

“Bristwaithe might be a peaceful town, but that doesn’t mean that there aren’t areas in the nearby wilds that people are unwilling to tread. I did a lot of digging and found out that Sakura’s been seen fleeing into the woods Northwest of here. They’re infamous for being filled with aggressive wildlife that even an experienced warrior would have trouble handling. A few locals die every year when a wolf wanders out into the farmlands and causes chaos.”

“She’s hiding amongst strong enemies then?”

“That’s right. I couldn’t possibly go in there alone.”

Nothing about this arrangement was rational. Dalston knew full well what my opinion on his students was, and he knew that bringing me was liable to cause trouble if we saw each other. He was taking a calculated gamble that I’d help him clear out the enemies and keep my word so that they could speak with each other. I didn’t want to kill Sakura if I didn’t have to. Even though she had pissed me off, I felt some small amount of sympathy for her as a fellow outworlder. I never took a particular joy in killing people unless I knew they were real pieces of work. Sakura’s biggest crime had been to rob some people with more money than sense.

There was no way that Derian was going to keep to his word and give me the relic. The only thing I could hope for at a minimum was for the Sakura situation to be resolved for good. If he was stupid enough to fall for my ploy and confirm her capture with his own two eyes, I’d gladly take the opportunity to string him up, brainwash him, and get all of the secrets out of his head. His life’s savings would be nice as a bonus for all the trouble he’d caused me. I was going to clean him out.

Before we could depart on our camping trip, I ordered Dalston to get some supplies ready. It was a few hours walk away from the middle of town, and we’d have to spend one night sleeping rough to avoid travelling in the dark. The last thing we needed was to dive headlong into a dangerous forest without the ability to see our own hands. Of course, that wasn’t an issue for me – but Cali, Tahar and Dalston didn’t have a cursed spirit hanging over their shoulder at all times. It was unreasonable to march in while being the only one who could see in the dark.

With everything ready and an objective in mind, we set off together to try and find her. Dalston walked ahead for an hour or so, before the boredom got the better of him and he revealed another irritating aspect of his personality. He was a masterful chatterbox. He thought better of speaking with me, but Tahar in particular was not spared his endless questioning. Where did she come from? What did she like to eat? How sharp were her claws? (Very.) Tahar had the patience of a saint, but even she was starting to fray at the edges.

I spared her any further torment and collared him, walking beside and trying to keep pace so that he’d get distracted. “Why did you decide to teach Sakura how to fight in the first place?” I asked.

Dalston scratched his beard, “I’m friends with her Mum and Dad, I’ve known her since she was born. As soon as the girl could talk she was always obsessed with becoming an adventurer or a warrior, but they didn’t agree with that ambition. Not one bit. She’d come to me whenever she had the chance and beg me to train her in swordsmanship.”

“And you caved?”

“You don’t know how cute that girl can be. She’s got eyes that could melt permafrost. I talked with her folks and said that I’d just teach her how to defend herself. I expected her to drop out after she discovered just how hard it really was. She never did. She came to my house every weekend and learned everything she could. Before I knew it – she was shooting ahead and learning techniques

and stances that took me decades. She's a prodigy. I thought it'd be a damn shame to waste a talent like that, so I convinced them to let me continue."

That was why Dalston was so protective of her. He'd made a promise to her family to keep her out of trouble so that she could keep learning with him. They sounded like a couple of normal people, they had no idea that their own daughter was harbouring such dark thoughts about them the whole time. It must have been a strange way to live, viewing everyone around you as nothing more than a computer program designed to deceive. The things I had felt were too real for me to think the same way. The pain was there, the bruises and cuts stung like the real thing. I couldn't forgive myself if I killed an innocent person with such a flippant excuse and they turned out to be a mortal soul.

"She never did anything to make you worry?"

Dalston's face told the tale. She did, but at the time he ignored them because they didn't fit into his picture of her. "From time to time she said things that confused and worried me; but she was just a child. I assumed she had an active imagination. When she ran away from home, that was the first time she ever did something like that. Her parents were furious."

"And you blamed me."

Dalston rolled his eyes, "That's very petty of you."

"You've got a bad habit of blaming other people for things outside of your control," I replied. I needed to make this clear to him before we went any further, because his personality was the type that caused problems on these team excursions. "Sakura's been thinking this way for a very long time, long before she ever met me."

"Fine. I'll admit to that much. I was ignoring what she really meant, does that make you happy?"

"It's not about making me happy. I want you to reckon with what we're really dealing with. Sakura isn't just going to follow your orders like you're used to. She doesn't think much of you at all, she doesn't respect you or your authority."

"We'll see about that," Dalston huffed – unwilling to accept her perspective as fact. He was in for a rude awakening when we found her. "Your problem is that you always see everyone as antagonistic, maybe if you accepted their help once in a while you wouldn't be in such a state."

I nearly clocked him for that one, but the way he flinched back as I turned on him made the point well enough. "You don't know the first thing about me, or what it's like to live on the streets. Maybe give it a try before running your mouth. I'm no dullard – people aren't willing to give kids like me the time of day. They think you're just in it to steal from their businesses or slack off."

Dalston stepped it back so that I didn't pummel him; "You applied for a job?"

"Every job. Wherever I could find them, but once they found out that I was raised in an orphanage, they wanted nothing to do with me. Is it any wonder that nearly everyone who goes through those doors ends up as a rogue? It's the only way to make any money. Goodwill doesn't put food on the table, and when you're on the bottom layer you start to realise that everyone is scrapping for every bit they can get no matter their station in life. I've seen wealthy men lose their minds because someone snatched a few gold bars from their safe."

"Apologies then. I shouldn't speak of matters to which I have no experience."

"Desperate times create desperate people."

Dalston wasn't self-aware enough to know I was talking about him.

With the argument defused, we continued on our way. The landscape that surrounded us was beautiful, with rolling hills and carefully maintained stone walls separating fields of various crops. There were also many varieties of farm animal to observe, like cows and sheep. The weather was fine enough for me to enjoy the journey now that Dalston had stopped asking so many questions.

"You have a very strange travelling party here, Ren."

"Do I ever."

"Do you know much about the Ashmorn?"

I gave him a warning, "Cali is tight-lipped on that kind of thing."

"Of course. I don't mean to trivialise the collective trauma of their society."

"I care little for their worries," Cali jumped in, "The reason I speak not of it is because I find it tedious. My Father would regale tales of the old days at every dinner and speaking engagement. They became prisoners to it. I cannot ignite the same sense of curiosity that an outsider would. Even explaining it to another is a test of patience." Cali was indeed not fond of storytelling. She liked to keep her words curt and to the point.

Dalston explained, "I won't ask you your opinion then. It's just unusual to see an Ashmorn across the strait like this."

Cali did add one detail for us, "It was very difficult to find a ship across. It would contravene an order established by the King forbidding anyone from leaving."

"A fool's errand, I must say. There's little to stop someone from doing so if they desire," Dalston chuckled.

"Indeed. There's a widespread belief amongst the nobility that the order is having the intended effect, but the reality is that most just choose to stay within their hometowns and with their families. If there were an easier way to make the journey with a family, I am certain that most would seek greener pastures."

"I do love to read a good historical account, but the collapse of the Empire was so chaotic that most of them must be taken with a grain of salt," Dalston continued, "Not to mention the difficulties in translating things from the old language. Some would take the chance to insert their own embellishments."

The discussion ended abruptly as he wavered on the side of caution with Cali. I myself didn't know the full extent to which she cared about ancient history like that. Cali was impassive to almost everything, the only way to stir her heart was to place her in a dangerous situation. With time and familiarity, I had started to notice the ways in which she was changing. She was more emotionally vibrant than before – and more willing to act in the best interest of other people. I was happy to see that Cali was taking the challenge head on, as she had indicated to me in the past that she wanted to overcome her emotional stunting and become a more complete person.

Before I knew it, the sun was starting to set. We were close to reaching the forest. We wouldn't have much luck finding Sakura during the low light of the evening, so I kept an eye out for a good place to stop and rest. The large number of agricultural areas around the town made it difficult, as most groves and small woods had been cut down to make room for the walls and roads. Eventually we

stumbled across a fairly sizable area that was good enough for a night's rest. Dalston wasn't happy about stopping, but when I explained that we'd have to trudge through a dangerous forest in the dark, he relented and pitched his tent away from ours.

We got a fire going to keep things warm. I sat across from Dalston and picked at my flaying skin. "I hope you have a good plan for when you speak with her, because your past approach isn't going to work."

Dalston exhaled, "Ah. I really don't know what to say, but I have to try and get through to her."

"You're being too idealistic. Think about the worst case and go from there."

"And what would that be?"

"Her trying to stab you."

"She'd never do that."

"I don't care, that's the worst-case scenario. You should always think about it."

Dalston was struck silent again as he considered what I had said. At least I hoped that he'd accept that things weren't going to be as simple as appealing to how things used to be. I finished my meal and headed off to get an early night's sleep.

This all hinged on us finding her first.