

We arrived at the manor later that evening. I was wrought with anticipation. Nothing got me more excited than the chance to waste several hours listening to a tottering noble ramble on about their amazing house or what they had to eat yesterday. Tahar and Cali had asked to be brought along, if only to eat the complimentary food. Cali expected for something exciting to happen, since it always seemed that trouble was magnetically attracted to me. What she hadn't considered was that it only happened when she was around.

Weapons were a no-go. We stashed them in the inn room and hoped that no one would be stupid enough to break in and steal them. Stigma could describe her surroundings to me even though she didn't have eyes. That gave me a small amount of confidence in leaving her there. I still didn't like the idea – but what could I do? He wasn't going to let us inside if we were armed to the teeth. Sakura wasn't a consideration. She'd already gotten what she wanted and made herself scarce. Anything else I could handle using a knife or my fists.

The attendant was already waiting for us at the gate when we rolled up. He gave me a look that suggested he didn't find our manner of dress entirely appropriate, but he was going to have to suck it up. I wasn't going to splash out on casual dinner clothes that I was seldom going to use. I was a thief turned mercenary first and a noble a distant second. He wasn't going to keep us out for a minor faux pas like that.

I did have to restrain the malicious smile on my face as he led us straight down the main path and towards the manor house itself. Just as I had hoped, we were going to get a glimpse inside of the last building on the lot. My mental map of the layout and every escape route was already being formed in real time. Even when I didn't plan on robbing a place, I still found myself doing this by instinct. That was what years of hard graft as a thief got you.

We ascended a short flight of marble steps and moved between the pillars that held up the front façade of the building. A pair of heavy wooden doors, decorated with ornate golden inlay, swung open and welcomed us inside with an ostentatious embrace. If Rivers was good at anything; it was infusing everything with a flair for the dramatic.

The main lobby area was about what I expected. Down the middle were a pair of stairways that split into two and led to each wing of the upper floors. Several pieces of furniture had been carefully arranged in the different corners for guests to use. There were several coat hooks on the left side wall and a set of chairs for people to remove their muddy shoes should the weather take a turn. Derian seemed to care much about keeping the place clean.

It was also where the first clue about Derian's military obsession lay. Several sets of armour had been placed between the open archways that led into the different rooms, almost as if they were serving as armed guards. Unlike the other armour I had seen in the museums, these were free from glass coffins and mantled onto standing dummies so that their full impact and form could be seen.

Alongside the armour, there were several large paintings on the walls that depicted various figures and battles from across the continent's history. Despite allegedly being a Sull loyalist, Derian did not discriminate in his choices. The distinctive colours of the Federation officer's uniforms could be seen in many of them, alongside their Sull counterparts. They were impressive pieces of work, bursting with painstakingly brushed detail showing huge battles and one on one duels. I didn't know enough about the history to hedge a guess on who they were or what battles were being represented.

The attendant led us through the left side to the dining room, but I hung back for a moment and took a glimpse of what was going on in the other wing. I could already see several cases that were

the same size and make as the ones in the museum I had visited the day before. That must have been one of the rooms where he kept his collection. It was considerably more restrained than I initially expected – I imagined that the lobby of the manor would be dominated with a large, central display. It seemed that practicality had won out, since many people would be passing through here on any given day and obstructing them would cause problems.

The décor of the house was more comfortable in the dining room, with soft cyan walls, tall windows, and a more intimate spacing to allow the diners to speak with each other. The ceilings were very tall – once again reminding me of a French chateau. A long wooden table dominated the floor with high-backed chairs surrounding it on all sides. The table had already been lined with expensive silverware. A set of candles burned in the centre and filled the room with a strong flowery scent.

Sitting at the head was the man of the hour, Derian Rivers waved cheerily at us. He was wearing a white dress shirt - complete with frilly collar. If he had any complaints about how we were dressed, he didn't say them out loud. "I'm so glad that you could make it! I thought it was too short a notice to invite you."

I bowed politely and offered him a smile, "It's no trouble at all. We're currently between work – so finding the time to share a meal with you is a matter of will."

Derian stood from his seat and walked over to greet us, "And who are these lovely ladies?"

Cali did the best curtsey she could with the short tails on her coat, "Cali La'Corvan. Pleased to make your acquaintance." The mention of her family name did elicit a reaction from him; though he quickly tried to swallow it and move on.

Tahar copied me and bowed her head, "Tahar Shul Hel Ten. It is a pleasure."

Derian was much less successful at hiding his thoughts on Tahar. I could read him like an open book – the way his eyes kept going up and up and up, he was clearly befuddled by her height. She was certainly the tallest person you'd see travelling the streets of the Federation, but some of the men in her home village were even larger. It was something I still couldn't wrap my head around. Eagles weren't exactly the largest variety of animal out there. Why would demi-humans in the form of them have such robust bodies?

Derian cleared the stars from his eyes and motioned to the chairs, "Take a seat! Would you like anything to drink? We have wine, cider and beer. I can personally recommend any of them."

I felt like something different, "Cider, please." Cali and Tahar chose the wine. Derian clapped his hands together and another servant emerged with the two bottles cradled between his arms like a pair of children. He popped each in turn and poured a generous helping of each liquid into our respective glasses. We were all bunched together at one end of the table, with Derian proudly sitting at the head.

"I don't mean to spoil the mood with talk about business, but I was hoping to ask you a few questions about the woman who attacked you yesterday."

I took a sip of my drink and cleared my throat, "Oh, that's fine – I'd be curious as well." The cider was good; you got what you paid for.

"Are you familiar with her at all?"

I don't know why that was his first thought, but I decided to sink my hooks in deeper with a rare display of honesty. "We were more like acquaintances, really. I don't know much about her, other than that an old soldier from Blackwake taught her how to use a sword."

"I see. How did she come to act in such an ill manner? I would have thought that a firm guiding hand like that would have seen her straight."

"I don't know. We met briefly once, but the next time I saw her she was intent on killing me and robbing me blind. Judging from how she fought yesterday I can only presume that she's been on something of a spree lately. A normal swordsman would not have been able to split my armour clean in two like that."

Derian nodded, "I've been asking some of my contacts about that. They say that she has stolen important items from several people – only to discard them later in a much poorer condition. Some of them were simply wrought with grief about the whole ordeal. Historic weapons and armour treated in such a way, it's enough to make me shiver!"

She discarded them? Why would she go to the effort of taking them in the first place then?

"The axe she stole, it was affixed, correct?"

"Yes. As were the others."

"Then I can offer a theory. She must have an accomplice who is skilled in affixing armour and weapons. Since you can't directly transfer an affix from one item to another, she steals examples of lesser known runes and duplicates them; all for the purpose of making herself more powerful."

Derian smiled, revealing the aged creases around his mouth and eyes; "You have a keen intuition. My own conclusion was that she couldn't locate a buyer willing to take such identifiable things from her hands."

Derian really had no idea just how deep and broad the fence industry was. You could find people willing to buy anything if you looked hard enough, people who didn't mind taking a risk on a valuable object. If they couldn't sell something whole because of the heat they'd melt it down for bars and take the loss incurred instead – as long as they still stood to break even at the end of the process.

With that said, it was easy to see things through a purely monetary lens. I was guilty of doing the same thing. Money makes the world go round; and that's true of any universe. Money was what bought food and clothes, and a place to call home. It was what people worked their fingers to the bone for, and it was what people broke rules and laws to get. Criminals usually worked for money but Sakura wasn't just a criminal. She had convinced herself that becoming the strongest warrior in the world was necessary for some as-of-yet unseen purpose. That wouldn't have been my first guess either.

Derian didn't seem too upset about his axe being stolen. He was so rich that he never had to shed too many tears about losing something – even if it was a part of his collection. Something bigger and better would come along eventually and fill the hole in that black lump of coal he called a heart. Despite the length of our interaction, I wouldn't feel bad when I took him for every penny he had.

Tahar and Cali were really getting into the wine at this point, with Tahar pouring herself a second helping of her own accord. Tahar could handle her drink well enough, but the sheer quantities she consumed presented a unique set of budgetary challenges. At first, I had naively thought that her

tribe didn't have alcohol, but they did. They had a process that allowed them to ferment some of the native plant life into a strong spirit.

Derian shrugged the issue off and moved on, "Anyway, let's dispense of the grim talk for the time being. I wanted to invite you to a meal as thanks for both the amazing weapon you offered me, and the effort you went to in trying to defeat that ruffian. Allow me to show you the best food and drink that Bristwaithe has to offer."

A few minutes later and a spread of starter food was laid out by a pair of servants. Bread, salad, and various toppings and condiments were provided. Tahar dived right in and started gorging herself on as much free food as she could. She was a big woman with an appetite to match. Every day I thanked God above that Tahar knew how to hunt, because I couldn't afford to keep her fed on the money I made as a thief and mercenary.

At least she was using some of the table manners that Cali and I had warned her about before we left the inn...