

“So, he is warning us.”

Viv stood in the council chamber of her palace with Enoria’s official letter in front of her. The room overlooked the deadlands and offered a perpetual background of roiling clouds above the distant, shambling shapes of revenants. It was not a pleasant view. She kept it that way on purpose.

People leaned over the nice parchment. It did look nice. It was polite, too.

“To Lady Viviane,

It shall be my honor to visit you in your territory on the fifteenth day of the month of seeding, along with my retinue.”

The rest was the typical signature and honorifics the Paramese nobles were fond of using in their correspondence. Viv immediately nodded a few important points. Meanwhile, Farren had an opinion.

“If he’s announcing a visit, he will not attack. The Temple of Neriad would consider this a grave violation of the sacred laws of negotiation. The presence of so many soldiers is a display of strength.”

“No,” Viv interrupted. “You cannot think that.”

“Pardon me?”

She pointed at the letter.

“Sangor never mentions Harrak or even Kazar. That means he doesn’t recognize us as a people. That’s one. Two, you cannot rely on rulers following treaties because everything is a question of cost and opportunity. If Sangor decides it is better to reabsorb us and face the consequences for years rather than let us exist, he will attack. And three, regardless of the likelihood of an actual attack, we cannot afford not to react in kind. If there is even a sliver of chance his army will strike us, we must be ready for it.”

Sidjin nodded in approval. Farren looked disappointed but not exactly combative.

“I concede your main point, which is that we must prepare for war regardless of Sangor’s intentions.”

“He might fabricate a casus belli,” Lady Azar added. “It has been done before, at least in Baran. Duke Sotti recently slew a récalcitrant baron at a party using the excuse of insubordination. He made penance, paying weregild to the man’s widows. He still regained control of the barony in the end because his actions were legally justified. We are not recognized by the Paramese alliance for now. Sangor can do with us as he pleases with only a slap on the wrist.”

“Right,” Viv said. “Then we are in agreement. I will meet him as he requests... with the army.”

“And the levies?”

“That won’t be needed.”

Lady Azar considered the question.

“The space before Sinur’s Gate would be a decent place for a meeting. It has room for all of their soldiers. It would also let them see our prosperity so that they speak of it when they return home. Kazar was always considered a frontier. Now, the deadlands have been pushed back.”

“We will do no such a thing. I’m not letting them take a single step on our land where they’ll get a chance to get rowdy. Never will we be at the mercy of a superior opponent if we can stop them before they can reach us. We will meet...”

She pointed at the halfway lake, the only safe stopping place on the path through the Deadshield Woods. Viv had split the teleport path in two there specifically to act as a sort of airlock, with one gate leading to Aneston in Enoria, and the other to Kazar.

“...there.”

“There is barely enough space for a couple hundred men!”

“Not to worry. I will make the room.”

Viv emerged from the witch gate into the depths of the woods, where one may lose themselves forever. Going from the expanse of tamed land to the pulsating, vivid heart of the forest disorientated her. Dense mana covered every tree, seeped through every crevice in their urge to make things grow. There was a life there that even dragons could not quench. There was death as well, death in the soil and in the claws of the many predators haunting the boughs. Towering copses surrounded the lake on all sides. The only signs of civilization were the black smears on the grass, remains of recent fires. Of the catastrophic damage the blaze drones had inflicted on this patch of land during Lancer’s attack, nothing was left. The Deadshield Woods stood eternal and the nations of men ought to be grateful it was content with what it had.

Sidjin emerged from the gate at her side, grumbling about witch magic and the lack of respect for traditional spellcasting. Arthur arrived a second later through her own portal because she wanted to show off.

“Right, darling. Only two days before they show up. How would you like to proceed?”

“First, we get some intimacy.”

Viv gestured and the far witch gate deactivated, the path closed until she decided otherwise.

She could simply stay like that. It was likely Sangor didn't have the material or supplies to cross the woods which had always been a perilous affair until Viv's generous contribution. But she wouldn't. Because it was not about being difficult. It was about sending a message.

"There, we won't be bothered until I say so. Second, we make space."

"And how would we do that?" the Red Mist of Glastia asked with a knowing smile.

"We burn it all down to the fucking ground."

'SQUEE!'

And so the terrible work began.

Tactical spells designed to turn companies into paste tore through majestic trunks and heavy branches with undeserving fury. Trees buckled. Rocks flew. Sometimes, unlucky harriens and colorful birds were caught, too stupid to understand the destruction coming for them. A rolling wave of force, fire, and death shredded through square kilometers of land without respite in a great din that sent the wildlife stampeding away to safety. At some point, Rakan came with his pupils and decided it was a great exercise. Abe also came with the ladies and decided that a cathartic exercise in deforestation was 'a refreshing task that unlimbered the legs and promoted the free expression of one's magical might in a safe environment'.

That turned out to be a little untrue when a mighty roar shook the very earth. A titanic being crashed through the undergrowth, a hunched creature covered in growths and rocks like a moving ridge. It glared at Viv from small beady eyes deeply embedded in a craggy face barely discernible from its surroundings. Lianas and stones floated around it, seeking a foe. Viv inspected it.

[Antalis Queen, dangerous, natural brown caster]

She looked angry.

"Did you expect we would attract such attention?" Sidjin asked without much concern.

"Expect? I was counting on it. I'll make you queen of my dinner, you legged knoll."

The Antalis queen was strong, yet against the combined power of Viv, Sidjin, Arthur, Abe, and Rakan, that strength did very little.

After they killed it, Viv stared at the hole she had dug in the creature's face. She had used the hyperbeam spell, the one that offered the best penetration at range. It had not quite killed the creature in a single hit.

The beast's fallen mass served as a reminder that it was just one of the many predators inhabiting the forest, and although they were deep, it was still nothing compared to the true heart far north of here. There would always be a bigger fish, but for now, they remained in control of the field.

The next part was much less fun so only Sidjin and Viv worked on it, and they did so for hours. Cutting and burning was all well and good. It would not create a flat space suitable to stand on. The eldritch wall spell proved to be a good alternative to brown mana in getting a flat, serviceable surface.

The two worked for the entire day, then through much of the night. Irao arrived the next morning confirming Sangor would arrive the day after, shortly before noon, along with his two thousand men.

"They have three hundred and twenty-six knights and six hundred and fifty-eight archers. I counted them myself."

"Thank you."

"You are welcome. I am leaving now. Goodbye."

"Take care!"

The timing would be fine. At dawn, Viv called for the army which was camping in the plains of Kazar. They showed up eager and excited. The deployment was made with a festive mood, even with a non-negligible risk of war. In fact, they seemed to be looking forward to it. Witchpact companies outdid each other with war paints while the heavies made sure their spear pennants were fluffy and clean for maximum floating-in-the-breeze effect. The best part was when Sidjin approached Viv with a nice chest.

"What is it? Ooooooh my old armor. Very — OH MY GODS THERE ARE TINY HOLES FOR MY WINGS!"

Not true wings.

"Hush you. Sidjin, thank you so much. I was just thinking that I have returned to my normal height. Excellent. I'm never pulling the wings back in again. It's just so comfortable to have them hanging around."

"You do enjoy things that hang around."

"Silence," Viv hissed. "Not in front of the child."

I know what mating is.

"They grow up so fast. Anyway. Let me put this on."

Viv's old armor was half enchanted robe and half fashion statement. The enchantments were made of silverite, the second half of what she'd gotten from Solfis' hangar. It was very precious and the work of Helock's best tailors. Between this and her skinsuit, she felt properly dressed.

"Maybe I should buy enchanted boots."

Boots are stupid. Feet are stupid.

"Maybe I'll make them out of insolent white dragon scales."

Noooooooooo!

Sangor hated the 'witch gates'. He hated them because they'd popped on his land without his knowledge or approval. He hated them because they made such things as borders, forts, and logistics less relevant. Mostly, he hated them because they were a powerful tool in a rival as unpredictable as she was frustrating.

And now he would have to use one.

The strange circle lit up when Yrlin of the Thorns touched it. His paramour gave him a smile that showed her canines, her usual, before stepping in along with a detachment of knights. She returned a moment later.

"It's working. Oh, and she's expecting us. Try not to let it get to you, hmm? We do not want to gawp in front of the social climber."

Sangor could read between the lines.

"Captain, stay here and make sure the men understand they are carrying the dignity of Enoira as they go through the gate. We will be deploying in defensive formation against infantry. I expect the highest standards of professionalism."

"Understood, sir."

Sangor had brought some of his best along with capital troops from the south, in theory loyal but untested as they were on the other side during the war. Besides Yrlin, the only high-ranking member of his retinue was Erwin Milderry, from Green Edge, who had insisted on coming to see how 'that ballsy young witch' was doing. He offered a nice counterpart to Bishop Renowho had the the privilege of being the representative of the Church of Maranor and the highest-ranking asshole Sangor couldn't afford to have publicly flogged. At least, the witch gates would make the trip shorter. Silver linings.

Sangor breathed in when nobody could see him, then he walked through.

The feeling was disorienting but brief and he soon found himself in the middle of the Deadshield Woods' path to the Old Empire.

Despite warnings, it was all he could do not to appear affected. His leadership guided him into the appearance of a confident sovereign riding down the slope on a mighty warhorse, barded in armor. The very symbol of Enoria. Elite knights surrounded him as he took in the surroundings.

It was a vision of the apocalypse.

Where he expected a maze of trees and leaves, the land was flat for hundreds of paces in every direction, broken, ravaged. Black smoke rose through the late spring air in ominous columns where the fires had not yet died. The ground was dark and twisted, flat, tamed and clawed by powerful destructive magic. It was a display of destructive power that should have cost enough mana to raise a fortress and they'd done it as a warning. And in the middle of all that devastation stood the Harrakan army, and he knew, in this moment, that he would not take the deadlands by force.

Rows of heavy infantry in black armor stood in grim formations, white pennants floating in the wind the only signs they were not statues. Masses of crossbowmen and... yes, those were women, grinned at them from behind the lines or from the top of earth barricades built with magic, their features hidden behind morbid face paints like southern savages. War machines occupied the back ranks and the core of the formation. All and all, over a thousand five hundred combatants waited in well-prepared positions, slightly up the slope. They watched the Enorians line up on the plains and they seemed... eager. Eager and amused. He inspected them to confirm what his instincts told him.

An old woman with a goofy smile.

[Bitter Heart Markswoman]

A skull-faced girl with a massive crossbow decorated with silver patterns.

[Elder Sister of the Eye]

A bearded man with scars and a two-handed longsword on his back.

[Hightree Heavy Linebreaker]

They already had military traditions. Neriad's bollocks, that wasn't bad for such a short time. Out of curiosity, he concentrated on the war machines.

[Shrill catapult, fire wasps]

What the fuck?

Just as he focused on another, a shape in a black cloak appeared out of nowhere near his target. It was a bald man with strange yellow eyes and an axe on his back. The man glared

at him, made a throat-slitting gesture, then disappeared again. A Hadal. The reports were true.

Right, no more inspections.

The witch was waiting for them.

In the middle of the clearing, someone had erected a large tent. A group of knights in black armor formed a half-circle around it as was tradition in negotiations. The witch was waiting for him on a comfortable, slightly saggy couch along with a few people he didn't recognize. There was a northerner in mage garb, a severe Baranese woman with prim gray hair, the horrendous bone golem, and the young dragon who had, and he had to double check, golden ribbons on her black horns. The witch waved when he looked. She was one of three people who actually moved out of the hundreds of glaring people. The second was a stout lad cutting meat out of the belly of a colossal dead beast sporting wounds that would have destroyed a fortress gate. The last one was one of the ugliest women he had ever seen. She was grilling meat skewers, fanning them and rubbing them with oil. He had to compose himself not to be taken aback by the outrageous display.

"The hills behind us are trapped with black mana constructs," Yrlin chuckled. "Do try not to aggravate her too much?"

"Can you disarm them?"

"Yes but she will feel it and it will be an act of war. The man by her side is the fallen prince of Glastia, Sidjin the Red Mist."

Right. Do not provoke the witch. Easy.

As he approached, he noted the more alien elements of her appearance. The armor already set the tone but the monstrous eyes and shadow limbs confirmed she was now an elemental archmage of the black color. The first in recorded history. It didn't take a mage to feel the power radiating from her, even at a distance. He watched those emerald circles in her black sclera and felt an alien amusement, an intellect both unhinged and soaked in the otherworldly knowledge she spread around like a peasant spreads seed, eager to see what would take root.

A cynical part of him harped on that he should have killed her when he'd met her, that outlanders were always a mess. He had not, because he had not risen to power by killing the unknown. He had harnessed it. She had been... less important at that time. He had been on the verge of triumph with Tarano trapped like a rat in Green Hedge. There was no reason for him to care about her anymore when he had finished a war that had started while he was just a child. Now... some things had changed. None for the best.

The witch didn't stand up to receive him, though she smiled invitingly as she gestured to the seats. The ugly old woman brought another two from somewhere behind the ranks of black-clad knights. Sangor recognized Rollo, a famed Baranese champion renowned for his

jousting prowess as well as his love for another man. Truly, Harrak had embraced different norms.

“Welcome, welcome. Take a seat, all of you. Thank you, Gogen. Nice to see you again Milderry! We started on the skewers before you arrived. They’re best when hot. Tea?”

“With pleasure,” Sangor replied.

It would be rude to refuse. It would also play in her favor. He sat on a straight-backed chair of decent enough make since it didn’t groan under the weight of his armor. Yrlin sat daintily by her side, hand caressing her pregnant belly. Milderry crashed in his seat with a roaring laughter while Bishop Reno refused the invitation altogether.

Sangor expected it. Maranor favored power and until she was recognized, she would remain a traitor and a revolutionary in Her eyes. Of course, all the witch had to do was welcome the clergy of the Goddess of Power in her domain but so far, she’d neglected to do so.

The witch glared at the bishop, a reptilian gaze that said nothing. She picked a skewer and bit it, teeth digging in the juicy flesh of an apex monster. Now, she was seated and comfortable and eating in front of a man who remained at parade rest, an insult and a show of control. The bishop bristled. Sangor felt like sighing. The clergyman was reaping the consequences of his decision.

Sometimes, dogma went in the way of situational intelligence, he observed.

“Antalis Queen! It is good for me, beloved,” Yrlin said.

A breach of protocol. The two women were thoroughly enjoying themselves needling the poor bishop and Sangor’s own patience.

“Have some more!”

The Gogen woman placed a large platter in front of the dragon, who picked a nice piece of meat on a stick between two delicate talons. Serrated rows of fangs that could bite through plate armor closed on it while the creature fixed her crimson, malevolent gaze on the bishop.

Alright, that was enough.

“Thank you for having me here. I believe this meeting was long overdue. This is my paramour and archwitch of the thorns, Yrlin.”

“We had the pleasure of meeting back in Green Hedge after you freed me. Congratulations are in order, I assume?”

“Thank you,” Yrlin replied. “And I see you still follow the Path of the Sun with... a lot of enthusiasm.”

“That was the war witch tradition, yes? I suppose I do then. On my side, please meet Baroness Azar, my chancellor.”

The prim lady nodded, her eyes calculating. Sangor knew who Azar was because she represented everything Enorians disliked about the old guard: smooth and cunning pursuit of power for its own sake. He had no idea what the witch had promised to get this career dire viper slithering in her bosom but he hoped it wasn't worth it.

“And this is Edwin Milderry, Duke of Green Edge.”

“That's some good meat! If you ever want to retire from the evil overlord gig, I have a position as a monster hunter available.”

“Oh, there is only enough room in Green Edge for one monster hunter. It's good to see you again.”

“Hah! And no matter what the others say, nice going with Tarano. That overinflated ego had a good twatting coming, he did.”

Sangor listened to the song of Bishop Reno's teeth grinding against each other.

“And here is Bishop Reno, of the Church of Maranor.”

“This is my daughter, She-Who-Feasts-on-Many-and-Creates-Much-Wealth. You know Solfis. And this is Sidjin, archmage and advisor. And my paramour.”

“Her name really is that long?” Yrlin asked with some curiosity, yet another breach of protocol.

My claws are very long as well.

And my fire is very hot.

“My apologies, I did not mean to criticize.”

“Could we have some intimacy?” Sangor interrupted.

“Of course,” the witch replied.

She waved and the air changed in quality. The sound of the wind died down. They could speak freely. Well, mostly freely.

“Let me get to the point. You have placed portals on my lands. This is a violation of my sovereignty and is therefore entirely unacceptable. You will cease.”

He gave her a pointed look. She shrugged.

“My safety was at risk. But sure, no problem.”

That told Sangor a few things. Either the witch didn't intend to travel north again or she had ways to travel that didn't need portals or she was confident she could hide them. Or any combination of the three, really. This was going to be a long day.

"Speaking of portals, General Jaratalassi suggested that I could create a network between our land and the Baranese frontier for the fast transfer of troops."

"You have been invited to the Paramese alliance?" Sangor asked with disbelief.

"Yes. Jaratalassi requested reinforcements within the next few months. He has... concerns."

"He always has concerns. How do you know old Steel Trap?"

"He was my teacher at the Academy and I served under him during the last Halurian incursion."

"I see. I was under the impression the incursion was repulsed."

"Jaratalassi expressed doubts on account of the fact that only a single warlord attacked us."

"Hmmm."

Sangor considered his options. The witch casually dropped significant pieces of information as if she didn't know what they implied. The Paramese alliance was a loosely aligned gathering of nations tasked with fighting off the Halurians with one implicit clause: if a member of the alliance was actively fighting on the frontier, the others would stop any conflict for the duration of the participation. Truces were not strictly enforced but violators would see themselves barred out of international agreements, not to mention attracting the ire of Neriad. The Righteous god seldom expressed his anger. When he did...

If Sangor pushed too hard, the witch could appeal to Baran through her pet court animal. It would be a disaster.

"Perhaps an arrangement can be made," Lady Azar suggested. "Witch gates can be used by anyone and they can be easily maintained if Her Grace has access to them. Witch gate networks can be extremely profitable for trade since they allow the travelers to save weeks of transit, not to mention less risk. Moreover, any mage can activate one. I am certain a man of your talent would see the remarkable potential of a new means of transport."

The bishop took a deep breath. The man could feel when power changed hands. That offer was of tremendous value, and the implications were significant. Yrlin warned him that it took an understanding of reality only few could grasp to replicate the spell. So far, only she and Sidjin could build such gates. It gave them an enormous bargaining chip.

It also meant that the first sovereigns to bow to the Harrakan witch would gain an enormous advantage at the cost of submission to what was essentially a monopoly on cheap logistics.

Sangor considered the question. Enoria's mage corps was decimated. It would take decades to rebuild it. Meanwhile, the northern province already boasted an active gate system.

He had little choice in the matter.

"I assume you have conditions."

"We would be interested in a trade agreement, a fair bargain, I assure you. Here are the terms," Lady Azar said, and she passed him a sheet.

Those were lists of approved goods as well as tariffs. The gates would cost twenty-five gold talents a season per gate to maintain with rebates in case the witch used it for her own purposes, such as by moving her army. He would, of course, collect a toll on anyone trying to use the gate which meant merchants would bleed money into his pockets for several times the amount the witch was asking for. It was a fantastic deal that would make both sides rich.

He still nitpicked on the price of precious metals because he could not afford to agree on the spot. The bishop grumbled.

"Sir, I would advise against... premature decisions. With this..."

Pain in his fucking ass.

Sangor didn't have to intervene, which he was still reluctant to do. Instead, the bone abomination everyone called a war golem but Sangor suspected was just a little bit more than that surged to its feet. Deployed, the creature was a gaunt, twisted entity taller than the tallest man with fingers ending in sharp knives. A voice like a snarl emerged from the engraved skull.

//Diplomatic immunity does not cover clear insults.

//Watch your tongue.

//Or I will extract it from your broken jaws.

For an instant, the dichotomy between the polite gathering and the presence of the golem became too much to bear for his fraying composure. A voice screamed in his mind that out of the five 'people' facing him, only Lady Azar and Sidjin were technically human. The witch's upsetting eyes and strange shoulder blades demonstrated that the rest of her features were just a mask. He could feel the mage control sphere, the space around them where they could control mana with as much ease as within their bodies, from across the table. And all of this was only the second most powerful tool in her arsenal.

The most powerful tool was how normal she made it seem.

And she didn't realize it.

Rollo, a knight who could have found employment anywhere in the northern cities stood guard while Sidjin, one of the continent's best war mages, lounged comfortably in his seat. They were calm. And that was crazy, absolutely insane to him. For decades, Kazar had been

a dot on the map, and afternote in books on the deadlands. And now an army of several different races using long-dead techniques and war machines the likes of which Param had never seen assaulted the deadlands for its plunder, pushing the curse back and turning the liberated soil into farms. All of that under the rule of an outlander elemental who might just be a little insane, whose ideas challenged everything they believed about governance. And they didn't question it. They didn't question how implausible this all was, and how if he'd not seen it with his bare eyes, he would never have believed. More than ten thousand refugees had crossed the forest in the past year alone and still more waited in Anelton for the witch gates to clear again. And some of those people could vote for actual representatives and those representatives themselves voted on things like taxes and this was accepted by her. It was actually a thing that they believed in and it worked and this was absolutely, completely out of this world. A dragon was the bloody heir to the bloody throne! What was next? Merl soldiers? Kark? A dragon minister? He didn't know and he was afraid that this was all. Absolutely. Possible.

Suddenly, Sangor just wanted to go back home to Losserec and leave the witch problem to someone else.

Viv watched the group of four debating the merits of Lady Azar's sweet, sweet trap. Sangor seemed intrigued. Yrlin looked over his shoulder, skimming over the list while a hand remained protectively over her belly. The bishop still seethed in his armor while Milderry gobbled more meat, obviously bored out of his mind. She took another bite as well, the delicious juice titillating her palate.

She was feeling great.

They were falling for one of the oldest tricks in the book.

She would simply make it far too costly for others to invade her.

If Enoria had a trade network that relied on her, older means of transportation like caravans would disappear due to a lack of profitability. Resources would be transferred elsewhere. Caravan hands would operate in smaller groups. Maybe guards would transfer somewhere else. And then, attacking her would mean that the network would fall into disrepair when the spell inevitably weakened. That would paralyze the entire Enorian trade industry for at least a while, until they rebuilt the caravan network. Add that to her improving army and the alliance and she was becoming too painful to erase.

Her attention returned to Bishop Reno. He was still glaring daggers at her. And testing her patience.

"The clergy of Maranor doesn't hold you in great esteem," Sangor said without looking.

"Why? Is it because I've killed some of your priests? Don't take it personally, I've killed a lot of priests. From Gomogog, Octas, Efestar, you name it."

The Bishop was now on the verge of apoplexy. Viv had only named dark gods.

“And Neriad,” Sangor added drily.

Viv and Solfis replied in unison.

“He perished in the mine and the cause of death was determined to be mole monsters.”
//Her perished in the mine and the cause of death was determined to be mole monsters.

“Squee.”

“YOU HEATHENS!”

“What the esteemed bishop means is that you have caused considerable damage to the cause by slaying champions that Maranor held in high regard,” Sangor added.

“During a negotiation,” the bishop forced out between gritted teeth.

Viv got a very strong feeling about the whole interaction.

And that strong feeling was that Sangor didn't want to be here. The only person who apparently wanted to be here was the bishop. It was an interesting tidbit. Most of the time, someone sympathizing with her didn't mean they would actually act on those sympathies. It was up to her to exploit this opportunity.

“This arrangement seems profitable to us both, especially if the Baranese agree.”

“I have an unofficial agreement with them to do so.”

“I agree in theory though I will only sign tomorrow after I have had time to consider the question.”

“Would you consider attending my coronation as well? It will happen very soon.”

“Not a chance,” Sangor replied with a pointed look while the Bishop reflexively flexed his blade hand.

Viv knew this was a tall order but she'd hoped.

“To be perfectly honest, we will only recognize you as an independent entity if we are the last ones in the continent to do so. No amount of money or teleportation will convince the wounded pride of my more conservative supporters. The humiliation that came with the deaths of Lancer and Tarano still lingers. I already shove arrows into invasion proposals every month. Do not push your luck.”

“The gates might turn opinions in your favor,” Yrlin said. “Walking can be so tedious. Especially for me!”

“The opinion of goodmothers might not sway the entire land,” Sangor told her in a tactful, low voice.

“Well my goodmother opinion better sway yours,” the archwitch of thorns replied.

Viv waited while Sangor came to the painful realization he’d walked right into that one.

“Hm. I don’t suppose you would be interested in a reunification?” he finally said though it was clear he didn’t believe it could be done.

“Is this a marriage proposal?” Viv asked. “Just kidding. Please do not look at me like that, Yrlin, I am not poaching.”

“Oh I would refuse it myself even if the nobles could tolerate a witch on the throne. The expectations they have of their wives! Dreadful.”

“Just so, though I anticipated you might ask and so I have prepared a little something.”

Viv gestured for Lady Azar to give them a sheaf of paper. The old baroness had a twinkle in her eyes that Viv knew she shared. Sangor read the first lines with much curiosity before his face fell into an expression of tired suffering. He passed the document to Milderry who went into a full belly laugh.

“The condition under which Enoria will be allowed to rejoin the Harrakan Empire,” he finally forced between two chuckles.

The discussion went on for a while after that though the tone was more casual. They smoothed a few aspects of the agreement, then Sangor requested a particularly heinous criminal to be turned over which Viv agreed on provided the clergy of Neriad determined he was guilty. The King of Enoria left shortly after, taking great care to help his paramour stand up. Milderry complained that they couldn’t stay for dinner until Viv invited him for a visit any time he wanted. The Enorian expedition left the plain over the following hour. The Harrakans watched them leave with various degrees of satisfaction.

“I believe much better terms could have been agreed upon with better knowledge of Sangor’s situation. We must consider a spy network with all haste,” Lady Azar noted, thoughtful.

“It went pretty well,” Viv replied.

“Is that so?”

“Nobody died. Therefore, it went pretty well.”

Sidjin stood up at that.

“Having seen Viv in action, I regretfully say that I find this statement accurate. Viv darling, will I get points for helping you stand up?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then allow me to carry this situation using other means.”

With an amused smile, Sidjin picked up a rolled parchment from Yrlin’s seat. He unfolded it with great care before presenting its contents to the Ascender.

“Please meet us in Arleton tonight around midnight, behind the blacksmith shop. Be discreet.”

“Aha, looks like we might get better terms after all,” Viv said.

The last of the Enorian knights crossed the portal which closed without issue. A great clamor rose from the ranks of the Harrakan army. Screams, jeers, and the ululating taunt of the witchpacts filled the smoky air with vindictive merriment.

“See? They agree with me,” Viv continued. “It went very well.”

The portal popped and Viv took a deep breath. A week on foot crossed in an instant. Above them, the stars were clear while it had been cloudy in the forest. The air smelled different and the mana was much weaker. Solfis stopped by her side.

//We have arrived.

“Who are you? Oh, Lady Viv?” one of two sentinels asked, spears extended.

Viv sighed and raised a hand.

“I solemnly swear I harbor no ill intentions and do not intend to harm anyone in anyway during my visit tonight.”

With her other hand, she grabbed for a purse and removed a few silver bits.

“I’ll also make it worth your while if you keep my visit to yourself.”

“You are trying to bribe us?” the first guard asked, passably offended.

“I am trying to compensate you for something you’ll do no matter what,” Viv replied with a pointed gaze.

The second guard elbowed the first.

“For the love of Sardanal, shut the fuck up and take the money because her next argument’s gonna be the golem.”

//Very astute.

“Right. You can go, we won’t tell. Just... don’t mess things up, alright?”

“Naturally.”

Viv cloaked in mana infused with the shadow meaning. She and Solfis raced to the palissade surrounding a newly rebuilt Anelton with good speed. They stopped at a section of wall between two sleepy sentries and scaled it, and by that, Viv meant that she grabbed onto Solfis and he crawled up like the world deadliest centipede. The two dropped down behind the inn and moved up before a drunk patron might come across them on his way to the loo. Like two skulking shadows, they jumped over fences, scaring the occasional dog.

“I feel very naughty about the whole thing.”

//It better not be sexual.

“Why is everything always leading back to sex with you?”

The golem only growled in reply and Viv enjoyed that rare and fugacious ‘gotcha’ until they reached their destination. The back of the smith’s house was empty, crates piled up on dying grass. Viv immediately noticed the mana exuding from a nearby shed. She dropped her own spell first.

“We’re here. Come out.”

The shed fell apart, the wood turning into spiked branche before being absorbed back into the earth. Viv had to admit, it was a neat trick that required excellent control. Sangor and Yrlin stood in the clearing, looking a little red. Sangor cleared his throat.

“Right. Yes. No one knows we are here so let’s make this short. About fifteen years ago, I married my first wife and we had a child together back when I was but a squire in the duke’s army.”

“Okay?” Viv said, slightly taken aback.

“My wife died in a southern raid. I sent my son to Mornyr, the City of the Gods in the north, to be apprenticed in the temple of Maranor. He has not come back yet. All my inquiries return that he wants to dedicate himself to the order. His letters speak of my need to comply with the scriptures.”

“Ah shit.”

“You see where I am going with this. He is my heir and my son. So long as he is their ‘guest’, I am at their mercy. I have pushed back as much as I dared but in the end, it cannot last. We need to get him out of there.”

“We?”

“I am under surveillance by an old and powerful order, one with a vested interest in the fate of Enoria. My nation has always worshiped Maranor before every other god but the latest developments have shaken that faith. The temple is doubling down. If you do want a peaceful eastern border, you will give me a hand.”

“I... I will consider it. After the war with Haluria.”

“If it happens, you will be called to Mornyr for the next Paramese Alliance meeting.”

“I am not opposed to helping you. It just might be... unfeasible. Your son is probably indoctrinated.”

Sangor wordlessly took a folded letter from his coat’s breast pocket, opening it with great care. Viv had a look. Several letters were circled and she noticed they were all slightly thicker than the others as if the ink was deeper. Together, they formed a single word.

Help.

“Well, I’m in. But you will recognize Harrak.”

“Done. Hell, I’ll give you a formal defensive alliance. Just... be careful. The Church of Maranor is moving. There are even reports that Oleander still lives in the Shadowlands.”

“Oleander? The traveler who reached Harrak?”

“Yes, him. He’s a living legend. He’s also Maranor’s greatest living champion. If he ever returns to this continent, you will have your work cut out for you.”

“One calamity at a time, please.”

“This might not happen for a very long time. Just be aware that you will need more than your current army if you want to survive. I am extending a hand in friendship. Please, do not bite it.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll save your son. And then you can finally return to Harrak in a glorious union.”

Sangor was still groaning when Viv jumped the fence.