

THISTLE ORIGINS UNWANTED VISITORS



Thistle Origins: Unwanted Visitors

“... and THAT, my friend, is how my old man got his hands on this infamous magma heart! ...only to drop it again seconds later because as you can probably guess, it was rather hot when he first found it. It’s considerably much more “cool” now, but lemme put this away before I accidentally burn the entire shop down.”

Where someone would typically be self-aware enough to know that pestering a shopkeeper for hours a day would be a nuisance, this wasn’t the case for Mathilda and Trista.

Trista was the owner of Bronzeloot’s very own Adventure Shop. She loved telling stories about her family and their long list of exciting endeavors, that most people seem to think are false and made up, or at least altered for the sake of getting customers’ attention.



“You know, you could always take the job here and become my assistant,” said Trista. “That way you’ll be able to hear all my stories whenever there are no customers’ around.”

Just the thought of working with Trista got Mathilda excited. Being able to hear about her family’s many ventures every day would be more than thrilling.

“Aaw Trista! Thank you so much for the offer, but I’d likely feel bad about leaving the restaurant behind. We’re a team there, ya know?”

Trista, not surprised by the response, just smiled and replied: “That’s fine, kid. But you’re always welcome here if things aren’t going your way. Feels like forever since I opened up for job applications and I’ve yet to receive even one... I guess that goes to show how this town is way past its prime.”

“You really think it’s that bad now?”

“ I absolutely do, Honey. Tell me, how many people do you see in this store right now?”

“ I uuuh... I don’t see-”

“THAT’S RIGHT!” Trista shouted, interrupting Mathilda, catching her off-guard.

“This town has lost its spirit, Mathilda! Bronzeloot used to be buzzing with people hungry for adventure! Daring to go where no one else wanted to go, just for the fun of it! THAT is the Bronzeloot my parents grew up in. Now everyone just sits on their bums watching TV all day, like there’s nothing left in the world to see.”

Trista’s rant caught Mathilda off-guard.

“Trista, I- I don’t think it’s all bad though. The folks here are still alive and kicking, just not in the way you want them to.” Mathilda gives her a compassionate smile. “I for one still want to be an adventurer, just like my parents were. I feel like I have a reputation to live up to as the daughter of Chops & Alice Thistle. I’ll go do that adventuring for you eventually, and come back with my own stories to tell”

Trista let out a deep sigh. “Yeah. You’re right. I just wish more stuff was happening around here, because right now unless some outside travelers come by and want to browse the store, I pretty much only got you and my stories to keep me company. I appreciate it, by the way.”

”Oh! you’re very welcome! I got more stuff to do before dinner so I better head out. It was nice talking to ya again!”

Mathilda had been meaning to ask Trista for something that meant a lot to her, but every time she got the chance, she hesitated. Now she was on her way out of the shop, going to buy those groceries that she had promised to get for her mom. Shortly after closing the front doors behind her, she stopped walking, reconsidering if maybe now would be the best time to ask Trista. She turned her head to look through the large front doors’ vertical glass windows adventure shop, to see that Trista had immediately turned bored after Mathilda had left. Trista was yet again, leaning over her desk, holding her head with her left hand while toying around with the cash register. Trista saw that Mathilda was looking back at her and the very moment they got eye contact Mathilda quickly turned her head.

“Shoot... Now it’s gonna look super weird if I don’t go back.” She thought to herself.

She turned around and walked back towards the adventure shop.



Trista seemed mildly entertained by Mathilda's inner distress.

As she opened the doors, the doorbell rang, and Trista jumped off her chair behind the counter.
"Ah! If it isn't my favorite customer, Misses... Uhm. shoot. What was your name again? Forgive me. It's been so long."

"Yes. Nice one Trista."

"I know. I'm a comedic genius. Anyway, what's on your mind, honey?"

Mathilda took a deep breath

"I've been meaning to ask if you'd like to... perhaps sometime when you're free, go on an adventure with me? Only if you want to, of course! I- I wouldn't ask if I knew you were super busy-"

Amidst her request, Mathilda was visibly nervous.

"Woah Woah, Honey, don't sweat it haha!"

Trista looked with a big smirk at Mathilda, whose face at this point was more red than usual.

"You know what?" Trista said and shook her finger. "Let's meet up at the saloon around closing time. Then we can discuss what kind of journey we'd want to venture on."

Mathilda's face lights up. "You really mean that!?"

"Sure, Hon. I wouldn't live up to my family legacy if I refused to go now, would I?"

"That's awesome to hear, Trista! Thank you so much-" Mathilda interrupted herself as a new thought abruptly came to mind.

"Wait, the saloon? Aren't there gonna be any performances there tonight?" She asked.

"Nah, Sweetie. Performances are usually on the weekends and from what I can remember, today's no special occasion. Why? What's wrong?"

Mathilda crossed her arms and looked shyly away: "You know... her..."

Right then it hit Trista. "OOHH Right! Right, right, right it's that uhm, your musically gifted friend, right?"

"Ex-friend." Mathilda mumbled.

"Yes... Right. Sorry, I tend to forget details like that."

There was an awkward pause. None of the two really knew how to snappily change the subject.

Trista's concern began to show.

"That singer, huh? She really hurt you that bad?"

Mathilda had previously mentioned her friendship with the beautiful, young singer from the town's saloon, but she never elaborated further or explained why their relationship had grown so sour.

"Honey, I don't mean to be rude, but don't you think it's about time you fill me in on what happened? For your own sake? Get it off your chest?"

Mathilda raised her head to face Trista, sending her an almost pleading look as if to signal that she wasn't ready to talk about it.

"It's okay. Don't worry about it. I wouldn't have asked if I didn't care about you, Mathilda..."

Trista walked away from the counter and up to Mathilda, comfortably putting her hand on her shoulder.

"...but if you ever want to talk about it, or anything else for that matter, then I am always available. Heck, I don't have too much else going on."

"I appreciate it." Mathilda said and smiled.

Trista lifted her hand off Mathilda's shoulder and swiftly turned around.

"I'll see ya in a few hours, Mathilda!" Trista said with a cheery tone. - "We'll make some great plans!"

"Great! I'll see you then!" Mathilda waved goodbye as she finally, for the second time that day, walked out the front doors and heard the doorbell ring behind her.

She exited the store, relieved and excited that she had seemingly grown a bigger bond with her idol than she had expected. She was still a little concerned about their upcoming planning at the saloon, thinking that the singer might show up even though Trista claimed that there was no show going on tonight, but anyhow, she was still looking forward to it.

She jumped on her dad's motorcycle that she had borrowed, and drove off to do her duties.

Later, when the sun had settled and the stores had closed for the day, Mathilda headed back to Bronzeloot Village. The town was usually very silent in the evenings unless some sort of event was happening, all that could be heard was the wind blowing and the crackles of old wooden buildings that had yet to be renovated.

She parked her motorcycle outside the saloon and walked up to the front doors, where she could hear the radio music from inside the building, assuring her that there was no show happening at the moment.

She pushed the door and entered the saloon. It was a weekday so there were expectedly not many people in the saloon on this late evening.

There was only Candace Caramel; the bartender, and a pack of young men keeping her busy. The TV was on, displaying that show about the exceptionally vulgar Kitchen chef that gave others in the industry a good scolding, which had become weirdly popular again.

Mathilda carefully walked up to the bar, trying not to make a fuss. “Ahem. Hi, excuse me. Candace?”

The bartender groaned, seemingly annoyed by Mathilda’s presence. “Ugh... What do you want?”

“I’m so sorry to bother you but you haven’t by any chance seen Trista Truffle in the saloon this evening?”

“I don’t know any Trista, sorry to say.” Candice replied while mixing a cocktail for one of her recurring customers.

“The pig lady who runs the adventure shop? Blonde and cherry-colored hair, about this tall.”

“Aaaaah yeah, now I remember. The storytelling explorer freak. Yep, she’s something special alright.”

“Excuse me?!”

“Sorry nerd, haven’t seen her since the last time my daddy took me to that yawn-inducing store of hers, which was like... years ago.”

Mathilda had always been an easy target for Candace’s bullying, even since they were but kids in the playing field they’ve never had a liking for one another. Mathilda has tried many times to make Candace talk to her like a normal person, but her regular insults had a tendency to rile Mathilda up.



“UGH! Could’ve just said no you jerk!”

Candace began to chuckle as Mathilda frustratingly went for the exit.

“I thought you came to ask where your girlfriend had been.” Candace shouted across the room.

Mathilda stopped in place, with her back to Candace “Why would I?”

“Drop the performance, twerp. You two obviously had a thing going before your little breakup or whatever the reason is she didn’t wanna see you.”

Mathilda turned around, walking back towards Candace with her finger firmly pointing at her.

“I’ll have you know that what happened between “Her” and I is none of your business!”

Candace poured one of her customers a mug of over-priced beer, one that looked like it was way on the darker side. The strong smell of the beer made Mathilda wince. She never really understood the appeal of alcohol, safe to say she wasn’t a big fan of it.

“...So you actually haven’t seen her?” Candace asked.

“No?”

“Huh... that’s weird. I would’ve totally bet that you two had reunited and run off or something. She canceled all her performances this weekend. Thought you might have had something to do with that.”

Mathilda went numb for a second, but quickly afterward shook her head. “I don’t know anything about that.” she said and opened the saloon doors.

“HEY! IF YOU SEE HER TELL HER TO GET HER CRAP TOGETHER!!”

“SCREW YOU!”

Candace smiles for herself and pours another drink. “Always have to have the last word, don’t you?”

The doors slam shut.

The logical place to look next would of course be the Adventure Shop itself, so Mathilda decided to head over there on foot since she needed some fresh air to cool off.

The time was nearing midnight and Trista was still busy making some preparations for the upcoming week, but suddenly, five masked individuals silently entered the shop. The next thing she knew, she was being held at gunpoint.

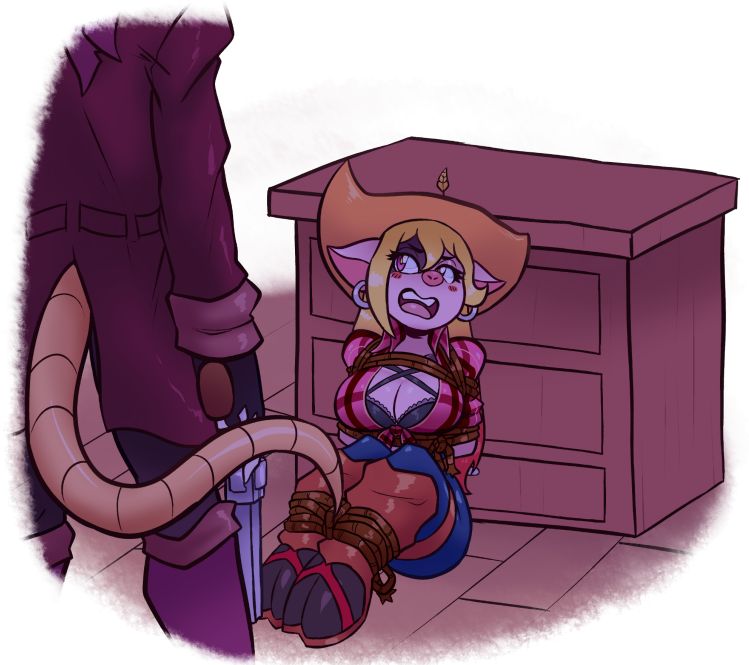
Mathilda walked through the linear, silent town on her way to the shop, still furious after her encounter with Candace. As she neared the shop, she started to hear voices from inside the store, which was strange given that few people actually visit the store, but never after closing hours. She sneaked up and leaned against the wall and took a peek through the window to see what was happening. Trista was tied up behind the counter. The robbers were sweeping the store for worthwhile loot. All but one very tall man who was standing in front of Trista with his revolver, which was abnormally big, pointed right at Trista.

Someone who was smaller than the others stood beside him, looking very uncomfortable.

“Where’d you hide it?” the tall man asked with a certain playfulness in his voice. He loaded his gun, making a quick snap sound.

“The Magma heart, dearest. You told someone about it this afternoon, now where is it?”

“Look, I’ve told you, I don’t have- Wait a minute! Were you goons spying on me?!”



One of the masked men went to the front doors and snapped off a tiny black piece of tech that had been placed fittingly between the doors and the door frame.

“Yeah that’s one way to put it.” the tall guy said and smiled.

“Aw, that’s so nice of you! Why don’t you let me put it back up sideways where it belongs? I wouldn’t want you to leave without it!”

The other goon, fed up by the response, was about to hit Trista with his rifle, but the tall one signaled him to dismiss the comment. He took a few slow steps forward to then look straight down at the helpless shopkeeper.

“Your sense of humor... I like it. You’re probably really fun at parties, and you know what? So am I.”

He grabbed Trista by her collar and lifted her up in an aggressive manner.

“What do ya say we “pig” up the pace!”

He grabbed Trista by her ropes and threw her across the store, hitting the wooden wall that Mathilda was hiding outside.

“What’s shakin’ bacon? I hope you are not too “Boared”.

Trista coughed.

“... You’re really scraping the bottom of the barrel I see. That’s rather lame.” She tried to catch her breath after the hard hit.

The masked girl looked away in disgrace and made eye contact with Mathilda who was peeking her head up behind the outside of the window.

Mathilda recognized the girl’s hairstyle, long ears and her green eyes which were vaguely hidden behind the goggles that she was wearing, clearly showing discomfort with what she was involved in. The girl distressingly shook her head, signaling Mathilda to leave, but Mathilda kept eye contact as she then boldly walked past the larger windows in the shop’s front. “Leave.” the girl whispered. Well aware that she couldn’t hear her.

The robbers turned their attention to Mathilda as she entered the shop and the doorbell rang.

The tall guy seemed thrilled

“Hello there!”

Mathilda was still looking at the masked girl, with an intense stare, and clenched fists.

“You really shouldn’t have come here.” the girl said.



Trista, who was severely weakened, began to aggressively struggle to try and break free of the ropes "NO! MATHILDA RUN!" Before she could say anymore, one of the masked men quickly beat her on the head with the handle of their rifle, knocking Trista unconscious, then gagged her with a large piece of cloth to prevent her from making more noise.

The tall guy was getting irritated by Mathilda's lack of attention. The smaller masked girl was seemingly really disturbed.

"No matter." one of the men said. "The magma heart has been found."

Trista had hidden the artifact under the slab of wood on the desk which could be removed to show a hidden space where she had more merchandise stored.

The tall guy nodded. "Welp. That's all we wanted. I dunno what Pinky here was trying to do but she sure doesn't seem faced by the idea of meeting her end."

"When I pull the trigger. Y'all better run for the back."

He loaded his revolver and raised his arm, pointing it right between Mathilda's eyes.

"ACE NO!"

The girl shouted and leaped in front of the tall guy, whose name she revealed to be Ace. She tried to slap the revolver out of Ace's hand but his grip was too tight. Her shout was so loud that all the masked men were caught off-guard.

"Shut your mouth! Are you crazy?!"

"You can't hurt Her! I won't allow it!"

Ace at first seemed upset, but his anger quickly turned to amusement, as the smile on his face grew wider.

"Well guys, would you look at this! The little bunny shows her sharp little teeth."

Ace then quickly grabbed the girl's black revolver from her holster and pushed her to the side. She stumbles and falls from the force of the push.

"Hey! What are you doing?!"

“Shut it!”

Ace slides the revolver across the floor, spinning its way on the wooden floor, stopping right in front of Mathilda’s boots.

“Okay, here’s an idea. We duel. You’ve seen the movies, right? Whoever wins gets the pig lady.”

Mathilda looked down at the revolver, then turned her head to the masked girl, whose eyes at this point was filled with despair.

She bowed down to pick it up while still keeping eye contact with the tall robber looking down at her.

The revolver felt heavy, way more so than the ones she was used to from practice range a long time ago.

“Alright Pinky. You decided to walk right into a mousetrap and now the consequences of your stupidity are gonna come hurling down! You’ve got a gun. I’ve got a gun. You know the drill.”

The black revolver almost slipped out of Mathilda’s loosened grip. Her heartbeat was speeding up. She started to believe that maybe her bold plan was gonna turn on her.

She closes her eyes, embracing for the worst possible outcome. She draws her revolver and rapidly pulls the trigger.

But nothing. No gunfire. Nothing is what happened. Just the rapid clicking of the trigger.

The revolver was jammed. The life was sucked out of her face as she felt something cold slide down her spine like the hand of death himself. She felt dizzy and the whole world fell apart as she braced herself for the bullet.

“I’ll tell you what, you’re a real cutie.”

The masked girl could be heard whispering. **“You jammed my gun?”**

Ace turned his head. **“hmm?”**

“YOU JAMMED MY GUN?! The girl yelled. “YOU ASS! YOU WERE PLANNING AGAINST ME THIS ENTIRE TIME!”

One of the robbers quickly grabbed the girl and put their hand over her mouth before she could reach Ace.

“Oh. Nonono! you’re all wrong! We just don’t trust you is all. Don’t take it personal.” Ace replied.

The girl was furious. She mumbled underneath the robber's glove. "Look who's talking about trust."

Ace was looking down and fidgeting with his revolver, seemingly amused by the chaos he was igniting within his colleague.

"Hey Pinky. Get over here." He slowly raised his gun to aim it at the girl. "Get over here, or I blow my colleague's mind out right here. That's sure to ruin some of your friend's merchandise."

Mathilda hesitated. This could go anywhere and at this point she was almost willing to just let fate have its way with her. The girl's eyes were pleading for help, but she didn't say a word. Only intense breathing underneath her mask and desperate eye contact with Mathilda.

"Sure." Mathilda mumbled. She silently walked towards Ace. Fists clenched. She walked up and stood right in front of him. He didn't say anything. He only looked down at her.

Silence

Suddenly Ace speaks. "This one's on your friend." and hits Mathilda in the side of her head with a quick, mighty punch, knocking her immediately to the ground.

"NO!!!" The girl yelled. She broke free of the robber's tight grip and leaped off the floor, launching herself at Ace, but Ace's reflexes were too quick, as he managed to grab her by her throat.



"Katie, I'm gonna be real with you for a second. There's no way you're ever gonna lead a squad on your own. Your own group let us borrow you for this job, and I'm not so sure they miss you back at your headquarters. You are a sidekick! A JOKE! You wanted this! You sit in your comfy chair, behind your monitors within your safe walls while you dream and romanticise being in the field. Well, this is it! This is the rough reality of the field. **THIS** is the dirty work the rest of us are stuck with, princess! so it would be NICE if you could just **SHUT YOUR MOUTH AND DO AS YOU'RE TOLD!**"

Ace had gotten himself all riled up. He looked at his men and signaled to them that it was time to leave. Katie gasped for air while Ace took a heavy breather.



“Welp. My mood might be ruined but at least I’ve got a snazzy looking artifact so it ain’t all bad.”

He released his grip on Katie and took a step over the beaten down, groaning mouse girl.

“You better head back to HQ quickly before these two wake up. You get to tell your group that the job was successful and climb back into your well secured ivory tower. Ain’t that great!”

He bowed down and waved at Trista, who was still lying unconscious.

“It was nice doing business with you, Lady.”

He forced out a laugh as he and the rest of the robbers went for the backdoor in which they entered.

They all disappeared. All except for Katie, the masked girl. She sat next to Mathilda who was laying on the floor, and carefully touched her shoulder.

“Mattie? Can you hear me?”

Mathilda groaned as she tried to get up “Mhmm yeah. I- Ouch... I can hear you.”

“Phew... That is such a relief! That punch honestly looked fatal. I thought you were done for.”

Mathilda was silent. Her head in her hands. She then looked down at Katie. "Why do you keep doing this?" she asked.

Katie stood up

"Mattie, this... None of this was supposed to happen. I swear!"

Mathilda turned her back. She couldn't hold the tears that she desperately had been holding back, any longer.

"You promised me, Katie! YOU PROMISED ME NO ONE WOULD GET HURT!"

"Mattie, I...

"DON'T YOU "MATTIE" ME!"

"Okay Mathilda, but please! You need to understand that they-"

"UNDERSTAND?! I understand that you are just as big of a liar as back then! You said that all you would do was stay "behind the scenes" and make sure that no one got hurt!"

"YOU WEREN'T SUPPOSED TO BE HERE!"

Katie got up close to Mathilda with her hands pleadingly folded.

"Those people weren't my group, Mathilda!! I didn't have much of a choice, okay! What this group of Undergrounders does is out of control!"

"It sounded like you had plenty choice"

"I know... I... I'm sorry."

"I can't believe you're doing this to me, again. How am I supposed to keep this a secret?!"

"I don't know, but you will, for both our sakes."

Katie walked out through the back door, her back turned to Mathilda. She was way behind the rest of the undergrounders but it didn't matter much. Katie knew how to get around without getting caught.

"Do you even believe what you said?"

Katie stopped.

“What do you mean?”

“That your group isn't as bad as this one?”

Katie thought about the question for a second, but decided not to answer it directly.

“I truly am sorry, Mathilda. You deserve better.”

One last sob could be heard as Katie shut the door and ran off into the night, leaving Mathilda and Trista alone with a store that had been wrecked. Mathilda stumbled over the merchandise to untie Trista from her binds and removed her gag.

“Hey. Are you alright? You've been out for quite some time now.”



“Sheesh... I dunno kid, I'll probably have to see a doctor about this concussion.”

Trista shook her head and tried to stand up, but was too weak to properly get up by herself.

Mathilda quickly assisted her before she could fall.

“Aghh!.. Thanks, Hon.”

Trista finally opened her eyes only to see her store even more in ruins than before she blacked out. All the shelves had been swiped clean with all the merchandise laying around on the floor. Some stands had been broken, and the counter had been ripped open by force.

“Those bandits... They really... wrecked this place huh.”

“I'm so sorry this happened, Trista. I tried to help but I screwed up...”

“I wouldn't say “screwed up”, I mean, we're both still alive. Things could have gotten significantly worse... I think I owe you one.”

Trista smiled, trying to stay positive in even the grimmest of scenarios, but it was clear that she was very upset about the whole ordeal.

“Well... I guess I need to fix this mess now, right after I report this robbery.”

“No Trista, please! You need some rest. I’ll come over and help you clean this tomorrow after I’ve worked my shift!”

“Thank you, Hon.”

“It’s no problem really.”

Trista stretched her back, making audible cracking sounds. The store’s ruined presence was too much for Trista to handle at this moment, just as Mathilda said. She decided to go home and rest up. As they both walked out of the store and Trista locked the doors that were surprisingly still intact, she turned to her friend.

“Mathilda. Did you recognize any of the robbers? They didn’t seem like they were from around here, no?”

Mathilda was silent, looking down at her hands which were still shaking.

“Mathilda?”

“No. They didn’t seem familiar.”

