

We awoke bright and early that following morning. Dalston was clearly not used to sleeping in the cold, because he was shaking like a leaf when he came out of his tent. However many layers of blankets and clothes you thought were enough to keep warm, you could always do with adding a few more. Dalston had learned that lesson the hard way.

“Do you have any idea where she’ll be?” I asked as we gathered around the fire.

“Not exactly, but if she’s hiding here for a significant length of time – she’ll need a source of clean water and food. I imagine she’ll be located near a river, but not too deep to make stealing from the local farmers a long walk.”

“That’s the first intelligent thing you’ve ever said to me,” I quipped.

He frowned, “I hope you’re going to keep your promise.”

“Cross my heart. You’ll have your chance to talk with her. If that doesn’t work, we’re knocking her out and hogtying her.”

I wasn’t feeling confident about fighting her again though. I didn’t have anything to replace my armour with, and the cheaper options I could buy in town wouldn’t be enough to resist the penetration factor of her legendary sword. If I stepped out of line and caught a blow again, it would go through into my HP pool without any modifiers. Additionally, the previous fight was inside of a building with a solid foundation. Sakura couldn’t manipulate the roots beneath us and get the upper hand; it was a different story now that we’d followed her into the wild. This was a forest, there were more than enough roots and trees for her to attack us with.

“What do you want her for anyway?”

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

“When it involves Sakura, it is my business. I’m not going to let you do anything that’ll harm her.”

I stared at him, “You really think you’ll be able to stop me if I decided to haul her somewhere? I’ve got news for you Dalston, I could knock you flat with one arm tied behind my back. Hell, Tahar and Cali could probably do it for me.”

Dalston threw a nervous glance in their direction. Had he seriously not considered that before we came here? The only reason I agreed to do it was because I knew that Dalston was in no position to mess with me. He couldn’t beat us in a fight, he didn’t have any contacts in the town – all he had to offer was a clue on Sakura’s current location. I’d offered him a chance to talk her down in exchange for that information.

“I meant it when I said that I’d rather do this without killing her. Contrary to your impression of me, I’m not someone who takes much pleasure in killing.”

“You said you’d kill her the next time you met,” Dalston reiterated.

“Things change. I was angry because she attacked me without warning, when someone does that – your only recourse is to defend yourself. She’s trying to kill me. Are you saying that it’s unfair for me to fight back and do the same? If someone was trying to kill her; you’d argue that it was her right to kill the attacker.”

Dalston paused, “Of course I would. She’s like family to me.”

It was a rather frank admission that Dalston didn't care about the double standard. This was the kind of thinking that allowed pointless wars to drag on for years and years without any progress. Anything that your side does is righteous, and anything the enemy does must be paid back twofold and without restraint.

"At least you're honest..."

Dalston objected, "No. I don't mean it like that. I want a solution where nobody has to get hurt, if there's any realistic chance of us doing it, then I think that killing would be unreasonable."

"I already think that there's no chance. She's done nothing but ignore your orders since this whole thing started!"

He stood up and threw his blanket to the ground; "I'm taking responsibility for it! You keep saying that I'm not doing enough, or that I don't understand what's going on! I do. I understand perfectly well what Sakura is doing. I'm here to make sure that she doesn't cross a line and start killing people!"

"How do you know she hasn't already?"

The wind was taken from Dalston's sails as I asked the obvious.

"I'm not making accusations without evidence, but she was monstrously strong when we fought a few days ago. I don't know how she did it, but Sakura clearly has something figured out that the rest of us don't. I wouldn't be surprised if killing people was a part of it. I heard her talking about everyone else being fake - that they aren't even real people. When you start thinking that way, killing becomes easy, no questions asked." He had no answers on that, so I pressed him for something more; "Did she never mention anything about NPCs to you?"

He looked to the ground and sighed, "I heard her mumbling to herself along those lines, but I thought it was just something I was unfamiliar with."

"I don't expect you to know what it is, it's something that only an outworlder would know. But she's been thinking that way for a long, long time. Before we even met. That's why I'm worried about you. She thinks that you're one of those NPCs. That you're nothing more than an obstacle trying to get in her way. No matter how good you thought your relationship was; people have a way of justifying themselves that most don't like to admit is true."

All of this was conditional on us finding her in the first place – even with some assumptions about the most appropriate place to camp long term, the forest was still a large area that could qualify multiple times over.

"I just want to talk with her. If she decides to not listen, or to hurt me, then so be it."

I sighed, "Alright. As long as you know what you're getting into."

It didn't matter to me whether Dalston lived or died. His usefulness was over the moment he helped me find where she was hiding. We finished up our morning business – eating, defecating and packing up our things so that we could move on. The forest was only thirty minutes away, so we'd have the majority of the day dedicated to the search. I hoped that it wouldn't take that long. We'd need to locate some of the streams and follow them to have any hope of locating her, if she was even in the forest at all. She could have easily moved on to somewhere else by now; or be in the middle of another robbery in the town.

Dalston remained mostly silent after our conversation at the camp, preferring to focus his energy on looking for any signs of Sakura's presence along the main road. I couldn't get a read on how Sakura was handling this. She was powerful enough to scare away most of the lawmen who would chase after her, and she had continuously discounted the intelligence of the people around her through her belief that they were NPCs. With that in mind, she could have taken the path of least resistance and posted up on the edge of the woods, the place that gave her the easiest access to the roads. I couldn't say that for sure though. She may have been exercising an appropriate amount of caution for all the heat she was generating.

The forest in question was rather unassuming from the outside in. Tall trees and scant underbrush meant that there was a decent amount of visibility. On a clear day it would be easy to see for some distance in front of you. There was a slight morning fog that would make things more difficult, but it would clear up with time. I had learned to never judge by outside appearances though, and the forest rightfully held a reputation for being filled with dangerous predators. Tahar was quick to locate a small mound of animal dung near the entrance. She inspected it closely, prying it apart using a dagger and investigating what was left inside.

"What do you think it is?" I asked.

"I cannot be certain. Large, eats plants."

"It's probably a dire bear," Dalston added quietly, "We should be careful. They're very territorial."

He didn't know a thing about travelling long distances, but he had read a bestiary on every possible species before he left the house. I rolled my eyes and pricked up my ears. We needed to be on the lookout for running water, not just hungry bears. Tahar took the lead and started to use her tracking skills to keep us out of trouble. It was unlikely that Sakura would have left visible footprints due to the composition of the soil, but Tahar's mastery of hunting always ensured that she had a few surprises up her sleeve. But to describe the process of searching a forest for someone is a fool's errand indeed. It wasn't something that I'd choose to spend my time doing if I had a choice at all.

At least the forest was beautiful, especially when the sun started to leak through the gaps in the canopy above us. The trees towered into the sky – having grown here unimpeded for thousands of years. They were gigantic, with dense bodies and dense bushels of leaves. It was almost enough to make up for how tedious the task at hand was. There was a brief moment of excitement when Tahar spotted an animal in the distance, but it quickly made itself scarce once it heard us moving. Even if the animals here had killed many farmers over the years, that wasn't evidence that they were bloodthirsty monsters. It was a natural friction caused by the wild and society at large.

It took us nearly an hour to find the first stream. It was large enough for a person to comfortably draw drinking water from, so Tahar led us down the left side. Dalston was starting to feel the strain of walking through such uneven terrain, "Do you do this a lot? I'm exhausted already."

"No. I tend to stick to urban areas if I can. Though we have had a few rural excursions recently, we even went north to the mines."

"North? Why would you go up there?"

"For a job." Though 'job' was understating the task of killing a dragon. I didn't want to tell Dalston about everything we'd done over the past few months, so I kept my answer curt and to the point.

"And I thought it was too cold out here..."

It was an unpleasant experience during the journey there and back. I was worried about getting frostbite in my hands and feet. The fact that some people chose of their own volition to live there and work in the mines was beyond my comprehension. The pay must have been damn good to justify that kind of sacrifice, but with the war going on that might have come to a very sudden end.

“Wait.”

Everyone stopped as Tahar finally spoke. She knelt down into the dirt and pushed aside some of the fallen branches and leaves. She had seen something using her tracking skill. Tahar had explained it to me before – it wasn't just the ability to see the footfalls left behind, but something more; a magical imprint that was left by all living creatures. It would illuminate itself when she used her technique, a form of spell connected to the earth. Some would argue that it didn't use enough energy to be a real spell, but those people tended to be members of the Amendment. They loved gatekeeping more than anything else.

Tahar stood back up, “Someone was here. These are human tracks.”

“We must be getting close,” Cali mused while leaning against her polearm.

“I hope you've been thinking of some nice words, Dalston.”

The almost pained expression he bore said otherwise. I had a bad feeling about this, and so did he.