

We were back in our old patch along the side of the road. The fire pit we had built was still here, untouched – so we settled down and decided to sleep through the night and make the journey back in the morning. I pulled Cali aside while Tahar and Dalston set up the camp and spoke with her about my plans. “I want you to sleep with Sakura in your tent – I don’t trust Dalston to keep his hands to himself, and if Sakura runs away we’ll be in deep shit.”

Cali nodded, “Okay, but let me gag her as well.”

She wouldn’t like it, but if needs must...

“Fine.”

The concession was enough to get Cali on board. When we returned, the fire was already lit and our three companions were getting comfortable around it. Sakura was seated with Dalston, who had continued to dote on her like a lost child since she accepted the vow of loyalty. It was clearly irritating her. She finally snapped when he held a piece of trail mix up to her mouth.

“I don’t need your damn help! Leave me alone!”

Dalston pulled a face like someone had sunk a dagger into her heart. He went limp in his seat and stared at the floor for almost twenty minutes afterwards. Tahar reached over and untied her hands again so that she could eat normally. Sakura stared at me with murderous intent that would never be fulfilled. “You don’t look so happy about turning me into your pet,” she started, “I thought getting payback was the only thing you cared about.”

I swallowed my food and laughed, “Why would I be happy about you leading me on a wild goose chase? I don’t do any of this because I want to, it’s because I *have* to. I’d happily take an easy, slow life working a normal nine to five job over this.”

Sakura frowned at my admission. That was the one thing that she didn’t want to hear. She had gotten to live a life of high adventure, just like the ones she had always read about in light novels and manga from our old world. It was every idle fantasy she had ever held coming to life. It was easy to think of this place as a spotless fantasy when you weren’t on the bottom rung of it. Sakura had lived an upbringing of relative privilege, where all of the world’s problems were solved by noble individuals putting a stop to injustice perpetrated by a wrongful party. Ending inequality wasn’t exciting and it couldn’t be done by one person. Stories didn’t tend to focus on ideas like those because it was something that most people couldn’t begin to grasp.

People are selfish. If you tell them that they can make a difference by adjusting their behaviour or making the smallest possible compromises, they would refuse nine times out of ten. I wouldn’t describe it as a natural phenomenon, but when you live in a society where property and wealth make the difference between life and death, people would become conditioned to act that way from birth. It was as close to natural as you could get without actually being there.

“You know what I really miss? Running hot water and proper plumbing. And being able to get to places in a reasonable time without having to walk the whole way or use a horse. You give me a choice, and I’m going back home...”

I paused for a moment and considered my own conclusion. Tahar and Cali were sitting right next to me and listening to me opining about the good old days. As much as I missed my family – I couldn’t justify abandoning them after forming a connection like this. Those conveniences were nice, but I had new obligations and relationships to worry about now. For all I knew, the old me was declared

dead and buried decades ago, even assuming that the flow of time was still the same between worlds.

“...Or maybe not. I don’t know. I just don’t get what you find so captivating about this.”

Sakura’s look of confusion was genuine, “What is there to not like? We’re living in a world of high fantasy, magic, and game stats. I love it!” She had reverted somewhat to her original character, rather than the aloof heroic persona she had been presenting to me before. I really didn’t know how to discern how genuine she was being.

“But for most people those stats don’t even matter. You can only go so far with them without a helping hand. What if you were in a position where there was no prospect of departing for an adventure or seeing any of those amazing fantasy things? It wouldn’t matter.”

Dalston returned from the dead as he finally caught up with the discussion, “D-Do you mean that Ren is correct about you being an outworlder?”

Sakura rolled her eyes, “What gave you that impression, moron?”

He was *really* holding onto hope that she was a native birth, though that did raise a lot of questions. Was Sakura reincarnated into the body after she was born, or was Sakura always the baby that grew inside of her mother? Clearly the rules were fast and loose when it came to doling out outworlders, I was left outside of an orphanage for example. Did I even have a mother here, or was I generated out of thin air for the sole purpose of going through all of this trouble?

Sakura’s implication that someone had given her Veritas had me wondering. What if my meeting with Stigma was arranged too? Though that would demand a level of foresight and planning that most could not execute on. The sword had been passed from person to person – to interfere in that process would be very difficult. The man I took it from was a nobody, a random mercenary lying dead on the battlefield. There was no way of them knowing that I’d be the one to take it from him. There were other scavengers picking through the corpses with me at the time. They could have just as easily found themselves in my situation.

Dalston looked back to the ground, “I can’t believe it. I was there when you were born.”

“Just because she’s an outworlder doesn’t mean she wasn’t *born*,” I explained, “I think a lot of people who get sent here have different circumstances.

“I don’t get it, I really don’t...”

Sakura cut back in; “I’ve told you a thousand times before, I don’t like you trying to control my life. But you never listened to me – you thought I was stupid, that I didn’t know what I wanted. And even when I leave that shitty city behind you keep following me everywhere. Why can’t you accept that?”

“Because you still act like a damn kid! You’re trying to tell me that you’ve lived two lifetimes? You didn’t learn a damn thing in either of them!”

Both parties were getting hot under the collar as the argument intensified, so I decided to put an end to it. “You two won’t agree on anything. So save the effort and shut it.” Dalston deflated and skulked away to get out of eyesight. Sakura crossed her arms and turned away with a pout. This was the girl who was calling everyone NPCs with near murderous intent a while ago, but now she was acting like a scolded child. The camp fell quiet, aside from the occasional crackle of the fire licking away at the encroaching darkness.

Why was she trying to be a hero in the first place? What could one person hope to achieve?

Our eyes locked and a silent battle started as we tried to size each other up. Two different people, with very different backgrounds and personalities, but now a peer level of power and strength. She had somehow come around to a kind of ruthless behaviour that I only assigned to myself. She was like a rabid dog – doing what she pleased and not letting other's expectations stop her. I had resolved to do something similar, but unlike Sakura, I enjoyed living quietly. I didn't resent every person I saw or believed them to be obstacles. I did the things I did because I had to.

I didn't need to be a hero because of my power. I could save many more lives by retiring. I'd already killed dozens of people across the two sides of the border. I'd unintentionally killed thousands by agreeing to the plan to remove the giants from Pascen. Stigma had only brought suffering to a lot of different people in ways that I couldn't possibly know or comprehend. When I finally recovered all of her disparate pieces, I wanted to put the sword away and forget it ever happened before something else terrible came about. Some people would respond to adversity with boundless ambition, some would think the opposite. I had lived through so much deprivation that I'd have happily accepted the bare minimum.

Sakura had the bare minimum, no, she had even more than that. She had a happy family and stable household. She wanted to throw all of that away for the sake of living her fantasy, to become a hero at some indeterminate point in the future. Her immediate aggression towards me came off as nothing more than her attempting to prove her own theories right. I looked scary and I had the evil sword – it was easy for her to follow that trail of logic to a certain conclusion. I was the villain of this piece.

I broke the silence as Tahar started cleaning up after our meal.

"None of this would have happened if you hadn't attacked me first. We could have gone our separate ways, and we wouldn't have ended up in this situation."

Sakura scoffed, "Blaming this on me? You're so blind to your own deeds that it's hilarious."

"Why don't you go stop the war? It'll be a much better use of your talents than chasing this thief around."

I placed my cup down on the log and stood up to stretch my legs. Tahar was a godsend when it came to pitching and maintaining camp. She was very skilled at everything that came with it. She knew the best spots to pitch up, she was a great chef, and she kept everything tidy. If she had the proper ingredients she could even make us food that buffed our stats. It was just a little wasteful when I was already so overpowered versus everyone I met. The ingredients didn't come cheap. Before I could check out the tent and designate who would go where, Cali pulled me aside.

"Are you sure about this? She's going to try and get away from us."

"If she does, we'll just kill her. She can't fight back against me now."

"I know that Stigma is capable of many great feats – but I still find myself in doubt about that, even with your display of reckless abandon earlier. I enjoyed it, by the way."

"Of course you would. Her not cutting my head off is proof enough for me, and we're keeping her and Dalston apart while we're sleeping here. I'll ask Tahar to make sure that they can't undo her binds when we get her into one of the tents. Anyway, he's not going to dare try and release her with you around."

"I'd much rather sleep with you," Cali quipped in her typical deadpan manner.

"Pft. Are you sure you don't want payment in gold instead?"

Cali rolled her eyes and followed me back to the campfire. Sakura was starting to grow increasingly irritable, so I motioned to Tahar for her to truss her up good so we could go and sleep off the fatigue. A second rope was tied around her mouth and forced between her lips so that she wouldn't make too much noise. Cali just found her annoying; I'd seen that elf sleep through much louder noises than someone shouting right into her ear. Cali hoisted Sakura up and marched her over to the tent, tossing her inside and giving me one last look before heading in herself.

Tahar was quick to jump at the chance, "We will sleep together tonight?"

"Yeah. Come on, I want to get some rest before she causes trouble again."

It was a tight fit with Tahar's larger body inside, but we managed to squeeze in with some room to spare. Tahar and Cali usually slept in the same tent together, but with Sakura taking her place the arrangement had changed. There wasn't going to be any funny business though. Both of us were going to be bundled up tight in several layers of blankets, clothes and our sleeping bags. Cali might have enjoyed the touch of cold against her naked skin, but we didn't share her love for casual nudity. I had to theorise that Ashmorn were simply more resistant to the cold than us. With the front flaps pulled closed and both of us keeping warm, I shut my eyes and drifted off into a fast slumber.

Tomorrow we'd see what Derian thought of our new catch.