

The old goat had somehow ventured across the border and ended up here. I had a good inkling as to the reason why, considering that his ward has just left me with a fairly severe injury and had seemingly been on a pillaging rampage for the past few months. His eyes widened in shock as he noticed the state I was in; not that he was going to connect it with the actions of his student.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I asked again. Dalston had a sour expression, just like he always did. For a guy who hated seeing me so much, he had a bad habit of running into me at inopportune times.

“What do you bloody think I’m doing here? I’m looking for Sakura.”

“You just missed her,” I murmured – pointing at the wound running down my chest and stomach.

Dalston was spitting with rage as the full implication settled in, “Don’t tell me that you’ve been trying to put your hands on her! I’ll kill you myself if you’ve so much as touched a hair on her head, you rotten bastard!”

A little late to be making threats like that. I’d given her a nasty group of bruises during the fight. Tahar tensed up as I responded in kind, “This is the second time she’s attacked me now. What the hell did you teach that girl? She’s totally lost it.”

Dalston insisted, “She wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“Maybe not; but she doesn’t seem to have much of a problem with hurting other people. From what I can tell, she’s been rampaging her way across the Federation, killing and looting as she goes. She certainly didn’t get this strong through honest hard work!”

Dalston started to pace back and forth in front of me, “I taught her no such thing! Surely she’s been possessed by a mad spirit!”

“A spirit? It’s not a bloody spirit Dalston, she’s an outworlder. One who’s got a lot of stupid ideas in her head at the moment. You’re telling me that you didn’t know anything about what she intended to do once she was out of your sight?”

He shook his head in blunt outrage, “How could she be an outworlder? I remember the day that she was born! I was the second man through the door to see her as a baby! You mean to tell me that she was brought here by some kind of higher power? Or that she’s been replaced with someone else? Absurd, clearly absurd.”

“I never said she was replaced. Do you even know what a Sakura is?”

Dalston paused and rounded on me again, “A Sakura? I don’t know – she insisted that I call her that when she came to me. Her real name is Wendy.”

“And why do you think she wanted to be called that?”

Dalston shrugged, “Nothing more than a childish whim, I presume.”

“No. Sakura. It’s a type of flower from my home, and a very popular name at that. I’ve never seen the kind of tree that blooms with them here. I assume it bears a different moniker wherever it grows.” Dalston wasn’t going to put much weight into my explanation. He was as pig-headed as they came; full of stubborn fury that couldn’t be untangled with reasoning.

“I don’t much care. I just need to speak with her and convince her to come back to Blackwake.”

“Convince her? She doesn’t think a damn thing of you, Dalston. If you get in her way she’ll do the same thing to you that she did to me. She thinks you’re just an obstacle trying to get in her way! She’ll kill you if she gets the chance.”

“She was never like that before!”

I was getting angry with him; “Well that’s too fucking bad, isn’t it? As it happens, even a girl her age can have secrets that you’re not fucking privy to!” The foul language and heated volume of the debate was starting to attract some attention away from the front gate of the manor. I took a deep breath and settled myself.

Tahar offered her own opinion, “Not wishing to think poorly of a friend is not strange. But I have witnessed her actions with my own eyes. There is a darkness in her. She cares not for the lives of others.”

I would have normally assigned that description to myself, but Sakura had taken things one step further. She didn’t value anything or anybody she saw, in a more extreme way – she only believed in the raw benefits that these things could provide to her. Stats, buffs, abilities, and the best way to exploit them for maximum return on investment. She had started treating her second life like nothing more than a game to be solved. It angered me that someone born into relative comfort could throw it all away on delusions of future heroism.

You can’t become a hero if you don’t believe in the people you are meant to protect. An un-earnest approach to being selfless was madness. Sakura had come to expect a reward for her deeds just like one of those RPGs. When the needy and the downtrodden couldn’t give her those rewards, how would she react? If she believed that everyone around her were nothing more than non-player characters for her to play with...

“This discussion is over,” I concluded. Dalston’s face creased in confusion.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s no point talking about this. You’re going to try and find her no matter what I say. So go ahead, hear it from the woman herself; if you have that much of a deathwish.”

His eyes hardened, “And what about you?”

I stepped away from Tahar and moved under my own strength. My voice was grave, “Let me be frank, the next time I see her - she’s dead. When you make enemies, don’t be surprised when they fight back.”

Dalston’s face ran through a varied spectrum of emotions as he ingested my intent. It was a bitter pill for the man to swallow. To think that his own ward, a girl he had raised like a daughter, could harbour such a deep and cynical darkness beneath her cheery exterior. I knew exactly what he was thinking. He was imagining a hundred different rationalisations that would allow him to ignore what she had done. People were as ever incapable of disconnecting themselves from their biases.

“I’ll stop you.”

That was the funniest thing I’d heard in months. The fact that I had started to laugh at his threat only infuriated him further. I couldn’t help it. Dalston couldn’t even stop his own student from going through a rebellious phase, and he thought he was going to be able to kill me? My chest hurt – laughing with a cut running down your front was a terrible idea.

“That’s all you are Dalston. Empty threats and hot air. So cocksure that you know everything, that you aren’t even aware of your own ignorance. You’re looking for the ‘innocent’ girl you used to know, the family friend, but you’re not going to find her.”

“We’ll see about that. Don’t get in my way.”

Dalston, sensing that Sakura had already run from the watchmen, turned and left to pursue her. Tahar returned to my back to make sure I didn’t collapse from my injuries, but the healing potion was already starting to work its magic on my torn flesh. I could move under my own power at least.

“An old friend returns,” she quipped.

“Seriously? You’ve met him once, and it was an argument back then too...”

“He didn’t try to kill us yet.”

Was that all it took? Certainly, I had a talent for rubbing people the wrong way. Dalston could go and get himself killed if he wanted. I held no esteem for the guy. He’d been nothing but an asshole to me since the first time we met. In an ironic sense his worries about me influencing Sakura were correct, but there wasn’t anything he could do about it. Sakura had decided that she was the hero of the story; and if trouble didn’t come to her she was going to find it herself. In her eyes I represented the archetypal rival.

With all of the drama, I had almost forgotten the reason we came here in the first place. I needed to find whatever the Absolver had sent Derian. Rummaging around his house for hours on end was doable – but not ideal. By fighting Sakura, I had earned some level of trust from the man. Trust I could leverage into another invitation into his home. I just needed an excuse to speak with him again.

“I don’t like seeing you injured,” Tahar complained as we headed back to the hotel. Her eyes kept darting down to my exposed chest.

“That’s normal. I don’t like seeing you or Cali injured either.”

It was a startling admittance from me – a man who had spent decades of his second life running from real personal connections. But it was true. I didn’t want them getting hurt on my behalf. I knew that this was a dangerous way of life and it was inevitable that some war wounds would be accrued, but the feeling was the same regardless.

I reassured her, “It should be fine after a little rest. She didn’t get too deep on that swing.” The same couldn’t be said for my shirt, jumper or chest plate. The plate would need re-forging if I wanted to keep using it, and my clothes were drenched through with blood. After my chest was healed, the first thing on my list of priorities was getting some new warm clothes. I could already feel the chill settling in during the trip back to our room. It also made the disturbing paleness of my skin easy to see. As a man who lived under a warm, comforting blanket of plausible deniability, having people ask questions about me was the worst possible outcome.

Mercifully there was nobody waiting in the lobby to intercept us, so we could head straight up to the room and get out of sight. Cali was reclining on the bed and staring at the ceiling when we arrived. Her eyes sharpened as she took in my beleaguered appearance. She was going to get mad at me for not inviting her to the part.

“I thought you said it was going to be boring, Ren.”

I shook my head and sat on the edge of my bed. I stunk of blood and sweat. I really wanted to heat up some water and jump in the tub, but it was an arduous process to undergo even when you weren't nursing a serious injury. At least Cali had kept the fire going while we were away. I grabbed the shredded edges of my clothes and dumped them out onto the bed in a huff. They were a write-off. I then removed my leather gloves, which had filled themselves with flakes of discarded skin. The friction from the fight had rubbed even more of it away.

I held them up to the light and studied the strange scaly surface that was emerging from underneath. Even my nails were starting to become sharper and more vicious. I could only describe them as dragon-hands. At least they still fit into a normal pair of gloves. Tahar could stop her curiosity though. She reached out with her own claws and prodded at them for a moment, sensing no resistance from me, she went a step further and held them tight. Her exploration continued for a few minutes – during which she managed to peel away even more of the dead skin.

“These are strange.”

I looked at her clawed digits, “Well, they're not any weirder than *your* hands.”

It was getting harder and harder to hide what was happening to my body. I didn't know where the scales would eventually stop spreading. The hands were fine. I always wore gloves to conserve heat and keep my fingers working in the cold weather. It was everything else that concerned me. My body had been growing larger, bit by bit; but Tahar still had the edge in height. The horns would be impossible to conceal if they got any bigger. I'd even need a new, custom-made helmet to go around them.

“Benadora said I'm turning into a demon. I don't feel like one.”

Cali was surgical, “Perhaps you are unaware of your own ill behaviour.”

“No, I'm not.”

Tahar smiled, “I will stay with you no matter what you become.”

She looked to Cali, whose confusion soon gave way to a nervous energy. Tahar was trying to tell her something.

“I... I will as well,” Cali finally declared. Tahar gave her an approving nod. Was that really all it was about? From my perspective it was just some scales and protruding bits, but whatever made them happy.