

"I leave here," Cernit explained.

Solfis translated the words of the knight. The Church base was further east, so he still had to ride some distance and going through the city would lengthen his stay. She would be fine as long as she behaved and presented the mercenary license he had prepared to the gate guard. Then, she could find employment as a mercenary or just move on with the money she already had, which should really last her a while.

"Will Solfis' presence create problems? With his appearance."

"No, the inspection skill shows him as a golem. While golems are rare and valuable, he will look more like a knowledge repository than a combat model, so you should be fine with the local populace. The guard will know what it is, however, but they have no reason to stop you. Just be careful and make sure to keep him charged in case thieves get any ideas. I would still advise you to make contact with the local church. Their support will guarantee your safety. The letter I wrote will make sure they appreciate how much you contributed to our success."

Fighting evil. Nice.

"We would have died without you," the knight stated.

Then came the awkward moment she feared.

"So, this is goodbye?"

"Yes, Bib, this is goodbye. May we meet again in better circumstances. Know that Baran will know of your heroic actions. If you find yourself in our lands, come and greet me or my fellow knights. There are worse causes than ours to raise your flag for."

"And good luck to you too, Cernit. I hope we meet again."

She stared in silence at the knight's retreating back. With the sled decoupled, he could now move much faster which he did. A part of her wondered if he had prepared a trap, if he had given her fake documents that would see her imprisoned and left to report her to authorities or something. She dismissed those thoughts immediately. She was a rather good judge of character, and this human from another world was as straight an arrow as they came. Or perhaps she was the human from another world. Bah, it didn't matter.

Viv huffed and grabbed the ropes which she tied around her torso.

"Back to it, I guess."

The trip was slow. She went downhill in a friendly environment where monsters were not trying to eat her eyeballs, and yet it became by far the most physically harrowing part of her trip, stamina-wise. She had to stop every hundred meters or so to take a few deep breaths. There was a slight wind that sent her short aflutter. It carried the scent of sap and wet earth. In the distance, animals sort of moaned as they were released from a barn and into an enclosure. A man in a grey shirt tilled his field a distance away, and would sometimes stand up and look at her distant form before getting back to his task. She felt strange. Detached. At some point, she realized that a pair of men carrying crates were following her at a long distance. They would stop when she stopped.

She reached the gates after an hour.

Fields surrounded her on all sides by then, with cottages seeded here and there. The city's walls were twice her size and covered in white plaster, with no sentinels that she could spot. The gates themselves sat at the top of a small incline that a city car would not have minded, but proved to be a pain in her ass for her. There were five guards manning it, who let a woman loaded with basket pass before they turned attention to her. Their eyes went wide.

Just like the knights, those guys had a greenish tint to their faces, though it was not as pronounced. Their skins were lighter as well. She would associate their features with Southern Europeans mixed with Incas or something. Again, it was weird. They looked like they belonged to the same ethnic group as the Baranese, more or less, and that meant that she stuck out like a sore thumb. They wore undyed leather jerkins inscribed with a shield sporting a tree on it over off-white shirts. Their helmets were steel and reminded her of conquistador morions with a neck guard as well. They carried spears and shields, as well as truncheons attached to their belts. Only one had a bow. No arrows were nocked, for now.

One of the guards had a large beard and a small red plume on his breast. He licked his lips nervously while the others, who all looked sixteen if they were a day, deferred to him in the typical 'above my paygrade' grunt reaction.

[Kazaran guard, not very dangerous. Follows a path concerned with keeping the peace]

[Kazaran guard sergeant, not very dangerous. Follows a path concerned with keeping the peace.]

First thing first, look mostly harmless.

She stopped and spread her arms in a gesture of 'I'm not here to kill you, at least, not yet,' which she hoped was convincing enough. She took down her backpack, and found the mercenary accreditation Cernit had given her. She waved it under their collective nose like it was a flag or something. The sergeant was sweating profusely by that time, but he nodded slowly and approached the sled.

“Something something Kazar, me guard sergeant Elimi, please something something identity and purpose.”

Wow, she could almost understand him. She guessed that, with the Harrakan heartlands so close, the local language was deeply rooted in Old Imperial.

“I am Viviane,” she slowly said, “I am looking for the office of the Church of Neriad.”

That felt safer than saying ‘I’m here for beer and hookers’ or any variation thereof.

The man in front of her blinked, and she raised a brow in answer, crossing her arms. Better not look too much like a victim either.

The sergeant inspected the sled.

“Squee!”

His jaw unhinged.

**//What are you looking at, meat?**

She could probably shove a whole egg in his mouth right now. The man took a few steps back and raised an open hand in the universal ‘hold on please’ signal. She took a step back. See? Harmless.

The sergeant turned and ordered one of the recruits to do something. The little scrub took off at a run, probably to get reinforcements.

Fucking hell, that was not a great start.

Viv took another step back and sat heavily on the sled’s front. Two tiny clawed hands went to rest on her left shoulder as Arthur’s intense red gaze inspected the gate. The dragonling huffed, then she bonked Viv’s head with her own very lightly and pointed at the green wall of the forest some distance away.

“Later. Viv tired,” her human answered laconically.

The small creature cocked her head in a gesture that Viv could have sworn she had never done before. It was strangely human. Or dog-like, she guessed. Viv pointed to herself, then mimicked eating and sleeping.

Arthur chuffed again and returned to her nest.

“Negotiations successful, I guess,” Viv muttered.

Meanwhile, the sergeant had gathered enough courage to talk again.

“Speak our language?”

“I speak Old Imperial.”

The man nodded. He started to speak in single words that Viv could understand, on account of being close or identical to Old Imperial.

“Name Viviane, purpose Church of Neriad. Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Drake dangerous?”

That was not a drake, that was a dragonling. Did Arthur have something to mess with inspection? She tried to remember the bestiary and realized that drakeling and dragonling were extremely close in terms of spelling. Oh, well.

“Drake not dangerous if left alone.”

“Sorry...”

“If drake angry, drake dangerous. Drake not angry, drake not dangerous. Yes?”

“Yes. Fine. Good.”

“Can get in?”

That made the sergeant panic a bit. He took his most diplomatic air, which made him look constipated, and explained with a small voice and a fake smile.

“Bibiane caster. Caster greeted by important person, yes? After, Bibane can get in. No entrance fee for church person,” he said, pointing at the folded document in her hand.

Well, that was fine.

“Yes. I wait.”

“Thank you.”

The sergeant screamed something and another guard ran into the city, but he came back thirty seconds later holding a terracotta glass filled with fuming liquid.

“Klod,” the sergeant generously offered.

Well, fuck you too. She grabbed the Klod with a polite smile and smelled it. It was a sort of cereal-based infusion. It smelled good.

Viv sat back more relaxedly and glanced up. The silence here was different from the silence of the deadlands. There was still wind, even now caressing her cheeks and uncovered neck. It whistled through the branches of the nearby trees, some of whom were sporting their first green buds as spring approached. The smell of her hot beverage now covered that of nature and the light stench of locker room that the guards emitted. After the mounds of smoldering corpses, that little stink did not bother her anymore.

It smelled nice.

In fact, it was the first time that it genuinely smelled nice since she arrived here. Even the Cassian springs had been more odorless than anything else. Silence and a pleasant smell. So weird, after so long. So much death. The monsters. The very air turning her veins dark and her body weak.

She took a sip and let the warm liquid rinse her palate. The taste was light and earthy.

She stayed like that for a few minutes, the light wind drying the small sheen of sweat the past hour had created. It made her feel cold despite the skinsuit. On a hunch, she called her interface. She had not done so in a while.

Current status:

- Deep fatigue
- Mana poisoning (very mild)
- Soul trauma (serious)

Yeah, she was tired. Needed a break.

Not five fucking seconds later, a woman emerged from the gates.

Like the guards, she wore a leather jerkin. The blade to her side was clearly of superior quality, however, and she was clean, with her dark brown hair held in a sensible ponytail that popped out of the back of her helmet. She immediately zeroed on Viv.

[Investigator, dangerous, follows a path concerned with ferreting out the truth.]

So she would get the interrogation that Cernit had tried to spare her.

The woman stopped at a polite distance and bowed deeply. She was smiling, but her eyes were not.

The sergeant mentioned something about Old Imperial and the woman nodded, cleared her throat, and addressed Viv.

“Ahem, greetings, caster, and welcome to the city of Kazar. I am prime investigator Tars. We do not often get visiting mages here, especially not one with such a, ah, an interesting baggage so to speak. Would you mind answering a few questions? Nothing too intrusive I assure you,” she continued.

Viv was used to protocols and whatnot. If casters were truly dangerous, it made sense to check them out before they entered your city. Besides, if she didn't tolerate arbitrary bullshit, she would have never joined the army.

“Yeah, fine. I understand. Here?”

“Would you care to join me in the guardhouse? It would be more comfortable than here. Good sergeant Elimi will keep an eye on your belongings and your... drake?”

“Sure. Yeah. Let's go.”

She stood up heavily and felt short of breath. The sergeant came and put her harness around his shoulders while the woman offered to take her accreditation. They moved in with Viv trying not to spill her glass.

The insides of the city were not exactly a surprise. A road made of packed earth led inward, disappearing in a corner. Two large structures lined the gates on both sides, all in the same white as the walls themselves. She could spot the wings of a windmill in the distance, as well as a tower at the top of the hill and the crown of a large tree just by it. They moved immediately left in what she assumed was a guard house.

“I wait here,” the sergeant informed her as he pushed her sled against the wall under the vigilant gaze of Arthur. The tiny creature was getting more used to humans, it seemed.

Viv followed the investigator into the shadows.

The interior of the guardhouse contained an actual lobby complete with a desk and a mousy man with a large moustache calculating stuff on an actual abacus. Or at least it looked like that to her. He blinked at her sight, then answered a request from the investigator who handed him

her mercenary accreditation. The man sighed heavily and took out a blank piece of paper from a drawer.

The other woman led Viv to a side door and into something that was clearly an office. There was a desk with an honest-to-God potted plant on it. As expected, it was not looking fresh. She also noticed several trinkets, like a bracelet with wood pearls on it. She collapsed in the guest chair.

“Sorry for the trouble. I will ask the questions and then leave you in peace. You must be impatient to find a place to rest.”

“Indeed.”

Viv appreciated the good cop routine, even if it was all bullshit to push her to lower her defense. She considered what she should reveal, and decided that she would stick with the teleportation incident story while hiding that she was an outlander. She did not want to attract even more attention to herself.

“Where are you from? Your, ah, features are not local.”

Well she did not look like she got part of her energy from photosynthesis, that was damn sure.

“France. A very distant land.”

“How did you get here then?”

“Teleportation accident, as far as I can tell. I woke up in the deadlands.”

Something flashed in the Prime Investigator’s eyes. Viv would not tell a falsehood. As a daughter of a politician, she knew how to use truth to mislead and manipulate. You just had to carefully curate it.

“You woke up in the deadlands and managed to survive?” the woman exclaimed, impressed.

“My black affinity is very high. It allowed me to survive long enough to be found by lieutenant Cernit. The one who hired me as a mercenary.”

“Oh yes, your authentication document. A good thing that he gave you that. It will make our paperwork much easier. Next question, then, do you intend to pursue criminal activities in Kazar?”

Silence. Heavy, awkward silence.

“Seriously?”

“Please just answer the question, lady caster.”

“No I do not intend to break any law.”

“Excellent! Thank you. Do you currently harbor any grudges towards residents of Kazar?”

“I don’t even fucking know who lives here.”

“Right! First time on Param, haha. Right. Sorry. Do you, ah, practice necromancy?”

“No.”

“Good. Great! That’s all of it. Would you like to stay and finish your klod? I’ll check to see if your entry papers are ready, then you can be on your way. Ah, but maybe the guard captain will want to meet with you at some point. We only have one another caster here, you see? Despite the proximity with the deadlands. Anyway, I’m going.”

Viv nodded in silence and drank more of her stuff, then she sat down in her seat and relaxed. Even if the guards tried something, Solfis still had a minute of battery. He would paste the bastards.

She closed her eyes.

Tars walked out of the room and recalled what she had seen.

[Black Witch, very dangerous.

Smart, killer, undead bane, on the rise, occulted,

Condition: exhausted, poisoned, soul wound]

That was the weirdest bird ever to enter the city, even with mercenaries and mages and Church champions occasionally coming in from their deployments for a little recreation. There was more than enough there to justify caution. Smart was strange for a witch, whose reliance on intuition when casting meant that they usually forewent traditional education. It was the path of wild talents. That was the first anomaly. The woman had skill, but she was not wild. Far too



composed. She was not nervous, just guarded, like someone who had experience with handling official enquiries. She even showed that small pause before answering, the one that some people used when they took the time to articulate or check their answers.

That was another.

Killer meant that she had personally taken human lives. Again, nothing necessarily sinister, but it did warrant caution.

Occulted happened when something blocked her advanced inspection skill. There would be a sense of being blocked, of her usual magic not functioning to its full ability. There could be many causes. One more weird detail to add to the pile.

Her story was a weird one too. And she was clearly a foreigner. Tars had never seen eyes that color. Perhaps they were glamoured to look different?

And what was it with the golem construct and the tiny drake? A tamer as well?

Also, teleportation. It was legendary magic that only happened in popular stories, or tales of faraway land and mighty old magic.

She shook her head, it did not matter. The woman had been truthful, so she had no reason to go and annoy the tired spellcaster for free. A wounded soul clearly required serious treatment.

She would make a report but let the woman go. Let the sleeping dreadhounds lie.

“Are you done yet? That caster is gonna fall asleep on my desk,” she asked the desk louse in charge of admission. His name was Jekt and he was a small-minded shitstain.

“Oh, I am sorry, I did not realize that an entry permit was more important than the budget for the entire next year,” the accountant answered sweetly.

She could not let that go. She grabbed the little ratwolf by the scruff.

“Not pissing off the black witch is more important than your bean counting, and don’t you forget it. I know that you came from some turd-covered mudhole out in the boonies, so I’ll spell it out for you. Don’t. Annoy. Casters. You’ll live longer. And keep all your limbs.”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s done.”

She dropped him down and checked the paper, then he sanded it to soak up excess ink. The delivery happened without incident, with the witch staring absent-mindedly out of the barred windows.

“Do you need direction?” she continued in Old Imperial. It was lucky that the artefacts and language of Harrak had travelled far and wide, including to that ‘France’ kingdom she had mentioned.

“Yes. I need rest.”

Yeah, you do.

“Sergeant Elimi will lead you to the compound of the Church of Neriad. They have beds for passing agents. Unless, of course, you wish to relax in a more pleasant setting? Church hospitality can be austere.”

“Pleasant setting would be nice.”

Tars was not certain that the Spotted Feather would match her taste. It was still the best ‘inn’ in a two hundred leagues radius.

“I’ll make sure he takes you there.”

Tars guided the woman out. She looked about ready to keel over, but the sergeant was already there and he agreed to escort her readily. She trusted Elimi to bring the woman to her destination. He was a good sorts.

They left, and she headed towards the town hall. Captain Corel would want to know about this.