

When the dust had settled over the camp, Dalston was left prostrated on his knees in front of Sakura, begging and pleading with me not to hurt her. I had already said that such a thing wasn't going to happen with her tied up like this – I needed her for something else first. The real umbrage I had taken was with Dalston himself, who had stupidly put himself into range so that Sakura could use him as a human shield. It was a miracle that neither of us hit him and made him take a nap too.

“You almost got us killed!”

“I can't let her die!” Dalston threw his hands against the ground and roared, “She's like a daughter to me! She's been the only thing keeping me going since that damned plague swept through; you have no idea how happy I was for her parents when they gave birth to her. To have a chance at experiencing what it was like to have a family, like I did!”

A crow cawed in the distance as I stepped back and took a second to reset.

“You replaced your own daughter with her.”

Dalston hung his head in shame, “Aye. I did. And now look at what she's done. Perhaps what happened to me was poetic, I hope to the gods that it wasn't my guiding hand that drove her down such a dark path.”

I shook my head, “She's been thinking this before you even met, I already told you that. She's an outworlder, but that's no excuse for her behaviour. It'd be unacceptable where we came from too. I'm offering you a way out of this – but you both need to agree to it.”

“Or?”

“What do you think will happen if you refuse?”

Dalston grimaced at the dark warning I was giving him. There was only one way that she was getting away from me alive, and it demanded two things of her. She needed to help me get the relic back from Derian, and then I needed to be certain that she wouldn't attack me again. She was too dangerous to be left alone to her own devices. She was constructing a build specifically designed to target me and me alone. I couldn't leave things to chance or trust her word. She was a duplicitous person at heart.

“But if you do agree, there'll be nothing more for us to do. You can go back to Blackwake, presuming you can convince her, and I get what I want.”

He frowned, “How can you be so sure that she won't come after you again?”

“I'll explain when she wakes up. Let's get going before a bear shows up and tries to eat her.”

With a deep sigh I walked to her prone body and hoisted it up with one arm, tucking her beneath my wing and lugging her about like a sack of potatoes. For anyone else, carrying a full-grown person in this way would be a bridge too far, but Stigma had given me more than enough strength to do just that. Though I quickly thought twice about it as she still managed to throw off my balance. I settled on holding her over my shoulders in a fireman's carry instead. It was going to be a long, irritating journey to get back to town. I hoped that the fight had sobered Dalston enough to keep him from annoying me again.

Tahar led us back along the trail we used to reach the camp. The second time was much faster, and soon we found a road that ran down alongside one of the farms that surrounded the woodlands. I wondered how long it would take Sakura to come to and start resisting me. At that moment, she

finally started to stir. She was in for a nasty surprise when she discovered that we'd stripped most of her gear after knocking her out. I didn't want her pulling any dirty tricks to get away after working so hard to catch her. Dalston was straight by my side and making sure that she was okay. Her skull was pretty thick, so I wasn't worried about us causing serious damage.

While I was anticipating a flurry of flailing limbs and screams of protest, she remained calm and mostly silent. Dalston continued to fuss over her until she tried to motion him away with a flick of her head.

"Sakura, are you okay?"

"Why did you lead them to me?"

The first question was bound to me the most cutting – and Dalston was taken aback by her accusatory tone. He was the one who had given us the information that led us to her, but he wouldn't have been able to follow up solo. He needed us to help him track her down, so I wasn't certain that assigning him the full sum of the blame was fair.

"He didn't. He needed us to track you down," I explained, since Dalston didn't like facing uncomfortable inquiries from his surrogate daughter. "You've been a serious pain in my ass for a long while now – turns out that your three-act structure theory was a load of shit, who knew."

"What makes you think that this is the last time we'll fight?"

"Because if you don't agree to my terms, you won't be getting out of those ropes alive."

"I'm not agreeing to anything with a demon like you," she sniped, getting a momentary glimpse of the horns starting to break through my hairline. I found a nice spot to sit her down and decided that now was the time to sort things before we reached the town. She rested against a stone wall with a firm expression, not willing to show any signs of weakness in front of me or Dalston. Tahar and Cali loomed over my shoulders like a pair of enforcers.

"Who gave you the sword?" I demanded. I wanted to know if they'd asked her to target me.

"I don't know their name, and I'm not giving you any more details about how I got it."

"Did they tell you to come after me?"

Sakura remained still, refusing to provide a clear answer.

"Alright – since you don't feel like talking, let's hash out this contract before we get back into town. I'll let you go, no harm done, if you help me with something. You're lucky that you have some use, or I'd just have cut you down on the spot."

"I'm not agreeing to anything."

"I don't need you alive, you know. There's a bounty on your head that I can turn in, dead or alive."

"So why am I still alive? You keep contradicting yourself."

I gave her a withering look; "Because I'd rather resolve this without needing to kill you. Contrary to your own perceptions, I'm not some wanton murderer pillaging and slicing his way through the good people of the Federation. I try to avoid it when I can, and the reason we're still talking about this is because there's a way for me to get what I want without killing you first. You can walk away none the worse for wear."

Sakura's lips were pulled thin as she considered my offer; she was definitely going to find my offer unpalatable when I actually revealed what it was. If she thought that there was any way for her to get out of this without going along with me, she was going to hold off and hope that it came to pass. Her gaze kept flickering over to Dalston, who I presumed she would ask to loosen her binds while we weren't looking so that she could make a run for it. I wasn't going to let her, and Dalston was an unknown quantity. Just how far did his loyalty to her even go?

"I can't make you go back to Blackwake, but I can stop you from trying to kill me. So, my trade is thus; you come with me back to Bristwithe and help me trick a local noble into giving up some information that I need, and then I use Stigma to bind you to an oath of loyalty. Once that's done – you won't be able to raise a weapon against me again."

Dalston objected, "Isn't that brainwashing? A dark magic most foul!"

"Would you rather that, or have me kill her? It seems a damn sight more ethical to me."

His opinion wasn't the concern. Sakura would need to consent to the magical oath to be bound by it. Unlike the domineering brainwashing that needed more magical power, the oath of loyalty was much cheaper because it needed agreement from both parties. It wasn't a total grip on her mind and faculties, but a simple statement that would keep her from betraying me. It wouldn't mean that she'd follow my orders.

Sakura was still hung up on her idea of destiny though; "I can't allow a fiend like you to roam free, never again to be challenged! How many people could you hurt if I wasn't there to stop you?"

"That's rich coming from you," I grunted, "Robbery, battery, you have a rap sheet a mile long. You didn't even try to cover it up or hide your identity. You're not the paragon of virtue that you seem to think you are."

"I've seen first-hand the consequences of your choices, Ren. Your purposeful ignorance does not erase the men and women who have died by your hand. How many more cities will you turn into rubble before your wants and needs are satisfied?"

I kicked Sakura in the face, slamming the back of her head against the brickwork and leaving a bloody, muddy stain across the bridge of her nose. Dalston tried to intervene, but Cali grabbed him around the neck and dragged him out of the way as he cried out in protest. Sakura grit her teeth and struggled in place, unable to assuage the pain that was running through her body. A trail of blood had started to leak down onto her upper lip.

"I get it. I get it. I know where you got all of that experience from. Since you already know about what happened in Pascen, I presume that's where you went to fight some powerful enemies right? The perfect place to grind for everything you need." The rumours about powerful monsters emerging in the ruins of the Duchy were well known by this point. Ryan had told me about them before we left him behind to come to Bristwithe.

Dalston was still scuffling with Cali behind us, "Stop hitting her!"

"This is your last warning, Sakura. You're going to agree to what I just offered or you're going to have to deal with a lot worse than a bloody nose. It's a pretty simple choice. Do you want to live, or do you want to die?"

Sakura's face twisted as she realised just what kind of situation she had found herself in. There'd be no heroic rescue or narrative contrivances to save her here. We were in the middle of nowhere,

miles away from the nearest major urban area. The only friend she had left was Dalston, and he was easily being handled by a woman two heads shorter than him. Cali had put the man into a full chokehold, with one arm pulled around his back. What she was thinking, I could only theorise. If she was still fully invested into her own personal storyline as a conquering hero, she'd probably moved the goalposts and started rationalising it as her 'lowest point,' from which she'd emerge stronger and more prepared for our next fight.

Even if there would be no next fight.

What she needed to do was buy time – so she nodded numbly to my demands and gave up on arguing with me. This discussion would only flare up again if I gave it time to fester, so the easiest solution was to make her abide by my whims before we even reached the town. I drew Stigma and pulled her over into a kneeling position. I placed the blunt edge of the sword against her shoulder as if to knight her. It took me a moment to recall the lengthy vow. It had been a very long time since Stigma had suggested using it on Cali.

"By the grace of the thousand maws, the eternal hunger, I pronounce thee as bound to an oath. Never shall you draw your blade against me. Never shall you doubt my command. We are one in spirit and body. You are my arm, I am your mind. I [anoint] you as my thrall, eternal and ambitious."

I felt a thrum of power run through me and diffuse into Sakura's body. Whatever she thought the spell would do, she clearly didn't take it seriously. There was no objection from her body. Stigma's ghostly visage smirked from behind the wall. "Oh dear, oh dear. It appears that she consented to the vow without understanding what it meant."

Sakura's plan to delay the inevitable relied on her ignorance. She smiled like she'd won one over on me. She could still run away, but she could never sabotage me. The magic I had installed into her mind would prevent her from working against my interests on purpose. To her, all that mattered was that she had earned one more day to try and wriggle out of this situation. Sakura was fallible just like everyone else; she had made a serious miscalculation by not resisting the vow while she had the chance.

Cali released Dalston, and he scurried over to clean her face with a cloth while I considered our next move. We needed to find Derian and have him hand over the relic. I didn't trust the guy one bit. He was going to try and have his cake and eat it too. He wanted to keep his 'immortality,' while also avenging the theft of his property by my capture of Sakura. That meant it had to be a trade that happened in person, and not through a proxy. Now that I had Sakura, I could make some simple demands under the guise of desiring a fair trade. He wouldn't get her until I saw the relic. Not that he was actually getting her. I didn't care one bit about that. I was planning to cut her loose and stop worrying about it. The bounty on her head wasn't tempting enough with all of the money that I'd made off of Derian and his weapon collecting.

Nobles; they were a bunch of cheap bastards come what may.

"I can't believe that worked," I scoffed, "Did you think that it was an empty threat?"

Sakura snickered, "What does that mean?"

To prove my point, I pulled her back up to her feet and cut the ropes binding her hands. I then waved to Cali, "Sword."

With a curious gaze, she handed Veritas back over to me. Sakura worked the kinks out of her joints, completely unaware that I was offering the legendary weapon back to her. She did a double take

before snatching it and hopping back into fighting distance. I stood in front of her with my arms crossed and no intention of responding in kind. A few seconds passed as she tried to parse my intent by giving her the weapon.

“Go ahead, kill me.”

Sakura naturally believed that I was trying to trick her. She hesitated, unsure as to what the catch behind my challenge really was. Stigma was cackling up a storm atop her perch on the stone wall. She was loving every second of this, because she knew the same thing that I did. There was simply no way that Sakura could will herself to hurt me now. She tried, god knows she tried, she raised Veritas into the air and brought it down with all the strength and murderous intent she could muster, only to stop inches away from my neck. I almost flinched. Almost.

Tahar breathed a sigh of relief as my gamble paid off, but there was never any risk involved. Sakura was stunned. Why couldn't she make her arms move? Why did it feel so revolting to try and harm me when I was her nemesis? She felt physically ill just thinking about it - like she was stabbing her best friend in the back like an honourless cur. Sakura roared in protest; “What the hell did you do, bastard?”

“I did exactly what you agreed to. That oath keeps you from laying so much as a finger on me. You thought I was lying the whole time, that's why you didn't resist it.”

Sakura's face dropped like a stone as she discovered the truth. My words were no bluff, I had been deathly serious about robbing her of the ability to fight me. Stigma's howls of laughter were so loud that they were starting to distract me. She was relishing every second of it. Sakura was motionless as I reached out and snatched Veritas back into our possession. She could feel it, the way that her mind and body resisted her will in an unnatural way.

“Now you're going to help me get one over on Derian Rivers. You might not be able to attack me, but I sure as hell can do the same to you.”

Tahar retied her wrists but untied her legs. It would be easier to make the journey if she could walk, a second tether was attached to Tahar's waist so that she couldn't make a break for it without having to pull her captor along with her. It was rare to find a mostly compliant bounty target like this. There was only one way that this situation could end, her helping me and earning her freedom.

She didn't look happy about it, “Fine. I'll play your stupid game. But the moment these ropes come off, I'll find a way to break this curse and kill you for real.”

“Good luck with that,” I said with a roll of my eyes. Never one to give up, this girl.

