

Viv walked by sergeant Elimi, inspecting the city as she went. The white clouds above her had parted to reveal a yellow sun much like her own, and a deep blue sky. Packs of kids in rags ran around town in rowdy clumps under the loose surveillance of busy parents. The houses were placed haphazardly, all white, and covered with either slate or a dense material made of straw and clay. They passed by a shoemaker, someone who made cauldrons. There were women weaving baskets or mending clothes sitting in small groups and talking in low voices. The speed of their gestures and the quality of their work eclipsed all but the most dedicated artisans back on earth. The locals looked on shily as she passed by and whispered with excitement when she went away. Several houses kept land-birds the size of a tall kid in their backyards, a bit between ostrich and chicken.

Traces of magic were everywhere. Some people used wind to dust their front yard, or earth to repair a wall. Viv was overtaken by an old grandma carrying a tree trunk over one shoulder as if it weighted nothing.

Life.

Alien life, in all its sedate and peaceful reality. Real people with their own routines and cultures across the dimensions. They really existed here before her. It was not a dream.

And no one was trying to kill her, but it didn't help because she was still impossibly far away from her old life and none of this helped, and she was so fucking bone-wary. Finding civilization was barely the first step towards understanding what the fuck happened to incarnate her in this weird place. She needed to find a library or something. Get help. And there was the matter of Arthur and Solfis. If she did find a way to head back but it happened in four years or something, would she still want to—

A shortness of breath caught her by surprise. An oppressive feeling clamped on her chest, and at the same time it felt lighter. Less physical. She stumbled and fell against a nearby wall.

They had just entered a small square with a bakery, a mill, and a well in the middle. A few people stopped and stared. That one dangly dude with the sleeveless shirt in winter frowned, then turned around and walked away after realizing what she was. He had a hole in his roughly-weaved trousers. Ridiculous. A pregnant woman strode through the silence without a care for the commotion, scolding as she went past a group of kids hiding behind a low wall.

The sergeant shifted his weight from foot to foot, perhaps not knowing what to do.

“Is fine. Just need a fucking minute, okay?”

Arthur jumped from her lair with a squeal. She bumped her snoot against Viv in a state of panic, before standing on her back legs and flapping her wings menacingly. The square emptied.

“Is fine. Calm down. Not attacked.”

“Squee!”

“Am fine.”

“Squee!”

“I’m not hurt!”

She petted the creature who kept ambling along, all proud of herself for forcing the villagers to keep their distance. Arthur’s warmth radiated from her scales in a soothing aura that calmed Viv down. It was mild, as breakdowns went. Only some sniffing and tears. She felt a bit better in under a minute. More importantly, she was spooking the locals, and that was bad.

Viv stood up and signaled the sergeant to keep going. He gave her a hesitant nod and kept dragging the sled forward. The square regained its vitality, with more than a few villagers commenting in low voices behind her back. Way to leave a first impression.

The pair walked some more until the houses around her started to get larger, and older. The men and women around actually had dyed clothes, and nicer too. The fashion here favored long tunics held by colored belts for the men, and sensible dresses and jackets for the women. It was all very practical. She was still on the taller end of the spectrum, height-wise, so most passerbys had to look up to her.

They stopped by a long two-stories building in the same design as everything else: white walls and slate roofs. This one was clearly some sort of establishment, as there was a double-door with an ensign showing a feather with some spots on it. An opening in the outside wall led to an inner court.

The sergeant dropped the harness here and saluted her. He gestured inside, mimicked sleeping and eating. He left her there.

She shrugged and walked in.

The inside of the inn smelled of candle and soap, which was nice. The walls were dark wood polished to a sheen, there was a hearth, a bar, and a few large tables surrounded by large amounts of comfy-looking couches with some really basic red upholstery. A young woman saw her and stopped cleaning the tiles on the ground with water she was conjuring from thin air. She stood up and trotted her way.

Now, that was what she had perceived in the first second second of getting in. Then, as was their wont, more details reached her sluggish mind.

There was a heavy floral scent in the air.

There were a lot of pillows on those couches.

The paintings on the walls were, well, suggestive.

Someone had left a freshly-cleaned lacy corset on a pulpit by the entrance.

The woman aiming for her like a heat-seeking missile was heavily painted. Her poor breasts were crammed in a too-tight ensemble that was really, really form-fitting.

“Ouh putain.”

It was a brotheeeeeel!

Viv took a step back as the girl stopped a few paces away and curtsied. She babbled a few words in the local language, too fast for Viv to understand, and seemed a bit intimidated when the older woman did not answer. Another girl popped out from behind a curtain to see what the fuss was about. Viv could only think about one thing.

They were far too fucking young. Probably around sixteen.

It was a den of fucking underage sex! She felt dirty to be here, as dirty as some disgusting groomer herding thai femboys on some remote island for millionaire octogenarians. Dirtier than dirt. Aaaaaaaaah. WHAT THE FUCK!

The second girl was approaching too, rinsing her hand on an apron. Viv had to... she could not look too aggressive or something.

“I just... errr... Sorry.”

Fuck. That was certainly some way to get her back to civilization.

“Oh, Old Imperial, yes?” the second woman offered. That one had dark curly hair and she was a bit more confident.

“Yes.”

Ok, ok calm down. This was another world. The important thing was to rest. She had money. Local money. It should not be too hard to ask for tranquility and no company. Just don't think about it.

The curly one left in a hurry, while the first one shuffled behind the bar and grabbed a glass of fresh water with some slices of weird vegetable inside. Viv tried it after the girl shily handed it to her. It was nice and refreshing.

She plopped on a pillow, considered that it was probably covered in dry body fluids and just... sat more gingerly. She did not have to wait long. A man practically crashed into the room from a side entrance.

[Courtesan, not dangerous, follows the path of harmony and seduction.]

A male courtesan? She looked back at the girl.

[Whore]

Ok, so... ok. There was a prostitution path. Nice. Probably had birth control and cumstain removal prestidigitation as associated skills. Hocus Pocus Ovum Deletus. Whatever.

The man himself was interesting. He wore a red open vest that showed a hairless, sculpted torso, and had wavy blonde hair that reached his neck. It was dyed too. She could see the roots as he came closer.

He was almost perfectly handsome in a surfer boy kind of way, except for an extremely pointy chin. It was really, really pointy. He was basically 90% top model and 10% pickaxe.

The courtesan stopped at a small distance with a genial smile, and bowed respectfully. His movements were graceful in a way that did not set her on edge.

“Milady?” he asked in perfect Old Imperial.

Ah. Right.

“I require a room for the day. And night. Meals. Also a meal for my, ahem, drake. If possible.”

And then, because her host was assessing her.

“I am not looking for company. You know what I mean.”

“The Spotted Feather and its staff will be delighted to accomodate you. We have several rooms that will fulfill your request for rest and tranquility. We also offer a bath and cleaning service for your outfit.”

Ah wow, five minutes into a medieval bordello and the head pimp already reminded her that she stank. She sniffed one of her sleeves. Eek.

The courtesan sat by her side at a respectable distance, not close enough to trigger a reaction.

“You just arrived in town, yes? From an expedition? Many of our regulars enjoy our comprehensive services. For two silver talents, I will personally take care of you. Bath. Massage. A good meal. You will leave tomorrow a new woman, ready for whatever business led you here. And no intimacy, as you said. I remember.”

She had many silver talents in her purse.

And that sounded exactly like what she needed right now. An afternoon of rest, then a war council with Solfis to decide what they should do next.

It was almost... too perfect.

She frowned.

“Are you using a skill on me?”

“Yes, one of my abilities as a courtesan allows me to be in tune with the mood of my client. I take it that you have never used the services of my fellow pathmen and pathwomen before?”

“I...no.”

“Then you are up for a pleasant surprise, I assure you.”

It was just a medieval spa day with underage prostitutes floating around that had nothing to do with her. That was it.

“Fiiiine. Erm. Do you accept Baranese currency? I was paid with that.”

The man waved off her concerns.

“We have many notables from different nations coming here to relax, courtesy of the Church of Neriad. We accept most currencies used by the greater kingdoms including Baran. Please, follow me.”

“Squee!” came a voice from outside.

“Ah.”

Change of plans.

In the end, a pair of teenagers (one boy, one girl, both ‘whores’) pulled the sled inside of the courtyard, which turned out to have a small garden in its center. A covered promenade lined the inner walls, with four doors leading to different wings of the Spotted Feather. She took five minutes to give Arthur a new nest in one of the corners. The dragongling settled into a new, clean cover with interesting snake patterns that she immediately found fascinating.

“I will have one of our girls bring it fresh meat. Don’t worry, she is good with animals. Even the territorial ones.”

Viv followed the man upstairs.

“Oh, I did not ask your name,” she remarked.

If the man was annoyed by her lack of manners, he did not betray it.

“My name is Yan. May I ask yours?”

“Viviane.”

“Viviane...”

The man pronounced the Vs slowly and carefully, but he did pronounce them. Almost correctly too. Perhaps he was more worldly than the knights had been.

“Yes.”

She was shown into a large bedroom, and once again appreciated that she was in another world populated by strangely similar humans, if one ignored the strange skin tones. The ground was rough wood planks mostly hidden under fluffy hand-woven carpets showing intricate designs. In her old world, it would have been infinitely cheaper to redo and polish the floor. Here, paths and stupid magically enhanced bodies meant that some things were easier to obtain, perhaps? Otherwise this made no sense.

In a way, the rest of the room reflected the paradigm shift. Anything related to cloth was here in abundance, including pillows and covers for the cozy-looking bed. On the other hand, there were no traces of glass or metal-based decorations. The only exception stood on the far wall. She took a step in its direction with a bit of awe. It was a full-length mirror.

Her reflection greeted her, in all its strangeness. The reflective surface was made of ice. Cold radiated from it in subtle waves, and yet the quality of the surface rivaled that of modern contraptions from her own world.

The rest of the room contained a table with two chairs and a wall partition hiding a tub made of wood, already filled with steaming water.

“I will give you some time to relax, and return with some refreshments. Is there anything I can get you?”

Viv almost answered no as a reflex, then remembered something a bit embarrassing.

“Yes. If you could get me a sharp razor...”

“A razor? As in, to shave a beard?”

Why, there was no need to... oh, maybe the local women... nevermind. Enough about hair.

“Yes.”

“Of course. Anything else?”

“No, thank you.”

“Understood. Just relax in the bath, I will be back shortly.”

The man turned and left. Viv noticed a small basket next to the door and decided to dump her stuff there. Hopefully, they had a skill to turn off their sense of smell.

She undressed and placed the cloak and armor down. Then came the turn of the skinsuit.

The temptation to open a window was strong, despite the frigid air.

“Wah. Pungent.”

She quickly checked herself in the mirror again. The cut on her flank was nicely scabbed. It had been very shallow anyway. She still had discoloration of her shoulder. Otherwise, there were no scars.

What she had were visible veins, not the normal blue that sometimes happened naturally, especially when the skin got pale. They were black. They snaked under her skin in dense networks that sort of looked natural. There were no bruises, no strange spills, it was as if her blood had turned dark. She knew that it was not the case. The whole thing was strange, as she had never seen such symptoms before. Not even in educational content.

Hopefully, they would fade after she recovered from near-constant poisoning.

The skinsuit joined the other stuff in their basket, and she dropped in the bath with delight.

“Aaaaaah.”

She had not cleaned herself properly since the Cassian springs.

Viv luxuriated in the amazing sensation for a while, before a knock on the door reminded her that the refreshments were on her way. She grabbed her knees to her chest and allowed the courtesan in.

She was presented with more of the fresh water plus weird vegetable-things and drank it all down. The man gave her the razor, a simple tunic to wear, and left with the dirty laundry without comment. She left the bath and towed herself dry when she was done.

The simple tunic felt smooth against her skin. Viv ambled to the bed and collapsed.

She was asleep in moments.