

I had to give Derian some credit – the food was worth the trip. It was a veritable feast of meat, vegetables, fish and grains that made me painfully aware of just how limited my usual diet was when we were on the road together. This was the kind of variety that I got to enjoy when I was still living in Japan. For the most part Derian had occupied himself with vague pleasantries. I tried to keep the conversation steered away from tropics that would spoil his appetite, which significantly reduced my number of options given that most of my time was spent roughing it in the woods or killing people.

However, the dinnertime conversation was proving to be tough to manage. Derian honed in on Cali and started asking her probing questions. I felt a cold dribble of sweat run down the back of my neck. “It’s rare to see a daughter of the La’Corvan family away from home,” Derian said between sips of his drink, “What brings you to the continent?”

Cali was at least being diplomatic for my sake; “My family was against the idea of me leaving the manor, but I insisted. I was tired of being locked inside.”

“A thirst for adventure then? Very unusual.”

If only he knew.

I stepped in, “We met on the road – and have been working together ever since. Cali’s pulled me out of some tricky spots.”

And pulled me into more than a few as well.

Derian turned his attention to me; “I’m sure that there’s plenty to do for a man of your stature and reputation. I’ve heard some stories about you.”

I cleared my throat, “I didn’t know you were so invested in what was going on.”

Derian looked at me with a cold glare, “Why, I am. Anything that happens between the Federation and Sull might impact my bottom line after all. And above all else, the only name on people’s lips at the moment is ‘Ren Kageyama.’ I suppose you know better than anyone else why that is.”

I leaned back and tried to look unperturbed. Whatever he wanted to get out of this discussion, it wasn’t overtly hostile. There was nobody in the house who could realistically put a dent in me. “I already said that I work as a mercenary. That means getting involved in the business of war from time to time.”

He was sceptical of my modesty, “A common mercenary doesn’t amass the type of notoriety to be given three dozen different nicknames and titles.”

“I’m sure they’ll have workshopped it down to two or three by the time I get back. Everyone’s always eager to be the one who sets the narrative, and there’s nothing they love more than a folk hero. A silly title is just one of the ways that they try to enshrine that reputation.”

He was trying to get me to say something – and I could only assume it had to do with my infiltration of Blackwake and subsequent assassination of Forester. He was a dyed in the wool Sull loyalist; one of the fanatics who pined for the good old days of complete royal domination over the continent. Instead of doing what most others did and moving there since they love the damned place so much, they sat pretty in the Federation and hoped that one day they’d break through the lines, and bring the fun to them.

I wasn’t certain why though. Derian didn’t have any leverage over me, and he must have believed me to be an ignorant rube at best, completely disconnected from his politics. That might have been

the case had Adelbern not filled me in with the missive he gave me. I took another swig of my cider and smiled, "I'm surprised you knew all of that. News tends to travel slowly down south since everyone's so easy-going." I could see the frustration in his face as I tried to shift the topic away from war.

"I have a lot of people in the north looking for things to buy. You can't keep yourself cooped up in Bristwaithe if you want to a collection as illustrious as mine. They say you were sent into the Kingdom to kill a high-ranking officer, a strange job to give to a mercenary."

"I have a unique set of skills."

"And that the death of that officer blunted an incoming assault from their army..."

Derian let the statement sit in the middle of the table for several seconds – which was extremely poor manners from a man who seemed to value them greatly. I didn't let any emotion show on my face. As the time ticked by, he realised that he wasn't going to get the kind of reaction he was looking for. To me, it was just a job – and the implication was lost on me, even if it wasn't.

"People die in wars all the time," I reasoned, "They're a terrible thing. But do you ever spare a thought for all of the officers and footmen who die on those battlefields? Taking out an enemy commander isn't unfair, that's what war is about. You do everything you can to get an advantage, and you shouldn't expect your enemy to hold back for the sake of honour when survival is on the line."

Derian's smile faltered somewhat, "I didn't know you were so philosophical."

"It's not philosophy, you can leave that to the Amendment. That's just what I've observed over the past decade. But some people do let themselves get carried away, they end up doing awful things in search of those small advantages. That's why it'd be better for both nations to keep to themselves. They're fighting over the Bend – and do you think its worth how many lives have been ended?"

"Hm."

"We're not talking compassion here. Those people could have worked, producing, making, farming – but now they're dead, they don't make anything anymore. The value of a person for a nation's economy is played out over decades and decades, more than people are willing to admit."

Derian didn't get what I meant. After all, the cost of war was a modern concept from my old world. For many years it was simply accepted as fact that the gains from conquest were more valuable than the lives spent taking the land. But that was rarely ever the case, not unless the enemy army was so completely outclassed that they couldn't fight back.

I clapped my hands together, "I'd like to use the bathroom."

Derian's smile didn't waver, "Please, be my guest."

One of the attendants was pointed my way, and they led me through the door into the lobby. Derian didn't trust me enough to leave me alone with his valuables, which was probably the right thing to do considering what I was planning. On the return trip I managed to sneak a better look at the wing opposite the dining room, where the large wooden shelves had been placed and assembled. Instead of heading through there, we turned left and went under the stairs through a long, red carpeted corridor. The spacing of the doors gave me a hint as to the size of the rooms beyond. Soon enough we were upon the doorway to the bathroom. The servant stepped aside and allowed me to enter.

Inside was a wooden bench with a hole cut into it. I could already hear the sound of running water below. People with a lot of money to spare would install private sewerage systems in their homes, though they were still rather rudimentary compared to the advanced plumbing a more developed society would shift towards. The room was very clean and nicely kept, though a little cramped – containing a toilet and iron bathtub. Derian must have had a private bathroom that was nicer than this.

It was good enough for me. I was used to squatting in the bushes, and that was a nightmare when the weather was poor. I sat myself down on the toilet and stared dead ahead at the door. I did need to use it, but there was another reason why I had asked to be excused – so I could slip away from Derian and investigate his collection unmolested. In order to make my plan a success, I needed the attendant to walk away and leave me to it.

So I waited patiently. It was a coinflip as to whether they were dedicated enough to stand there the entire time, but eventually I heard the sound of their feet moving away from the door and onto other tasks that they surely had to handle. There was little incentive for them to make life harder by letting time be wasted, even if it meant that I could potentially steal something from the house. I finished relieving myself and peered out through the crack in the door, checking each side to make sure that the coast was clear.

The plan was simple. I just wanted to head back the way I came and take a quick detour into the collection room I had seen. If I got caught, I could wave it off as unburdened curiosity and go back to the dining room none the worse for wear. I retraced my steps through the hallway and emerged into the main lobby. There were no servants around to keep watch. I hugged close to the wall so that Derian couldn't see me through the archway and moved around the edge.

The collection room was similar to the one I had seen in the boathouse. The first impression that came to me was how much nicer all of the equipment was. Derian loved to show off, but he still held back some of his most valuable and impressive things for private viewing. There was a suit of armour in the middle of it all that was almost completely covered from head to toe in gold plating. It wasn't effective at blocking a weapon, but there was likely another layer of a more durable metal beneath it. I couldn't imagine how expensive it would have been to forge, never mind purchase later as an antique.

There were a wide variety of styles, shapes and forms on display. Derian had painstakingly arranged the room like an art gallery, intending to draw the viewer's eye to various arrangements and displays. I could image him pouring over every detail for weeks on end, driving himself mad trying to find the *right* colour of red velvet to go beneath his lances and swords. I refocused on the task and searched for the Ashmorn section of the display, locating it tucked into the back-right corner of the room by the other exit.

It was a chaotic bundle of black iron and twisted, floral hilts. Stigma really was forged in the same vein as these weapons, though these uncursed instruments did not glow with an evil red energy when used. If the spirit within Stigma really was from the Ashmorn Kingdoms, it didn't make much sense that her appearance matched that of a human.

The rough timeline that I had pieced together from her dubious statements of half-fragmented memories was that the sword was forged there, and somehow ended up on the east coast of Sull while the Blackblood Demons weren't yet extinct. Given the legendary status of Stigma, it must have been utilised by a hero or warrior of renown. The biggest question that remained was whether the sword was cursed before or after that crossing. Given that the story Cali had told me relied on the

last Emperor's daughters being punished for their part in his repressive actions and having their spirits embedded into them, it could be either. It was entirely possible that one of those daughters fled across the strait during the collapse. Or rather, his only daughter.

I wasn't going to get a clear answer. Stigma had reasons to keep the truth from me, if she was even aware of it in the first place. At the end of the day it wouldn't change my situation. I screened through each item in order using [inspect,] but my efforts were fruitless. Derian had hidden it somewhere private. I had hoped that his ego was big enough to put it somewhere I could see. Why would he have paid so much for it otherwise?

*"Bastard,"* I whispered to myself.

The next best bet was that it was located within one of his private chambers, but that would require a more illegal form of infiltration. I quickly leaned through the archway and took the lay of the room beyond – where a pair of large glass doors led out into the back patio and garden area. With that done I had a fairly strong mental map of where everything would be. I didn't have time or permission to go rifling through the rest of the rooms, so I called it there and headed back to the dining chamber.

Derian didn't notice the absence of my escort. He was nose deep in another glass of alcohol. Cali and Tahar were starting to waver as it really diffused through their respective bloodstreams. I sat back down in my place and steepled my fingers. "I have to say; the food and drink has been wonderful. Thank you, Sir Rivers."

He sputtered back, "Oh! It's no problem at all! I always have an excess of this stuff waiting in the larder. And what good is food if not for sharing?" While most people would disagree given the value of the spread that he had given us, to him the luxuries were a mere rounding error on his yearly budget.

"I have a *very* talented chef. Everyone in the town is clamouring to take him into their own staff, you know."

"Really?"

"Yes. I have an eye for good weapons *and* good staff members. I make sure that each and every one of them is ready to take on the responsibilities of running the house, and in return I give them benefits that outstrip anything my competitors are offering. A fantastic wage, and the building at the back of the grounds is a lovely dormitory for those without abodes of their own."

He was really trying to brag now. It was wasted breath – I didn't give a singular shit about it.

"Hm. Do you hire private security as well?"

Derian pulled a very strange face as he leaned away from me, "No. But I'm considering it after what happened yesterday. You'll find that only the most paranoid businessmen and women have guards on standby. They're a mostly needless expense." Of course, I already knew that because I was one of the people who benefitted from it. I'd robbed a dozen mansions exactly like this one over the years. Butlers and maids didn't put up much of a fight, and they would never risk their lives to protect the master's property.

"If you do, make sure they're good. When I say this I mean it, she's bad news. She's more than capable of fighting back against me."

“No need to worry. As I said, I personally manage all of the hiring and firing that goes on within these walls.”

It wasn't going to help. I was going to be in and out before he even had the chance to get them in order.