rules. Not to her. The issue she had was that there was nothing she could demand from Mornyr without them denying responsibility for the fiasco since they would never admit to being wrong. Similarly, there was little she could demand of the Pure League. She didn’t trade with them. She didn’t share a border with them. Hell, they had never really interacted. Seizing sovereign funds from the bank wasn’t a thing that could be enforced on this planet. Maybe...

“I request a recognition of casus belli.”

The atmosphere changed immediately. The priest leaned backward while Selyen let out a little cough of surprise. Even Sidjin seemed surprised.

“The, ah, that would not justify an invasion or anything too drastic. It remains an incident.”

“I want the ability to conduct hostile actions without condemnation from the alliance. There are provisions for that. Attacking an embassy remains an act of war”

"I am familiar with the code of conduct, thank you, but are you sure? It will only be valid for five years."

"That's more than enough time to figure out what I want to do."

"Viviane, may I call you Viviane?"

"No."

Viv didn't care about the assembled priests' concerned whispers at her outburst. She knew he was going to say something to piss her off. She didn't let go of her aura but her glare made it obvious she expected some saccharine bullshit. She wasn't disappointed.

"Very well, Empress. You have so far proven yourself to be a paragon of, ah, restraint and diplomacy. At least since your notable contribution to the defeat of the Nemeti. A good behavior goes a long way towards rehabilitating your image as a reliable partner. Would you consider letting go of the matter? I am sure we can find a way to have Harrak compensated without having to resort to violence."

Viv crossed her fingers. Sidjin discreetly patted her knee in a gesture of support. She took a deep breath.

They didn't get it.

She would have to explain.

"You are basing your impression on a false premise. You see me now, calm and composed, and think I have fundamentally changed from the hellion who overthrew Prince Lancer's puppet in Kazar. Perhaps you think my support of General Jaratalassi is an act of redemption and sacrifice for the common good. In this, you are basing your understanding of me on Loyalist Enorian propaganda. So allow me to dispel any delusions you may have when it comes to the way I conduct politics and diplomacy.

"I am one of the most consistent rulers to have ever joined the alliance.

"See, I didn't go to Lancer. He came to Kazar, violated the free city agreement, enslaved those who didn't flee, and killed my girlfriend. So I gathered those who mattered to me and led a revolt. And we killed his envoy. Then Lancer came again to finish the job so I rallied my friends and allies and fought back. And we killed him. Elunath tried to enslave me so I rallied allies and laid a trap. And we killed him. The Nemeti threatened Param and old steeltrap Jaratalassi called me for help so I rallied my friends and allies, we came, and we killed the Nemeti. Do you see a pattern? You do, do you not? The reality is quite simple. I would gladly spend days pushing back the deadlands but some shit keeps happening that requires my attention. I'm sure you can see where I am going with this."

The priests were studiously examining each other's fingernails so Viv enunciated the next sentence with great care. Just so there wouldn't be any confusion.

“As long as twats come after the people I care about or myself, I will simply raise the banners and go after them, and since I’m consistent and rather cool, the number of banners keeps increasing and now we even have wasps throwers. The Pure League insulted me and went after my embassy so I am going to rally my people and fuck them up. I don’t know how yet, or even when, but it is going to happen. Because I am very consistent, very vindictive, and I always, always get even. Always.”

She leaned back against her chair. You could hear a pin drop.

“The council grants you the casus belli clause. Please use it with discernment.”

“Oh don’t worry. Unlike some people, I don’t go after civilians. Anyway, was there something else?”

“You are the offended party, Empress Viviane. If you are satisfied then we can resume the summit.”

“I’d like to know why your own nation’s military tried to kill you,” Viv told the ex-councillor securely hiding in her embassy’s guest quarters.

The old northern woman had recovered from her shock, to the extent that she looked perfectly at home in her bedroom and Viv was but a guest instead of the manor’s temporary owner. The witch had left her guards behind. Only Sidjin remained by her side. She was hoping for cooperation with the recent defector.

“What do you know of the Pure League’s drive west across the Kark plains?” the old woman asked.

“I know it’s not going well.”

“That would be an understatement. The Pure League’s original intentions were noble. At first, our enemies were not the Kark but the beastlings and any other species or individuals that prayed to the dark gods. The drive east was based on, shall we say, creative evidence at the start though you will not find a noble alive who will admit to it.”

“Except for you,” Sidjin remarked.

“Behind closed doors. And I believe we are way past appearances. My point is that the drive to turn the steppes into farmland is failing.”

“The soil isn’t fertile enough?” Viv asked.

Marruk had indicated as much. The Kark were not stupid. The steppes were just unsuitable for intensive agriculture the way the humans did it.

“After two harvests, all that remains is cracked dead earth. The first wave of farms has already been abandoned. Meanwhile, the military presses on to free more land for new settlers and those who had to leave theirs behind, but this strategy is just delaying the inevitable.”

“The supply lines keep getting longer,” Sidjin guessed.

“There is that, and the fact that what was steppe land with water spots and some food is now a dry desert, not to mention there are the casualties.”

“The Kark are fighting back.”

“Not as well as before but neither are we. An entire generation of elites has died on Kark spears to slaughter their shamans. Victory was achieved multiple times, but at too high a cost and now the people are weary. Noble houses refuse to sacrifice scions for a cause that they believe is lost. There are two factions right now, the purists and the reformists. The purists want to go all out. They believe that with enough dead Kark and enough free land, they can rotate farms to maintain some measure of productivity. Reformists, meanwhile, believe we should pull out before sinking more resources into a looming disaster.”

“And you are a reformist,” Viv guessed.

“While my fiery colleague represents the purist faction. For now, they hold the advantage but the scales are gradually shifting in our favor. It is making our adversaries desperate, and desperate people are the most dangerous.”

“This does not explain while they would dispose of you,” Sidjin noted.

“I have valuable information that Ambassador Feliserendi would have very much preferred to have kept hidden. Unfortunately, the servant I, ah, convinced to help, had a change of heart and I was forced to leave expeditiously. And by that, I mean I had to jump out of the window. At my age! I would, of course, be willing to share that important piece of information with you provided you could assist me in some matters.”

The lady had courage, Viv would grant her that. Unfortunately, Viv had little patience. Those had been trying hours. She progressively released her hold on her aura, first on leadership which Sidjin reinforced with his own aura in a curious mix, as if he was giving her legitimacy. The second layer was more draconic and caused the lady to roll her eyes. At first.

The room grew progressively dimmer and her guest’s condescending smirk faded. Viv wasn’t just bullying her. She was conveying a message that words would take a long time to express.

The woman didn’t matter to Viv, not as a person. She was here at Viv’s sufferance and this manor was now under Harrakan dominion. Viv would get her piece of information or she would get her pound of flesh, and she would harvest either with cold, reptilian detachment. The woman would cooperate or she would die, and then Viv would have dinner. That was it.

A knock on the door. Viv smiled. Solfis' ghastly head slithered through the opening.

//YOU CALLED?

"You have made your position clear," the woman said. "There is no need for this aspect of the Old Empire to make a return. I will tell you what I know. In exchange, I ask for asylum until I manage to find my way back."

"You will have asylum if you are truthful, if I can ascertain that you don't intend to betray us, and if Lady Azar thinks your skills are worth employing for the duration of your exile."

"How would you even know that I wouldn't betray you?"

"You will swear an oath to Neriad which I will have Lady Azar prepare. I have had some people get creative with oath breaking in the past so I am no longer leaving anything to chance."

"This is acceptable. As for the piece of information, the League intends to secure its flank by making an example out of Zazas. Ambassador Feliserendi knows the city intends to contract you to become the center of the gate network in the north. They want to dispose of the ruling couple. I... am not sure how. This is all I have learned, I swear."

"This diplomatic summit is growing more and more annoying."

//Diplomacy can be quite complex, Your Majesty.

//May I offer an alternative?

"No."

Solfis' taunt had been directed at the lady. In reality, the ancient golem strongly favored a peaceful approach for the summit since he cared about the glory of Harrak even more than he cared about the glory of battle, and so Viv returned to the negotiating table along with a mollified Sidjin. As expected, the alliance was eager to stop funding the deadland forts and the vote passed with Viv's support. It was a bit of a blow since the sentries manning said forts didn't just provide a buffer for invading necromancers. They were also a good source of trade on their way to and back from the fortresses. Viv took solace in the fact that thanks to her effort, they were now only a minor contribution to Harrakan total trade. She could consider their loss a growing pain.

The afternoon was spent voting on stuff that didn't concern Viv. The Paramese alliance covered an entire continent, of which Harrak was still just a very small part. Trade disputes, border disagreement, even the responsibility for rampaging monsters were the subject of many arguments, some of them fierce. Viv watched the King of Baran raise his voice for the first time when confronted with the news of a rampaging creature called an 'earth wyrm' that had crossed into Helock-controlled territory. Viv had no idea it was such a big deal, even with

Lady Azar mentioning it in the past. The earth wyrm had apparently destroyed a valuable small town.

“The sons of Baran have bled to slow the beast down and you have the gall to demand reparations from us? While their widows still weep?” he roared.

It was serious business. Viv voted for whoever was right according to her advisors in order to develop a reputation for impartiality. She voted against Enoria once, but Sangor didn't seem to care much. His request was shot down by most representatives anyway. The negotiations continued well into late afternoon to make up for the earlier disruption. Once more, it was amazing how high stats made everything easier. People talked faster, points were clearer, people tended to be more precise and presented more structured arguments. The votes were tallied in record speed as well. Viv was starting to think it wasn't just superhuman abilities that let humans thrive here in a land with liches and dragons. Superhuman bureaucracy could be credited for a lot of successes as well.

Speaking of, there were a few improvements.

Leadership: Intermediate 9

Polymath: beginner 5

Apparently, achieving a major breakthrough for one's nation improved leadership. Maybe it was about legitimacy as much as it was about rhetorics. Achieving results gave one a reputation for efficacy, after all. She wondered if failed diplomats gained the 'disgraced' title until they cleaned the stain on their honor. She wasn't exactly eager to find out.

The second day was much the same with more minor cities requesting portals which Viv was only too happy to provide. After that, Mornyr offered a welcome break with a fencing competition.

Mornyr was famous for its arena, of which Selyen was the champion. He didn't participate in the bout and Rollo was beaten in the semifinals which was very honorable for a commander path. Viv had a good time watching all the muscular sweaty men and women slicing at each other for her pleasure. It was quite nice. On the third day, Viv had finished her preparations. It was time to secure an alliance with Enoria or be expelled from the international community. Or maybe both.

She was feeling confident though. The League of Lesser Evil was back in town and there were no gods on the planet who could create contingencies around Solfis.

Three shapes in black cloaks climbed the stairs to the Hidden Smile's monumental gates. Viv felt giddy behind her mask with Sidjin and Irao on her arms. Even outside the ancient circular building, songs and enrapturing perfume filled the air. Well-armed guards waved her in without a challenge since she had her anchors out. The Hidden Smile was a temple to Sardanal, more specifically its fertility aspect. Viv knew it offered more medical services for those who had difficulties conceiving, but tonight's focus would be the seductive aspect of growth and Viv was kind of excited for it.

It was a sex party.

She'd never attended those back on earth! She also presumed they were less grandiose since Nyil had an abundance of sex-related professions. The Northern Cities didn't share Enoria's or indeed the judeo-christian's prudish approach to lovemaking. The Hidden Smile clearly advertised what it was down to the lush wall paintings and voluptuous carvings of its exterior though it was still in good taste so far. Buxom women in togae danced with muscular men, the marble simile cloth clinging to their fetching buttocks. The suggestive imagery remained subtle enough to tease while leaving the building's purpose clear to all. Past the gate, priests and priestesses of Sardanal welcomed them in fitting clothes, distributing glasses of sweet wine and spicy snacks. Viv removed her cloak to reveal a rather daring dress while Sidjin's northern toga left his tanned legs bare. It was all rather stimulating. Sadly, Viv was here for business as reminded by Irao's insistent steps. They moved to the main room soon after, appearing on a balcony overlooking the open space below and the court held there.

In the center of the room, an orchestra played an engaging song while performers mingled with the guests, half dancing and half cajoling. A brush of the hand on a shoulder here, leaning tittering laugh there, all conspired to make the guests more relaxed, dragging all into the spirit of the party in an inclusive vortex of sensations. It was still relatively early and only a few breasts were on display, most of them in a body paint exhibition that impressed Viv with its hypnotizing patterns. The dancers also knew how to use their waists, and for Viv who, as her grandpa used to say, worked on both steam and sail, it was a treat for the eyes. She helpfully directed Sidjin's gaze to the sexiest ladies while she sneakily checked the men herself. Hey, this was a sex party. It was only mild now because those priests understood the notion of foreplay.

Soon, their steps carried them to the back of the grand hall where the king waited for them, surrounded by a court of priests and nobles in shimmering attires. There, the outfits and masks gained an exquisite quality that matched Viv's fucking expensive own so that attendants would know, if not their identity, then at least their status. The three Harrakans slightly bowed before the dais where Sangor sat with his bearded chin resting on a scarred fist. A suspiciously high amount of empty wine goblets cluttered the table by his side. He nodded in acknowledgement.

"Welcome to the party, dear guests. By day we all carry a heavy burden, so tonight let it rest and set your minds at ease."

"Not going to join the party, oh king?" Viv asked in front of the priests.

It was important to really mark her presence in the mind of other guests, hence why she didn't bother to hide her anchors. It was simply a matter of establishing a rock solid alibi. Similarly, Sidjin's form was rather easily recognizable. As for Irao, those capable of noticing him through the passive obfuscation skill would assume he was a bodyguard.

"Oh, it would not be fitting to join when I am already blessed, you see?"

Yeah if his war witch of the thorns paramour learned he was having orgies while she was giving birth, it would probably make his return difficult. Viv suspected that the man was intensely nervous. There were subtle hints, like the way his sword arm flexed when he reached for more alcohol.

"And besides, I am enjoying fruitful conversations. It will have to satisfy," the king finished to the indulgent chuckle of the surrounding clergy.

They had apparently decided it was a perfect time to proselyte. To be fair, Sangor was trying to reduce Maranor's hold on his kingdom. A competing church would go a long way towards doing so. Viv left him to his device, going instead to the various shows with her companions. She leaned towards Irao as they neared naked acrobats.

"Are you alright so far?"

"Yes!" the hadal replied with more excitement than Viv had ever heard from him. "The mask. I like it. I feel like I am someone else. No one is looking at me because they are looking at the mask. I am not me!"

He sounded really happy about it.

"That's great to hear. Huh. Maybe we should get you more masks. Just let me know if it becomes too much anyway."

For an hour or so, they moved through the main room. Some people came to talk to them since their real identities were not exactly a secret, though the topics of discussions stayed on light talks and innuendos. Viv had to decline several daring invitations on the way which proved that eldritch wings and devastating black magic could not stand in the way of libido. The party gained intensity as the last guests arrived and the first led temple attendants and each other to alcoves from where moans soon emerged. Interestingly, established couples in matching attires were the drivers behind the heating atmosphere with priests and lone guests joining along as they were invited. It was an interesting tidbit to note to distract her from the fact she had to remain at the periphery. Her soul sense detected a diffuse cloud of divine mana suffusing the place, untying tongues and making limbs and mentalities more limber. She forced herself not to succumb to the siren's call. When the agreed hour was upon them, it couldn't have come too soon. She guided Sidjin and Irao by hand to a secluded corner in full view of the attendants. There, they found stairs going down towards a room they had reserved because of its location. It catered to a more specific taste, one that really enjoyed restraints. Sidjin shivered as he entered and just like that, the mood was ruined.

“I’ll never get used to that,” Sidjin said.

“Well at least I won’t need a cold shower. Let’s get changed.”

The trio quickly swapped their party clothes for dark leather attires somewhere between armor and really kinky suits that would help melt in the shadows. The last thing Viv needed was for a loose piece of fabric to activate a ward.

The witch deactivated the protection glyph on the room’s grate then lifted it with telekinesis. The trio slipped down the opening to surprisingly clean sewers. A massive bone form unfolded like a flower from a corner, eyes quickly pointing towards the north. They didn’t speak on their way through several damp corridors, their feet light on the slippery cobblestone. The grates that barred their ways opened with a little bit of magic. The underground smelled rank though the stench remained extremely mild compared to what could be expected from a large city in summer. There were actual enchantments down there to purify both water and air.

After only a couple of minutes of walking. Irao pointed at a wall. Sidjin wordlessly traced a large spell on the surface and Viv once again marveled at the fallen prince’s ability to just make up ad hoc spells with only a couple of days of preparation. Keen mind on that man. Once done, he moved his hands to activate the hex.

A flash of blue formed a circle on the brick surface, then an entire tube of rock was smoothly extracted, the titanic rod carried in silence by a layer of liquid mana. Sidjin sectioned it, then Viv used telekinesis to quietly place them by the newly formed hole. The League (minus Abe, who had arguably retired) crawled through it and found themselves in the sewer section dedicated to the temple of Maranor, facing a cistern that smelled like really dirty socks. They were in.

Maranor’s temple sewer system was only joined to the main one by pipes no larger than an arm’s width, yet despite this there was still a divine mana ward covering the grate leading up to the temple’s baths. Solfis and Irao nodded at each other before signaling the path was clear. Like last time, Sidjin quietly made an opening while Viv levitated the cleanly split segment out. The team climbed or flew into the deserted bath in silence. The place was Spartan in appearance though it was large enough to host at least twenty people cleaning themselves butt to butt. It was also entirely deserted. The followers of orders weren’t fond of unscheduled midnight dips, at least. Small mercy. Viv unlocked the door, then Irao and Solfis slipped out first.

Viv settled to wait. Just like the Hidden Smile, this place too was permeated by a halo of divine mana. It was more pronounced here than it had ever been in any of the provincial temples she’d visited. It felt quiescent to her soul sense, like a house with its host absent. After ten minutes of tense expectations, the pair returned. Solfis signaled and the casters slipped into a richly decorated corridor.

Maranor favored straight columns of red stone and gold filigree. Half of the decorations were exquisite works of art while the other was more warlike: stained pennants along with broken weapons lined the walls as a reminder that order would be enforced by violence if

necessary. They turned deeper into the complex under the skull of some imposing beast, Irao leading the way. Viv bathed Sidjin and herself in a layer of shadow-infused black mana just in case. The hadal stopped them as they passed by a training courtyard. Targets and charred practice dummies could be seen from openings through the thick walls. They stopped when he made a sign.

Viv and Sidjin knelt on the ground. The sounds of footsteps sounded from the other side of the courtyard while fleeting light shone on the ceiling above them. She cast a sound enchantment and reinforced the darkness effect just in case. Just as expected, the guard moved on without contest. Viv looked up to see directions written on the stone in a nearby corner.

‘Cadet’s barracks’

They were on the right track. Irao and Solfis led them to an intersection with what Viv would have believed where two decorative armor sets were it not for the buckets suspiciously blocking their views. Golems. The passage that interested them was next.

While the previous alleys had led to the lines of evenly spaced doors Viv associated with dormitories, this one had only six. Solfis’ prep work confirmed this was the VIP part of the barracks where rich scions could have their own personal quarters. A massive red seal covered the entire passage from wall to wall and ground to ceiling, visible in the darkness as faint lights. Just as Viv was making herself ready to breach it, Irao and Solfis moved. Irao pushed Sidjin towards Viv and then Solfis picked them up, jumping to the ceiling like a spider. The four huddled above the ground in an awkward and slightly uncomfortable hunch bathed in dark mana. There was someone coming.

A young woman in the dress of an apprentice passed through the barrier without issue before leaving with quick steps. Viv spotted a chit dangling from her waist. It was an identification token used to go through wards without issue, and even bring people with. It had been one of their leads but Viv had eventually decided against using them as she didn’t know what kind of extra checks might be in place. Irao made a sign for ‘acquisition’ but Viv denied him. They had a plan. They would stick to the plan unless necessary. The woman had barely turned the corner that Viv was working on the divine ward.

Now, divine wards could be broken with a ton of effort, less from Viv since breaking stuff was her specialty. The issue was, if you broke a ward fueled by divine power, the goddess owning it would be immediately aware of it.

That would be extremely bad.

Fortunately, divine wards were less responsive than temporary ones. Maranor was propping up hundred of wards, conducting her normal business, plotting, floating in the in between, and generally being a bitch all at the same time. Even a divine being could only multitask so much so their wards could be stretched a little without them noticing. A bit like a mosquito stinging skin, Viv’s little prick would not be felt.

That was a rather phallic metaphor. The party was really getting to her. Viv focused and started pulling on threads. The ward itself wasn't that complex. It was the power behind it that truly mattered. Slowly, with delicate touches, Viv pulled on threads to loosen them. It felt very much like untangling cables. She merely had to exercise patience and consistency.

The world around her faded away as did her stress. The others were looking after her. She had nothing to worry about. All that mattered was to coax the construct into extending a little, not much, just enough so that a weakness could be crossed without triggering the construct. Thanks to her training with Garm, the Knight Captain of Neriad, she knew how durable divine mana could be. Eventually, she pulled back. There was now a semi-stable circular opening in the ward. She slipped through it immediately with the other four hot on her heels, then she moved down the alley.

Sidjin took the time to pat her arm. He looked very impressed behind the leather half-mask. They easily found the right door as it was the only one locked from the outside.

Irao could have probably taken it from here but this was an extraction and he was not exactly the most trustworthy-looking person around. The door was locked and warded, though not divinely. Sidjin and Viv worked together to displace the alarm's anchor away from the gate, then Viv opened the door into a dimly lit room.

It was a little bit messy and very pungent. It reeked of sex. Suddenly, the fleeing girl's late night visit made a lot more sense. So the apple didn't fall far from the tree uh? Viv shouldn't judge.

As for their target, he stood abruptly when Viv walked in, growing more alarmed as Solfis joined them. He was wearing a simple summer sleeping shift. The room itself was decorated with basic trinkets that showed a lot of care but very little means. The most complex one was a basket made of straw, a little scuffed around the edges.

"Who are you?"

"Hello Gil, we're here to bring you to freedom. We were—"

"Give me one reason why I shouldn't scream."

Ugh, the little shit.

"I'll give you two. First, I cast a sound bubble so no one will hear. Two, as I said, we're here to free you and bring you to your dad."

Gil was like a younger and admittedly more handsome version of his dad. He had the rugged charm of an action movie star, the kind that couldn't express his feeling until he and the female lead were caught in the villain's lair above the shark pool. He was also rather young which made sense since he was still officially in training, as well as remarkably calm for someone caught with his metaphorical pants down. Viv had also expected some measure of resistance, so she pulled her ace from her sleeve.

“Here, one of the letters you sent to your father. You hid a message in them.”

Gil gave her a measuring look. Viv gave him some time to look at the letter.

“You are not my father. For all I know, you—”

//Did you seriously expect your father, the king, to charge in with a regiment of Enorian knights?

//Inside of Maranor’s main temple?

“Well, no, but...”

//You are being extracted at your own request.

//Kindly cooperate.

//Because our schedule is tight and said cooperation is, in fact, not required.

“We are taking a major risk to come here,” Viv added.

“Alright, alright. There is just one thing. We need to get Lydia as well.”

Viv felt her stomach drop.

“The woman who just left?”

“Yes. You... didn’t do anything, right?” he said, suddenly afraid.

“No. We didn’t touch anybody.”

He was infatuated. Fuck! She gave it two chances in three this was a honey pot either started or tolerated by the temple but if she said that to the strapping young man, he would definitely dig both heels. A woman approaching him because he was a valuable royal hostage who needed an outlet and not his roguish charm? Unthinkable.

“Look, we can’t get her. It’s too risky.”

“I love her, we’re not leaving without her,” the young man said with a stubborn clench of his jaws.

Had to work on it a bit.

Viv pushed leadership into her words. This wasn’t a moment for threats. It was a moment for maturity.

“Look, if she comes with us, she will be seen as a traitor by her hierarchy and by the goddess she swore herself to. She will live the cursed life of a hidden exile because you couldn’t bear to be separated from her for a month or two. If you really care about her, you will leave her behind instead of destroying her life.”

“Her life will be destroyed anyway! They will suspect her.”

“They will suspect the fucking doorman after we’re gone, but right now she can swear an oath she had no idea you would be leaving, something she cannot do if we miraculously find her through patrols and closed doors. I’m not asking much from you Gil, just that you consider the future of Lydia as well as that of your nation, which is being endangered because you’re wasting everyone’s time with a selfish request instead of saving yourself. We will die if we are caught here. Don’t you care about that at all?”

Gil bit his lips. Viv’s short speech acted like a cold shower. The key had been to avoid questioning her love in any way.

“Right. Sorry, I just care about her very much.”

“And you can see her again once you’re free and secure as Enoria’s official heir. Alright?”

“Right. Lead the way.”

Gil only put on boots. Irao and Solfis exited the room first, then signaled that the way was clear. Viv took the time to repair the door’s ward just in case someone came to check on Gil in the middle of the night. It wouldn’t surprise her. The divine ward was pulsing back in position by the time she returned to it. Irao and Solfis slipped through without difficulty. They kept a vigil while Viv widened the passage again so the humans could cross. She pushed it back into position even as the stomping of boots drew closer, and had to run to catch up with the others. They doubled back at a good speed until they found the bath again. Viv locked the door behind them, then Sidjin fixed both holes on the way back until the walls appeared as pristine as the day they were built. They absconded to the Hidden Smile without issue, and that was weird as hell.

Upon returning to the kink room, Irao simply melted into the shadows while Gil put on his cloak and mask. They returned back to the main hall. By that time, the festivities were in full swing and coincidentally full swinging. It was definitely decadent and amazing. She still leaned towards poor Gil who’d been briefed and still stared.

“Get a grip.”

“Sorry! Sorry, I just, I’ve never seen anything like it.”

To be fair, neither had Viv but she was cool and would never admit to it. The stress of the operation and surrounding horniness faded in the background when Gil stopped in front of his father. They had a code ready in case the operation succeeded, so Sangor could be seen ruling over the revelries without any break while still learning of his son’s fate.

“It is time for us to leave you, king. Thank you for your hospitality,” Viv started as planned.

By then, the number of empty bottles by Sangor’s side had reached a concerning amount. He grabbed the table with white knuckles, the emotions barely visible in a very distracting scenery.

"I see. I hope you and your guests had a pleasant time."

"We did, king," Sidjin said. "It was good for us to meet."

"Though we were apart for too long, our bond is one that cannot be broken," Gil said with a voice heavy with emotion.

For a moment, Viv thought the two might jump into each other's arms and ruin the plan and it would have almost been worth it.

"I... see," Sangor replied.

They awkwardly retreated towards the door. Revelers looked up to see her leave but soon returned to their current concerns. The Harrakans had come by three and now returned by three. Nothing interesting. A carriage led them to a small square on the way back to the embassy where visiting artists had erected a tent. Gil recognized one of Sangor's bodyguards as soon as he stepped out of the compartment.

"Erlyn?"

"Gil m'boy? It's really you!"

The two threw themselves into a hug and Viv saw that all was well. Sangor had it from then on. She could count on the old fox to manage it from here and she could also count on a defensive alliance. Gil would leave at dawn with a caravan of traveling performers, long before Maranor's temple could react in a way that maintained secrecy. After all, they wouldn't want the humiliation to spread too fast.

Viv had now accomplished all the objectives she'd fixed herself for this meeting. Her only objective now was to avoid catastrophes.

With that, they finally made their way home. She breathed out the anxiety of the night into her paramour's neck.

"Everything went admirably well," Sidjin replied, voice tight.

"Yeah."

"Unfortunately, I fear Sardanal's divine magic might have been more potent than I expected."

"I have never been more horny in my entire life."

They kissed passionately, finally relaxing after what was probably her most flawlessly executed operation. A bloody miracle. It had gone almost too well.

Was she forgetting something?

Maybe? But then Sidjin's calloused hand grabbed her thigh and she lost what was left of her patience.

Morning light filtered through the crimson stained glass of Maranor's temple

The high priest of Maranor stayed still so his subordinate wouldn't see the fury in his eyes, the shame and outrage twisting his features despite his best attempts at self-control. A disaster had befallen this hallowed ground. A humiliation. He had failed his goddess.

"Your Excellency, we detected weak brown mana residues near the southern bath house, but even this is..."

"What about the sewer wards?"

"Intact, Your Grace. No wards were breached, no physical damage was detected. It's... a complete mystery."

The head priest glared forward, towards the guardian golems even now wearing those silly buckets as hats. As far as they could tell, it was the only visible evidence the sanctum of Maranor had been desecrated and its valuable guest stolen. It was a boast. A slap to the face. Nay, it was a message.

"They want us to be afraid. They want us to know they can hit us and there is nothing we can do to fight back. We are being mocked, but this is not the last of it."

"Yes sir."

Despite his facade of confidence, the high priest had to press the fear clawing up his chest with a cold certainty. That assault on his keep was terrifying.

They were dealing with a terrifyingly competent opponent.