

The sun hit its zenith above the city-state of Ul'dah, baking the desert city in a sweltering midday heat. The populace sought shelter beneath awnings and inside sandstone buildings, darting from one shadowed overhang to another.

Noon was for lunch and for avoiding heat stroke.

Bundled behind a forgotten stack of crates with an axe wedged carefully within grabbing and striking distance, his back firmly against a wall, sat a miqo'te. Or rather, he was slumped in the little nook he'd found, head resting against his shoulder, dozing.

Sunlight crept along the cobble paths, finding even the most destitute of Ul'dah's people.

And it found him, sneaking past the barricade of boxes to shine directly across his face.

Zhyk woke with a start, his fingers clenching around the handle of his axe instinctually. His neck flared with pain, muscles taut from his sleeping position.

He sighed in irritation, pressing thumb and forefinger to the inner corners of his eyes, and gave himself thirty seconds to come to his senses. There was no danger. No stray pickpocket come for what meager gil he had on him. No Brass Blade with sword in hand. It was only the noonday sun and its oppressive heat.

Slowly Zhyk stood, massaging the side of his neck and shoulder to try and ease the tense muscle. He hooked his weapon across his back absentmindedly, the motion second nature to him.

He hadn't thought he'd sleep for so long. Hells, he hadn't thought he'd sleep to begin with, but getting more than a few bells was a victory of sorts, even if he hadn't tucked behind the crates until nearly sunrise that morning. This was as refreshed as he'd felt for weeks.

The sound of footsteps racing along the cobbles caught his attention. Zhyk glanced up, palm still pressed to the ache in his neck, when a body practically crashed into the stack of boxes. He was on the defensive immediately, stance dropping lower, eyes sharp, hand reaching for his weapon.

"*There you are!*" A familiar voice shouted and he looked up to see a young hyuran woman half-clambered atop the crates. Her smile brightened as they locked eyes and she finished her climb before perching almost daintily on top. With one knee hooked over the other, she leaned forward, propping her elbow on both and laughed. "Look like you've just come back from the dead."

Zhyk scowled, ears flattening. "How'd you find me?"

She exhaled through her nose and offered a dismissive wave of her hand. “Momodi hadn’t heard or seen you yet today and there’s only a handful of spots you bunker down in, wildfire. Wasn’t hard to make the rounds.”

“... ‘n what’ve you come searching for?” He relaxed his stance, returning to nursing his stiff neck. “I’ve no time for the stones, ‘less you’re needing a guard.”

“Bloodstone won’t be running ‘til evening tomorrow.” Amber eyes followed his body language, cutting him off as she noted the way he shifted his weight, getting ready to leave already. “Ah! Not so fast!” She pushed off her perch and landed on the ground before him with a smirk, dusting off her hands. “Doesn’t mean I don’t have work for you.”

“Sy—” Zhyk halted as her finger prodded his chest and he smacked the offending digit away. “Look—”

“I *am* looking. Now *you* listen.” Sy took a step back to give him space and jabbed a thumb over her shoulder. “Blades found the arena—not that it’s much of one, of course—so we’ve had to pack up shop again and haul arse ‘cross town to set up anew. Every couple moons they do this, acting like they’re busting up some illegal fights, but a little coin as we leave and a little coin as we settle in again...” She grinned. “Well, let’s just say there’s no snitches if some off hours Blades showed up for a little brawl, aye?”

“You need an errand boy.”

“You got it! I need an extra set of hands for hauling shite.” As Zhyk crossed his arms over his chest, Sy plucked a hefty pouch from her hip, a hint of song to her tone. “I’ll be paying well.”

Seemingly unswayed, he held out one hand to take the coin. It landed in his palm with a heavy weight and the gil inside jingled pleasantly. He didn’t have to look to know she spoke truth. “This’s more’n just for moving ‘n cleaning up the old place,” he stated.

“You’re right,” Sy agreed. “Help me sort out this shite and play guard tomorrow for me.” She looked him up and down, not even disguising the motion. “You look like hell, Zhyk, and we both know it’ll be another few days ‘til you get paid taking on something from the guild. I’m offering you payment up front for work I know you can do.”

His fingers closed around the coinpurse. *You’re right* was what he should say. *I’ll do it. I could use the coin. Thank you.*

But he said nothing, only looked at the pouch in his hand. This was a disguised favor, wasn't it? Something to bind him beyond the contract of work? He had no obligation to her once he played security for the bloodstones.

“Wildfire.” Zhyk glanced up. Sy regarded him closely, her smile faded, concern etching worry lines at the corners of her eyes. Yet she didn't reprimand him or demand anything, only raised an eyebrow at his silence and then shrugged, feigning acceptance of his non-answer. “Guess you won't get that late breakfast spread either then.”

“*Tch.*” He pocketed the coin and swiped a thumb across the tip of his nose, tail flicking behind him. “I'll take your work, but only 'cause you found me 'fore I went to the guild.”

Sy's smile returned and she gestured for him to follow her out into the midday sun. “Then I'll make sure I find you right quick any time I know you're in the city. *And* I'll include a meal—seems to change your mind faster that way, hm?”

He stepped out into the blazing heat and waved off her tease, obscuring his own hint of a smile.

He'd convince himself it was that same heat that warmed his cheeks, nothing more.