

“You’re back already.”

I had put out feelers that I was looking for Derian when we returned to the town proper. Before the end of the day – his agent had already come to the inn to negotiate with me. Cali, Tahar and I crowded around a small table at the back of the tavern floor. Phillip looked extremely nervous about being on the frontlines of our personal rivalry.

I spoke under my breath, “That’s right. Derian said that he wanted Sakura, so I went and got her. In return, I want to see the cursed relic that he bought, in person.”

Philip knew that he was walking a fine line here, “I’m well aware of what you want, but I’m afraid that Sir Rivers may find such a demand unpalatable. He’s become very attached to that particular piece.”

I looked to my left, “Then he isn’t getting Sakura. I’ll tell Tahar here to let her go.”

“And give up the bounty?”

“I already got paid for that sword. The bounty is spare change in comparison. Derian should have put more money down if he wanted me to follow through.”

Spite was a powerful thing. It was enough to make me pass over money already made. I was assured by Stigma that Sakura had no way of breaking her vow. She had never heard of a method by which one could escape it, though that was tempered with a qualification – nobody had lived for long enough to see if it was possible. The vow would also be dispelled upon my death. There was nothing Sakura could do directly to speed up that process. Of course, all of this also depended on the information that Stigma was providing me; measured against my trust in her and her memory of certain things.

Still – my promise was enough to rattle Philip a little. He tugged on the collar of his shirt and tried to think of a new way to get his hands on her. I wasn’t going to budge no matter what they offered. Getting my mitts on that cursed item was a matter of life or death to me. Derian was a greedy asshole. He wanted to kill Sakura or turn her in without having to give me something in return.

“Philip. The only way that you and Derian are finding out where she is, is if you show me what I want to see. I want the cursed relic, in a box, presented to me for inspection. In return, I’ll allow you to confirm that Sakura is in my custody.”

Philip leaned closer, “Is she in this inn?”

“What kind of idiot do you take me for?”

It was insulting. I was wise enough not to keep her in the same place where I was sleeping. I had dropped both her and Dalston off somewhere else – which was ironically rather close to the manor where Derian lived. Gerry said that he owed me one for screwing up the interrogation. He was very confused as to why the dead man he had disposed of a few days ago had turned up alive and well again. I managed to avoid explaining the whole story to him somehow. With them staying inside his home and no way to track where I’d been, Derian and Philip were out of options.

“You’re not going to find her. That’s the truth. Derian said that I could get the relic if I got him Sakura. I did, so now I expect him to uphold his end of the bargain.”

“We never made such a firm agreement,” Philip repeated. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a brass watch; “I don’t have much time to speak on this matter. If there’s no movement, I’ll have to take my leave.”

“Fine by me. Go tell Derian what I said. I want the relic in exchange for Sakura. That’s the beginning and end of this deal.”

Philip clenched his teeth and stood from the table, marching away in a huff. I took another swig of my drink and kicked back with a sense of satisfaction. It felt good to even the playing field and get one over on them after what happened last time. Derian would have to come up with some kind of scheme to get me to talk. Though I didn’t expect him to have already made arrangements before even knowing I was back. A minute after Philip left and a gaggle of four armed men entered the tavern and singled me out.

“You, outside. Now.”

The inn-keeper gave me a pleading look as if to say, “Please don’t get blood all over my nice floor.”

“Do you need a hand?” Cali asked.

“Eh. This looks pretty dull to me. Finish off your drink and come check in when the noise stops.”

Cali concurred with my assessment. I could handle this myself – the gang of thugs wouldn’t provide her with the excitement she sought. I sighed and grabbed my sheath, following them through the main entrance and out onto the road. Philip was cowering behind two dozen men of various descriptions, all wielding cheap weapons and wearing equally cheap armour. They must have caught wind of me being in Bristwithe and the bounty on offer for Sakura. Derian was probably offering them more money to screw with me than he did to capture her in the first place.

So that was his game. He’d brought a gang of hired swords to try and intimidate me into giving her up. There was just one problem with his plan, all of them already knew me and my reputation as the guy who slaughtered forty people in one fight. Three of the gang gave each other nervous looks, while one stood at the head with his arms folded. That smug smirk wouldn’t last for long as one of them men tugged on his shoulder.

“You didn’t tell us we were fucking with Ren Kageyama, arsehole!”

He pushed him away and barked back, “Do you seriously believe that crock of shit they keep selling you? There’s no way that one guy survives a fight like that! They just made it up!”

I clapped my hands and drew his eye once more, “They’ve got the right idea. I wouldn’t want to be standing on that side of this fight personally.”

The leader’s face warped into a furious scowl, “Don’t give me that bullshit. There’s no way you could have done any of the things they said you did. I’m going to get that bounty and live easy.”

What he didn’t see was that several of the goons he had gathered were already starting to back away from the group. They were the ones who put the most credence into those ‘rumours’ and had been misled about who they were hunting for. The rest stood firm, unwilling to flake when such a large cash reward was on the table. Surely those tales of slaughter and heroism were just that?

He continued to boast, “Once we kill you – we’ll be the real heroes. Everyone in the city knows what you did back in Pascen now. You’re the public’s biggest enemy.”

“Oh yeah, and who did you hear that from?”

“It doesn’t matter! There are enough witnesses to attest to the story, and I think that mage has been spreading some muck as well.”

Benadora? Had her guilt compelled her to spill the details to someone?

“I suppose I’ll have to clean that up when I get back. Anything else to share with me before I shut that trap of yours?”

He clamped his flapping gums shut and waved to the mob to start their attack – though that was his first mistake. As the man at the front, you were always expected to lead by example, and none of the hired hands were going to test the waters for his sake. The standoff continued with a long, awkward pause before he realised that they were waiting for him to make a move first. He growled angrily and drew his sword to make an attack. I didn’t even need to pull my own to deal with this.

He charged at me with a long-range thrust, which I easily caught beneath my arm. I wrenched the sword out of his hands and clobbering him with a right hook, which sent him sprawling onto the ground in front of me. He was already knocked for a loop, spitting out blood and teeth into the dirt below. I’d given him more than enough chances to turn around and leave it be, but he had rejected all of them. I had run out of patience for his games and grand declarations. I grabbed him by the collar and turned him over onto his back.

The man held his arms over his head and tried to defend himself as I mounted him and started to rain down blows, but it was a pointless exercise. The first strike broke the bones in his wrists and caused him to wail in agony, the next broke his nose, then his cheekbone. Cuts allowed dense rivers of blood to flow down into his eyes and over his face. I didn’t stop. I kept punching even as the sound of his head hitting the floor made a sickening snap. Blood flew upwards from my speeding fists and landed onto my clothes and face.

I only came to a stop when it was clear that he was dead. The man was completely unrecognizable. I’d pounded him into a mash, a piece of raw meat tenderized far too much to be edible. It was a gruesome display. I stood up from his corpse and kicked him over. All of the people who had observed the killing understood now that the rumours were not exaggerated. My fists struck like cannonballs – and I had no patience for people who attempted to waste my time. The rest of the men thought better than to join him in the undertaker’s office and backed away.

Philip begged them, “W-What are you doing? Sir Rivers is paying you good money to take him down!”

One of the mercenaries shook his head gravely, “No amount of money is going to make me go six feet under. He just damn near took his head off!”

“But there are more of you! Just attack him at the same time!”

Philip’s pleas fell on deaf ears. The mercenaries scattered and walked away, leaving Derian’s agent with nothing between him and I. Philip was so stunned by this turn of events that he didn’t notice me sneaking up from behind him. He yelped like a scolded dog as I grabbed him and pushed him down into the mud, pressing my knee against his back and pinning him there. I laughed sardonically as he clawed at the ground in an attempt to escape from me.

“Was that really your big plan? Send a bunch of nobodies to die fighting me?”

“S-Sir Rivers insisted! It wasn’t my idea! Ack!”

"I don't want to hear any of your excuses. You're going to tell Derian that he's bringing me that relic, or I'm going to start cutting off your fingers and sending them to him through the mail!"

"O-Okay, I promise! I'll tell him everything!"

I released the pressure from his back and allowed him to stand on his own two feet. Philip wasn't sticking around to see me follow through on my threat. He ran as fast as his legs could possibly carry him. A crowd had gathered to see what all the fuss was about, including two watchmen who had been brought over by a concerned woman.

I was going to have to explain what exactly happened here, but witnesses could be a good thing too. They'd confirm my account that the stiff had attacked me first and I'd killed him in self-defence. Cali eventually poked her head through the door to see what was happening – landing on the moment where they decided to haul the body away from the inn and to the local morgue. There was nobody to kick up a fuss about his death, so it was highly unlikely that I'd be apprehended or charged. The justice system in this world was too undeveloped for a full investigation to be launched.

"Just the one?" she asked.

"The rest of them got cold feet after he bit it. Philip's going to have some explaining to do when he gets back to the manor."

Benadora had some questions to answer too. I had no idea who was saying what back in the city. They could be using the information vacuum to blame everything on me. That was going to be my first job when we got back.

"Do you think that Derian will fall for it?"

I gritted my teeth and winced, "No. Not at all."