

100 – Clandestine Transaction

“I hate when they do *this...*” Renji grumbled as our Party were walking towards the edge of the village.

The first thing he had done after we arrived to Sacramento was to seek out the local Huntsman and Alchemist, to ask for advice on how to most easily find Buzzing Rocks for the Gathering Quest. The Huntsman had informed us that the Alchemist had already collected all the ones from this season, so we immediately went to his home, a tapering tower, which sort of look like a giant party-hat covered in blue candlewax. No sooner had Renji asked about the Buzzing Rocks he had collected, than the woman had said that she would part with ten in exchange for a favour.

“Are they allowed to do that?” I asked.

“There aren’t any laws against it, but it *is* frowned upon. People like her don’t want to go through the official channels to have Quests set up, so they hoard things that they know Adventurers often take Quests to gather and then use them to barter with them to take on tasks that haven’t been appraised by Guild Representatives, i.e. they end up usually being really dangerous.”

We reached the end of the village, where the road led down a gentle slope to the Whispering Wilds. The Alchemist had asked us to hunt down and kill a Black Hound Matriarch, which Renji had said was equivalent to a Seeker-ranked Bounty Quest.

“I don’t think Emily should go with us,” I said and my party came to a halt.

“Are you just going to leave me here by myself?” she asked, horrified.

I shook my head. “I’ll stay as well.”

Renji considered it, then looked at Elye. “Just the two of us? Are you okay with that?”

“*Yes, let us hunt!*”

“I’ll have my familiars keep an eye on you,” I told my friends, “But don’t take any risks.”

“Of course. Though I’m sure Elye and I can handle this. You should’ve seen her when we exterminated that Black Hound den, she’s like a prodigy with a bow.”

I smiled. “Still, don’t get complacent.”

“*Yes yes, we will be careful! Come on, Renji, hunting time!*”

He smiled, then said, “I’ll keep her leash tight.”

“We will handle the deliveries in the meantime,” I decided. Renji began looking through his bags for the items and surprised me when he pulled an entire saucepan out of his belt bag, as well as the stack of letters, and the wooden crate which clinked with bottles of some kind from his other bags.

“How did you fit *all of that* in there?” Emily asked.

“Practice,” he said, though it was clear that there was something abnormal about them, as the bags were smaller than the items.

“Are those bags magical?” I asked.

He nodded. “They’re not capable of holding as much as a ‘proper’ magical bag from the games I used to play, but they are slightly bigger on the inside.”

“I wonder how they make them,” I contemplated.

Renji shrugged. “No idea, but they’re pricey. Each was about five gold crowns. There are backpacks with a similar concept that can hold an entire suit of armour, but they’re ridiculously expensive. And they also don’t reduce the weight of the items inside, so you’re still carrying the same weight.”

“Where do they sell them? I’ve never seen them in any stores before.”

“Only place I know of is in Evergreen, a tailor shop called ‘The Golden Needle’. But maybe the place Ludwig mention, Fortress Major, could have some.”

“You think we should go there?”

“Might as well. If it’s on the way to Evergreen, it seems a no-brainer.”

I nodded, holding the letters and the saucepan, while Emily took the crate. “Alright, you should go now before it gets dark.”

“Understood, Captain!” Renji said with a salute and a grin.

Emily laughed at his antics, while I just shook my head with a smile. We watched the two of them walk off towards the forest, before its gloom quickly swallowed them as they passed through the treeline.

Sera, could you follow them, just in case?

“I was already going to do that!”

Thank you, I replied, which only seemed to annoy her more.

“Where should we start?” Emily asked, while tracking Seramosa, who was flying off towards the forest, with her gaze.

“The saucepan was for the Tavernkeeper, which should be just past those two houses and around the corner. We might as well secure lodgings there too, while we’re at it.” We had left our horses out

front of the place already, where a bored-looking youth was left in charge of watching the horses. He was no skilled stablehand, but I doubted we’d have our mounts stolen in this place, remote as it were.

I wasn’t used to a lot of heavy lifting but Emily seemed to have a good grip on the crate, and wasn’t complaining about the work, as we made our way to the tavern.

Unlike Altar, the streets of Sacrament were unpaved dirt, with a few rocks placed at odd intervals, and, thanks to the recent rain, it was a bit muddy in places where water had pooled. Since the village lay in a valley and street drains weren’t utilised here, I was fairly certain this place would be flooded pretty quickly once the rain really picked up, since the earth could only absorb so much at any given time.

The tavern was a square brick of a building, seemingly made from wood and stone, and covered in a thin layer of off-white yellowish candlewax. Our horses were parked out front, where the stablehand was snoozing in a simple chair up against the façade, and they turned to look at us as we passed by. I shifted my grip on the saucepan to pat them as we passed.

We went in through the open double doors, our muddy boots clunking on the wooden floor. I immediately went over to the large counter that seemed to serve as a bar as well as a kitchen, behind which stood a burly man. There was also a board with keys that had wooden tags with room numbers on them.

“I have a delivery for the Tavernkeeper,” I said, placing the saucepan on the counter, while rummaging through my pouch for the flier.

“That’s me,” said the burly man, picking up the saucepan by its long handle and turning it around a bit. “Arrived quicker than I thought, but where’s the lid?”

“It didn’t come with a lid,” I replied. “I need you to sign *this*.” I handed him the flier and he pulled a pencil out of thin air, as though a sleight-of-hand trick, then scribbled his name. It was impossible for me to tell what it said, even with Omniglot.

“Guess I’ll have to make do. Thanks kid.”

“Can you tell me where the Chief lives?” I asked, while Emily stood behind me, her focus elsewhere.

“He’s a few spots over from the Alchemist, in the black house.”

“Thank you. I’d also like to rent some rooms for me and my Party, since it looks like we’ll stay the night.”

“Sure, how many?”

“Four of us, two rooms would be fine.”

“For one night that’ll be eight silvers,” the Tavernkeeper said, pulling two keys from his board. Only one other key seemed to be missing.

“Eight? That’s a lot.”

“You see any other lodgings around here? Plus dinner and breakfast are included.”

I thought about it. “Make it seven and you have a deal.” I pulled out the exact amount of coins and placed them on the counter in front of him. He glanced down at them, then up at me, before handing me the keys.

As he took the coins, he said, “For the record, I would’ve gone down to six if you asked.”

“I’ll keep that in mind for next time,” I told him, and he laughed in response.

I went over to where Emily waited, while putting the keys in my bag, and noticed that she was looking off to a table near the back, where three men were talking. From their auras and appearances, it seemed like they were doing a trade, with the seller having a bodyguard with him. The surprising part was that the bodyguard was a Vanguard, though he wore simple leather armour and was probably younger than Renji, but seemed confident and self-sure.

“You seeing anything?” I asked Emily.

She nodded slowly. “The box,” she whispered.

The box on the table was maybe big enough to fit a watermelon and it was made from simple crude iron charred black, with a handle on top and a little door on one side to open it, almost like a lantern, though far too big. I didn’t see what she was seeing though.

Karasumany, lend me a clone, I commanded and held out my right hand. A *CAW!* came from outside and a crow flew in through the door and alighted on my Ifrit Claw. Only the tavernkeeper seemed to notice the bird, but he just remained quiet, probably knowing to leave well enough alone.

I connected my essence to the crow and watched through its eyes. From the box billowed black smoke, as though a ghostly fire was trapped within.

“Must be a supernatural object or maybe a Possessed Item they’re trading,” I commented, somewhat unsettled to see such a thing taking place, as I was fairly certain it was a clandestine transaction.

The bodyguard noticed us watching and I took Emily by the arm, leaving out the open doors before the guy could start a fight with us for having seen something we shouldn’t have.

I guess this is the exact kind of place for such trades... also explains the other missing key from the Tavernkeeper’s board.

As we walked down the steps outside, Emily said, “Did you hear the voice that came from the box?”

“Voice?” I asked. “No.”

“It kept repeating ‘*I will find you*,’” she replied, looking very spooked.

“Come on, let’s go deliver the rest,” I urged, not wanting her to dwell on it.

Karasumany, keep an eye on that box, I commanded. It couldn’t hurt to be cautious.