

“Mister, how much to get across?”

“Two coppers.”

Liam rolled his eyes and handed the ferryman a cut copper piece.

“I’m not a wagon,” he said.

The ferryman snorted in response, pocketing Liam’s money and waving him under the thick rope blocking off the slip. No one else had boarded the cable ferry yet, so he settled in to wait.

*Is anyone even coming? I should’ve waited before paying...*

Unlike the Sorcerous Kingdom, Re-Estize was still bound by the rules of conventional travel. Towns were spaced a day’s travel apart and travellers tended to leave early in the morning if they wanted to sleep safely behind walls. He was hoping that inbound wagons would force the ferry to pick up more passengers on the opposite shore, but it looked like he had missed the last of the day’s traffic.

His assessment of E-Raevel’s infrastructure and logistics had taken most of the day. Marquis Raeven delayed him even further, insisting that they return to his manor for an early supper. Liam had spent most of the meal providing vague answers to the High Noble’s endless stream of questions and, by the time he managed to escape, it was already sunset. He considered staying overnight at one of the pubs in the city’s lower districts, but he suspected that the Marquis’ agents would report that and he’d end up in his manor again.

The distant rumble of wooden wheels over the rough cobblestones of the highway signalled the approach of a pair of wagons.

*Metal? Weapons? No, probably tools.*

With the ongoing harvest, farming villages would be desperate to repair or replace any damaged equipment. Both wagons sounded like they were fully laden and had brown tarps drawn over their cargo. In addition to the spindly Merchant seated at the front and his teamsters, six armed men accompanied the wagons at a leisurely pace. Three of those men fixed their hawkish gazes on Liam as soon as the ferry came into view of the wagons.

Liam grasped a nearby railing as the ferry shifted under the weight of the wagons. One of the guards purposely went to stand next to him.

“What band are you with?” Liam asked.

“Black Iron,” the Mercenary said. “Lookin’ to join?”

“I’m just getting outta here,” Liam said. “The Knights won’t leave me alone.”

The man gave Liam a purposeful once-over.

“I could see that,” he said. “The Nobles’ve been trying to pull in anyone who looks like they can handle themselves in a scrap. Never know when the law’ll conveniently twist their way and get ya stuck under ‘em for life.”

Liam nodded silently in agreement. Back when he scratched up a living in Fassett County, he was just one of countless scrawny street waifs. Now, he had grown strong enough for the Mercenaries to recognise him as a potential threat.

“So how ‘bout becoming a Merc?” The man asked. “Our cap’n’s on the lookout for new blood.”

“I thought about it before,” Liam answered, “but they probably pay better in the north.”

“Ain’t worth it, if ya ask me,” the Mercenary hocked a glob of spittle overboard. “The extra coin might *sound* nice, but you’ll be thinking differently when ya see what yer up against. Anyone hiring mercs up there has powerful enemies. Or they’re taking a big gamble. Losses are high for that type of work.”

“Is that why Black Iron is based here?”

“Mhm. Well, sorta. Ya see, our cap’n’s got a good head on his shoulders and he says that a storm’s comin’. Price of food’s through the roof and the whole Kingdom’s fallin’ apart at the seams. The Raevenmarch’s the stablest place and the people here’ll be paying us long after everywhere else’s gone to shit.”

“If things are that bad,” Liam said, “maybe I should just take a ship to Argland.”

“Assuming ya survive the walk to Re-Uroval.”

Liam merely shrugged in response. Seeing that his recruitment attempt had failed, the Mercenary stopped paying any attention to him. Once the wagons were secured to the ferry, the ship's crew worked the ropes and used a set of long poles to move them to the opposite shore.

"It's rare to see a youth from the city out this late," a voice said from behind him.

He turned to find the spindly Merchant looking down at him from the lead wagon.

"I'm leaving the city," Liam said.

"Under the cover of night? My, how mysterious. I don't suppose you've travelled much."

"I-I've been outside of the walls," Liam said defensively. "I was helping out at an orchard just a few months ago!"

He wasn't lying. He *was* leaving the city and he *did* help out around an orchard a few months ago in the Holy Kingdom. Certain types of people had a nose for lies, so it was always best to tell the truth or at least wrap one's words in a cloak of bluster. Of course, if one was in a place where everyone lied, harmless stuff didn't matter.

"Then you should know that decent people don't travel at night," the Merchant said. "E-Raevel might be the safest territory in the Kingdom, but everyone still makes their trips during the day."

"What about you?" Liam countered, "You're out here now."

"Perhaps I'm not a decent person," the Merchant smiled slightly, then held up his hands at Liam's frown. "I jest! We'll be camping on the far shore tonight to beat the morning rush. One can get stuck waiting in line for the ferry for hours, so those with adequate protection avoid the wait entirely."

"Oh."

It seemed like a smart move. Now that they were closer to the opposite shore, he realised that this Merchant wasn't the only one doing it. He spotted dozens of campfires hidden in the trees above the riverbank.

"Shouldn't this be someone's land?" Liam asked.

“It’s part of Lord Raeven’s demesne,” the Merchant answered. “The Marquis allows us to camp in the copses along the river for free so long as we don’t poach anything. Not that we dare to. His foresters are very good at keeping track of that sort of thing.”

In other words, the woods were crawling with Rangers. They were a Rogue’s worst enemy in the outdoors so he was even less inclined to stick around.

“I want to go as far as I can today,” Liam said, “so I’ll probably stop in a village or two. Is there anything I should know about the road ahead?”

“That depends on how far you’re going,” the Merchant said.

“To the Azerlisian Marches.”

“Blumrush’s land?” The Merchant raised a thin eyebrow, “I hope that adventurous spirit of yours doesn’t land you in an early grave.”

“I know it’s worse than here,” Liam said, “but is it *that* bad?”

“The border has gotten much better since Lord Raeven married the Lady Valerie,” the Merchant replied. “The problem these days is what happens *after* one crosses the border. Anyone who enters the eastern marches enters because they’re *allowed* to be there. Everyone else is simply prey for the highwaymen.”

“What if I travel along the rural roads?”

“It’s a better option for those travelling on foot,” the Merchant admitted, “but I’d still not go at all if I were you.”

“How else can I get to Re-Uroval?”

The Merchant raised a hand to tug on the tuft at the tip of his chin.

“Hmm...the only method that comes to mind is joining a northbound caravan,” he said. “Any Merchants going in that direction will have paid off all the right people. You’ll just have to convince them you’re worth bringing along. Of course, if they so very nicely offer to take you north for free, they probably intend to sell you.”

The memory of a woman smiling in the shadows of an alleyway and a haze of crippling pain flashed through his mind. He idly wondered how he would fare against a gang of slavers if they came after him now.

As the ferry slowly closed with the slip on the opposite shore, Liam hopped over and made his way out of the valley. According to his map, the border with Blumrush's territory was a week away by wagon. He could probably cut the time required for the journey in half if he went straight there, but he had a job to do along the way.

He pulled out his clipboard, filling out a brief report on the ferry crossing. As he did, he wondered if it mattered since it would probably be replaced by a bridge after the Sorcerous Kingdom took over. Not long ago, he would have simply written something along the lines of it being almost the same as the highway running through the Duchy of Re-Estize. He had learned a few things since then, however.

The same capabilities that made Adventurer Rogues essential for investigating ruins worked just as well for non-ruins. In hindsight, it made sense since ruins were just the remains of settlements, fortifications, and other structures that Rogues already excelled at analysing, breaking into, or taking apart. All he had to do was translate the way that he saw the world into a format that the Sorcerous Kingdom's bureaucracy could understand.

Of course, Foreign Affairs was way ahead of him on that front. Long before he had received his mission – before his time in the Draconic Kingdom, even – he had already received the appropriate training for his job as a compliance officer for the Ministry of Transportation. The technical side of that training, at least. He still wasn't very good at stuff like law, economics, or any of the other things that important people were usually responsible for.

Not that he needed to know them for his mission. He had come to observe what was going on and report his findings. What came after was up to his superiors.

The sound of another wagon drew his eyes to the northern horizon. There, a wagon one might find in any farming village was heading south on the highway, accompanied by a group of noisy boys and young men. They quieted down once they noticed Liam coming in the opposite direction, scowling at him while brandishing their walking sticks as makeshift quarterstaves. Liam moved to the grass alongside the road to let them pass.

"Isn't it a bit late for you guys to be out?" Liam asked.

"We're selling dinner to the Merchants on the river," the biggest guy in the group answered as he reached into the wagon and pulled out a wicker basket. "Buttered rolls, goat cheese, and sausage. We've got ale, too."

A glance at the wagon showed that there was twice as much ale as there was food. He gestured to the basket in the young man's hands.

“How much for the meal?”

“One copper.”

The rest of the group kept glaring at him until he plucked a copper coin out of the purse fastened to his belt. The provisions were way more expensive than they should have been coming from a farm, but the Merchants camping along the river were probably used to the price of urban fare. If anything, there wasn't enough food and drink – especially drink – to go around. He would have applauded the farmboys for their opportunism but for the fact that they were from a farming village. What they were doing was supposed to be a Merchant's job. Heretics were weird.

*And aren't they supposed to be stockpiling provisions? What's money going to do for them when people are short on food and there's no one to trade with?*

He kept his criticisms to himself, waving farewell to the group of boys as the wagon trundled on towards its destination. As misguided as their attempt to earn money was, they would hardly smile and agree with him. If anything, their scowls would return if he tried to interfere with their 'business'.

Liam's journey along the highway led him north along the Senne River, whose headwaters rose from some glacier in the Azerlisia Mountains. The towering mountain range ran parallel to the highway, its icebound peaks catching the light of the setting sun long after the pastoral valleys of the march were plunged into shadow. Countless creeks and small rivers flowing out of the forested foothills added to the might of the Senne, causing the highway to cross over an equal number of bridges and culverts.

In all, the infrastructure was probably as well-maintained as the local nobility could reasonably afford. Given the technology that they used, this made it unacceptable by the Sorcerous Kingdom's standards. Being a former subject of Re-Estize, Liam for the most part already knew what to expect, but he still couldn't help but marvel over the difference between his old home and his new one. Now that he thought about it, both the Duchy of E-Rantel and the southeastern marches supposedly had the best roads in the Kingdom. If that was the case, what awaited him in the eastern marches?

His pile of reports grew as he continued taking notes on his journey northwards. Like the Duchy of E-Rantel when it was under Re-Estize, the only paved portions of the southeastern marches' road network were the highways running through it. Clay trails carved with well-worn wagon

ruts made up the rest. Unlike the Duchy of E-Rantel, however, the southeastern marches had several navigable rivers. Barges laden with the autumn harvest were a frequent sight on the Senne, which explained why there was relatively little traffic on the highway even during the harvest. Save for local traffic, farmers would be unloading their crops in the nearest town to be sent downriver at a far cheaper rate.

As twilight transitioned to night, Liam arrived at the first town along his route. Its entrance was already barred and the men posted around the gatehouse didn't look very welcoming, so he opted to sneak in instead. At first, he looked forward to the challenge, but his anticipation was quickly replaced by disappointment. The sentries didn't have Darkvision items and the braziers on the wall were sparingly placed. All he had to do was wait for a gap in the sole night patrol and cross undetected through a lightless stretch.

Liam's near-effortless entry was greeted by the unlit alleyways on the other side. The only real activity was along the highway, which served as the town's high street, much like Fassett Town. There, a row of pubs and inns served as the common haunt of the town's artisans, visiting Merchants, and prostitutes. He stopped at the mouth of an alley and pulled some notes out of his pack.

*Let's see...the Horny Badger?*

His face screwed up slightly upon reading the name of the inn. It only took a few seconds for him to locate the building's wooden sign, which went to great lengths to emphasise how horny the badger was. He wasn't sure whether he wanted to be seen entering the place even as a complete stranger.

Since he had to speak with one of the people inside, however, he had no choice but to do it. After checking the alley behind the building, he decided to get in through the kitchen door. His attempt at a stealthy entrance ended in failure when he bumped into a man inside the doorframe.

"Kitchen's still open, kid," the man frowned down at him. "Come back when we're closed."

What did that mean? Had he been mistaken for a beggar?

"I'm a customer," Liam said.

The man's frown lengthened.

"Customers come in through the front. Paying customers."

Liam patted the purse on his belt.

“I have money,” he said. “I just didn’t want...I mean...it’s *embarrassing*.”

His voice ended in an incoherent mumble. The man snorted at Liam’s expression and waved him in. A blonde-haired girl around his age appeared a few moments later to escort him out of the kitchen. She flashed him a brilliant smile as he seated himself in the tavern, but Liam’s only response was a stone-faced look. He could imagine the frown on her face as she flounced away.

*At least ask what I’m having...*

“What will it be?”

The silky voice of a lithe young man startled him out of his thoughts.

“Jolene said that you’re not interested in women,” the man smiled slightly.

“Hah? I’m—I mean, I’m here to see Velvet.”

That’s me, the man winked at him.

Liam stared at the man for several seconds. Male prostitutes of course existed, but when Mrs Linum instructed him to make contact with a prostitute by the name of Velvet, the idea that he would be a man hadn’t crossed his mind.

He removed his gloves and turned his body to block the sight of his moving fingers. Velvet’s playful expression didn’t waver in the slightest as he made his reply.

*—where to?*

*—march, north.*

ljaniya’s sign language was made to be functional wherever they operated, so things like specific names for places and people didn’t usually exist. It was up to the individual agent to make sense of what the generic terms communicated referred to.

*—job?*



–recon. Got info? Maps. People. Events.

–come.

Velvet took Liam's hand in his, pulled him to his feet, and wrapped his arms around him from behind in one smooth motion. Liam could follow his movements, but he doubted he could do the same thing.

"Smile," Velvet whispered into his ear.

They were showered with disgusted looks from every table that they passed. Velvet guided him up a stairway near the kitchen entrance and to the brothel's third floor. Liam didn't say anything until he was brought into a perfumed suite and the door whispered shut behind him.

"I have to wonder how many customers you get after getting all those looks," Liam said.

"Oh plenty," Velvet replied. "Men and women both. Regular customers usually enter more discreetly – one sinks or swims by their reputation around here, after all."

"Even the Merchants?"

"Especially the Merchants," Velvet replied. "Nobles will use any excuse to ruin a Merchant and mere rumours of one's...*proclivities* can be costly for sales."

"Why does it matter?"

Velvet opened one of the drawers of his dressing room table and produced a polished black crystal. An unnatural stillness fell over them: a telltale sign of a *Silence* effect.

"I'm not sure that it actually does," Velvet replied. "What matters is what one believes will happen if certain associations are made. Once the trap is triggered, its mechanisms move of their own accord."

"That sounds like something Mrs Linum would say," Liam said.

“The old crab is still around, eh? You’re not wrong: I spent about two years in Fasset County with her training for my post in Re-Estize.”

“Is *that* what she was doing there?”

“Among other things. She’s largely responsible for setting up the sleeper agent network in both Re-Estize and Baharuth, you know.”

“...just how old is she?”

“Who knows?” Velvet shrugged, “I *do* know that she was one of the founder’s original followers and was doing jobs back when the clan was first established. Since Elves supposedly don’t leave their homes until they’re considered adults, that should make her at least two centuries older than the Demon Gods.”

“If she’s that important,” Liam said, “then why would she stay in Fassett County?”

“That’s one question I never dared to ask. I just figured it came down to being an Elf. They may look Human enough, but there’s a vast difference in thinking between someone who lives for less than a century and someone who can live for ten.”

He would have to ask her at some point. Then again, Velvet probably had the right idea in not asking.

“There have been a bunch of changes,” Liam said as he emptied the contents of his pack onto the suite’s central table. “Big changes. These three scrolls are for you.”

Velvet came over and plucked the closest scroll off of the table. He broke the black wax seal and unfurled the pure white parchment, frowning as his eyes scanned its contents.

“I think ‘big’ is an understatement,” he said. “I know that the Baharuth Empire has been trying to get its hooks into the clan for the longest time, but I never thought I’d see the day when we ended up under a country.”

“The boss said it isn’t a bad thing,” Liam said. “She even said that this is in line with the founder’s wishes.”

“Did she, now...”

Ijaniya had a weird history as far as shady organisations went. Like many members of the Thirteen Heroes, Ijaniya was a powerful individual whose home had been destroyed by the Demon Gods. Little was known about her fate after the Demon God King was defeated aside from the fact that she had gone on to establish the infamous clan that inherited her legacy.

It didn't make much sense to Liam or his sister that a famous hero who had helped save the world would then turn around and raise a group of killers for hire. When they finally had the opportunity to ask Tira about it, her response was 'Sometimes, a guy just needs a good stabbin'.'

The country that Ijaniya was from wasn't exactly a great place even before the Demon Gods came and wrecked it. It was worse than Re-Estize – if that was possible – and was filled to the brim with people who needed a good stabbing. While most of the survivors of the Demon Gods went about trying to piece together what remained of their shattered civilisations, Ijaniya wasn't very hopeful about the results.

Rebuilding the past also meant bringing back all of its problems. Thus, Ijaniya put all of her energy into creating an organisation that would stab the people who needed to be stabbed. They were more than the lowly Assassins whose skills went to the highest bidder. They were *Ninja*: those who worked in the shadows to support a greater order, doing all of the necessary things that those who walked in the light could not.

Despite her good intentions and apparent foresight, Ijaniya still underestimated the depths to which people would go to serve their own interests. Over the next two centuries, the region turned into little more than a mess of infighting and all the clan could do was guess which job offers would lead to beneficial results. Ijaniya had become a sword without a master; considered little more than disposable saboteurs and contract killers by everybody in the region.

"Well," Velvet said, "if the boss says so, that leaves little room for doubt. She's the one who has been worrying the most out of all of us, after all. It looks like we have an interesting future ahead of us. Speaking of which, you don't look like one of our people. Are you a new initiate?"

"Yeah," Liam replied. "Well, sort of. I received my training from Ijaniya agents, but we've been doing jobs for all sorts of people."

"Is that so? What's the job this time?"

"Um...I guess the best way to put it is an *inspection*," Liam said. "Reviewing things in the southeastern marches hasn't been a problem, but pretty much everyone says that Blumrush's territory will be."

Velvet went over to the large bed in the back of the suite, going to his hands and knees to pull a chest out from underneath it. Then he disappeared under the bed.

“They’re not wrong,” he said as some clicking sounds came from the floorboards. “Let’s see...”

A minute later, Velvet emerged from under his bed, bringing a pair of satchels out with him.

“The Azerlisian Marches are probably the worst things get in Re-Estize,” he said. “A hive of scum and villainy over a hundred kilometres across. Fortunately, it’s hemmed in by Nobles that don’t much like how things are done there.”

“Hemmed in?” Liam frowned, “But I thought it has House Boullope on its western border.”

“You appear to have concluded that House Boullope is on good terms with the Eight Fingers because they’re the leaders of the Successionist Faction.”

“The Successionist Faction?”

“They’re colloquially known as the ‘Noble Faction’,” Velvet told him. “That’s technically not true, however. Both major factions in Re-Estize are royalist factions. It’s just that one supports Rampossa’s extended rule while the other is pushing for him to cede the throne to Crown Prince Barbaro. Anyways, Boullope is a martial house and they rule their territory with an iron fist. Even if they did have connections with the Eight Fingers, they wouldn’t allow them to do as they please.”

“But House Boullope lost most of its armymen in the Battle of Katze Plains,” Liam noted. “They wouldn’t be able to stop the Eight Fingers even if they wanted to.”

“That’s the odd part about it,” Velvet said. “It *should* be as you say, but that syndicate’s activities have been strangely subdued since the Demon Emperor Jaldabaoth attacked the capital. I know that House Vaiself and its allies announced that they had struck a critical blow against the Eight Fingers around the same time, but country-wide criminal organisations won’t suddenly stop doing what they’re doing even if that happens.”

Liam figured he could let someone else update Velvet on that part. He wasn’t sure if he could come up with a satisfactory answer himself.

“Then is there anything I should be wary of?” He asked.

“Everything?” Velvet shrugged, “The place is rotten to the core. Never mind the criminals, aristocrats and commoners alike have long...*adapted* to life there. Everyone’s been painted the same colour by the bucket of pitch they’ve been dumped into.”

“They can’t *all* be that bad,” Liam said.

“That’s probably true,” Velvet admitted. “But I wouldn’t place my bets on anyone you meet there if I were you.”