

## Reemergence

Marcus wasn't exactly sure what he was supposed to be looking for. He'd tracked deer, rodents, and various other smaller animals before, but a bear was just a *little* bit beyond his experience. But he also knew that a promise was a promise, especially one made to his brother. And as painful as it was, he wasn't letting anyone else deal with this matter but him. So here he was, trudging his way through the outskirts of Reinsan territory doing his best to interpret the panicked recollections of one of Colton's fellow servicemen, all while starting to break a sweat under the uncaring sun. If he'd been correct with the directions, he should be approaching some kind of settlement soon. An independent one, so he'd hopefully be able to get some kind of lead from one of the locals, but he may have to get selective with his reasons. Although not an official member of the Serin Line, he had still scratched their backs on multiple occasions (including now), and was directly related to one of their sergeants. Requesting a favor on their behalf from a neutral party might instead get him the cold shoulder. He began to formulate a story (or at least pick which facts to omit) as he continued forward.

Thankfully, the directions were correct and he did finally stumble upon the village that was mentioned to be on the way. At first glance, there wasn't much that distinguished it from all the other villages he'd visited, although that didn't surprise him. Rejecting allegiance to any of the major powers didn't exactly leave

much possibility for mass luxury, and as a result, most of these isolated settlements had a “minimal-yet-functional” appearance to them. Houses and their farms were clearly sectioned off, the old wooden buildings were really only differentiated through size and signage, and the streets that lined them were shared by both people and carts. Having grown up in a village similar to this one, sights like these always made Marcus a bit nostalgic. Riding the family horse, making trips to the market, getting yelled at by his mom whenever he fell in some mud and ruined his clothes, places like these were a pleasant link to the past for him. But of course, he had business to take care of. If his bear was residing in this area of the territory, then there’s a chance someone could have witnessed it. Approaching the first resident he could find that appeared to be unoccupied, he cleared his throat, only for the man before him to speak first, “What brings you here?” he said with an air of apprehension. Marcus noticed that the man’s eyes weren’t looking directly at him, moreso slightly above him. He then remembered the sword he had slung around his back for his task at hand, that it was on display for anyone to see. That’d probably lead to some bad assumptions, but there wasn’t anything he could do about it now.

“I..uh...I’m a traveler. Just looking for someone here who has some knowledge on some...recent events.”, Marcus

“You an ambassador?” The man’s stare had grown cold now. This wasn’t good.

Marcus realized he was already making a bad impression.

“No sir, I just have some questions for—” he started before the man quickly interrupted him:

“Kid, you best just drop all this and go back to your master. Nothing good’s gonna happen to you if you stick around here. Not everyone here’s as nice as me.”

“Sir you’ve got the wrong idea, I’m just looking for a bear!”, Marcus snapped back a little louder than he intended. The man’s look suddenly turned to one of surprise.

“A...bear?”

“Yes, and a really terrifying one at that. People I know have been going missing for weeks until someone finally saw it and lived to tell us. And well...I figured I gotta deal with it before it gets anyone else. They told me it was living somewhere in this part of the territory. Now...please, is there anyone here who might know more?”

The man was silent for a few seconds, then he responded:

“Well...guess that explains the blade. I suppose I can at least tell folks at the Square to hear you out. Gets you outta *my* hair at least.”

Marcus sighed with relief. It wasn’t exactly the full truth, but he didn’t have time to worry about that. He just needed whatever information he could get that...thing.

The man got up and walked past Marcus toward the center of the town, motioning

for him to follow. As they walked the muddy streets, the man turned back towards him.

“By the way, what exactly does this bear of yours look like? We’ve probably run into twenty different bears in the past month, so you may need to be a bit distinctive.”

Marcus took a deep breath. *Here comes the hard part...*

“Well...”

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“It’s a demon *what* now?”

“A demon bear. That’s how he described it.”

Leaning back in his chair in the Serin Line barracks, Marcus felt a chill wash over him. This isn’t how he expected his first meeting with his brother in two months to go. He didn’t want to believe it.

“What did he say it looked like, Colton? Why would he call it a demon?”

“He said there was no other way he *could* describe it, Marcus. Its physical strength was beyond anything he’d seen from a bear, its flesh was rotting and filled in with something else entirely...”

Marcus had already begun to pace the room before Colton delivered the worst of the news.

“And...it *talked*, Marcus...”

Marcus froze. Painful memories resurfaced at the mention of those words. He remembered a pitchfork, a rotting but alive wolf, and some kind of ritualistic chant that he couldn't understand.

“So...that means there's more of them...”

Colton simply stayed silent, and looked down at his desk. Rage and fear swelled up within Marcus. Mostly fear.

“God DAMMIT!” he yelled before slamming his fist into the wall. Colton didn't react. Any other day, and he would've reprimanded him for doing something like that at his place of work. But this time, he understood it. They were both there that night. Marcus took a few deep breaths and tried to compose himself.

“...So that's why I'm here.”

“...Yes. I'd figured you should know”

“Well then, what are you gonna do about it?”

“It has to be dealt with one way or another. We've lost 14 men to it. Anymore, and it will start to undermine the Line's legitimacy as an organization *in addition* to losing more innocent lives. Who knows how many *civilians* it's probably killed?”

“Do we even know where it lives?”

“Not until recently. Now that we have a witness who survived an encounter with it, we have an idea where it *may* reside.” Colton said as he began to pull out a map.

He motioned for Marcus to look at it with him.

“According to Fitzroy’s account, their approximate location when they were attacked by it was around *here*,” he said as he pointed at the southeastern corner of the Reinsan-ian territory, “near the Kerratin Border. Closest settlement was an independent village about a few hours west of them.”

“And all the attacks happened here?” Marcus said as he motioned to the general area that Colton had marked.

“That’s the problem: we don’t know for sure. All the disappearances were one man scouting parties to keep tabs on the Verak forces on the Kerratin border. They could have all been attacked in completely different areas on their journeys back.”

“So how do we kill this thing?”

Colton sighed heavily, a trademark gesture of his before he went over whatever great strategic conundrum he was facing.

“That’s the other problem. I want this thing dead as soon as possible, and I know you do too. But with the Verak on the border, any kind of sizable deployment we send to that area could set them off. Word travels fast among the independent settlements, we could end up sparking a bloodbath. But, on the other hand, I don’t want to throw anymore singular lives at this *thing* when it’s already killed too many of our finest. The right answer hasn’t come to me yet, and I’m afraid—”

“I’ll kill it”, Marcus interrupted. He knew this was his task, and his alone. Colton got up from his desk.

“Marcus, no. I only wanted you to know, I’m not asking you to—”

“I’m not part of the Line, Colt. And I’m on borrowed time anyway. Throwing my life at this thing won’t risk the organization. Let me do this. For me and for you.”

“What do you mean ‘for you...’?”

“Whether I like it or not, I’m changed in the same way that this bear is now.

Wherever these things come from, whatever makes them...maybe there’s a chance I could learn more about whatever they did to me. About how I could *stop* it. Or if nothing else...it’ll give me some closure.”

“Marcus, I...”

“You said it yourself, Colt. Large force could start a war, and a small one just throws away more lives that you need. Let me take care of this.”

Colton sighed once again.

“I can’t say no to you at this point, can I?”

“Colt, this is my war to fight. I *know* you know how that feels.”

Colton sat back down in his chair, looking at the amalgamation of paperwork and memorabilia on his desk.

“Okay...I understand, Marcus.” They were both silent for what seemed like hours. But Marcus wasn’t going to let that be the end of it. The bear wouldn’t take away time with his family.

“..Why don't we talk about other things now? It's been months since I've had you around to yell at me, after all...”

Colton burst into laughter. At the end of it all, they were still brothers.

“It has, hasn't it? Speaking of which, I actually got *quite* the talking to from my lieutenant a couple weeks back...”

“Oh now *this*, I gotta hear...!”