

Forgiven

Note: this is a selection of a larger piece.

“Apollo, I have a task for you, my son. A few years ago, one of our most valued test subjects, if not, the most valued, escaped from our laboratory. He is a rather... peculiar man... Who goes by the name...”

...

“Sanjuro... Sanjuro *Tempest*...”

A man somewhere in his late twenties made his way down the pavement his icy blue eyes were glued to. His jaw was clenched and eyebrows slightly furrowed, before he stopped for a moment and released a sigh. As he stood there, a breeze swept his unkempt blond hair against his elbows and he closed his eyes, recalling every detail of the conversation he held earlier with the Scientist. Opening his eyes once more, he looked forward as he slipped his hands into his pockets and stared blankly ahead. “But the bastard goes by *Sanjuro Crest*...” he muttered, kicking a rock once he resumed walking, watching as it bounced and rolled away onto the street beside him. The tall blond exhaled deeply as he eventually found the designated bench and slumped onto it, removing his black Stetson and setting it on his lap before allowing his eyes to rise to the sight before him. Another breeze blew by and he remained motionless as his bangs danced before his eyes. Raising a hand to shift the bangs behind his ear, his eyes finally laid sight of the school before him. The front lawn was void, but the parking lot was brimming with cars of all shades and sizes. He glanced at his watch, and sighed; it was still two minutes before the school day ended. Taking a deep breath, he gazed at the school that lay opposite him, leaned back, and waited.

Plenty of cars passed by the street and many birds fluttered by before the arms on his watch finally hit the 12 and the 3 marks. Shortly after came the sound of a bell.

The man raised his head to look before him as the sound of passing cars and tweeting birds was soon replaced with the shouts and cries of teenagers eager to escape the prison of school. A smirk made its way to Apollo’s lips as he recalled his own school days, and remained seated, watching as the swarm of students trickled down to a few stragglers. Releasing a deep breath, the blond hunched over to rest his elbows on his knees and his chin on his fists, still watching. His attention piqued as it became the professors’ turn to leave.

It was almost an hour before his leg began to bounce, but he perked up when a specific man made his way out of the school and into the parking lot.

It was a man with pale skin and a thin, almost sickly build. A man who was swinging on a black trench-like coat—in 80-degree weather—as he made his way out of

the school. A man who slipped on a brown Stetson hat with a frayed brim, and who wore tinted eyeglasses. The blond sat straight up and blinked as the other's long hair caught a gleam of sunlight, revealing a black shade that almost looked purple, and his stomach felt as though he had swallowed a few heavy boulders. It was difficult to breath so he had to look away as his fists clenched. 'Damn,' he thought, 'Has it really been twenty years...?'

After getting over the initial shock of spotting his target, the blond shook out his hands and inhaled deeply as he watched as the black-haired man mounted a blue Tsuzuki motorcycle. A frown appeared on the blond's lips as the other started up the vehicle and... Spoke...? to it, riding off soon after—without a helmet. '*Is he trying to get himself killed?!*' the blond thought, frowning deeply, before standing up as the black-haired man rode past him. He looked ahead and finally made his way to a parked red Corvette as he pulled out his keys. With a beep and a click, he climbed into the car, started it, and waited for the right moment before he took after his target.

By the time Apollo caught up, he saw the same Tsuzuki the black-haired man owned parked in front of a rather small but prestigious-looking store. At first glance, it seemed to Apollo that this was a regular antique shop, but after peering in on the display windows, it became apparent that it was a shop that sold forged *swords* and various other metal-works. His eyebrows quirked at the thought of a blacksmith's shop still being able to survive in this day and age.

Parking across the street, the blond turned off the car and exited, making his way into the shop with a ring as the door opened. Once inside, Apollo gazed around and slipped his hands in his pockets, smiling a small smile as his eyes glistened at the beautifully crafted swords that hung along the walls.

"Hello there, how may I help you?" a young man that sat behind the counter asked as he polished a sword.

Apollo turned to look at the young fellow and let out a short breath before opening his mouth to speak. "I'm looking for your boss. Could I meet with 'im?" he asked in a voice with a distinct Australian accent.

"Sure is, sir. I'll call'm up. Any specific reason you want to see'm?" the lad asked.

"Just want to see 'im," was Apollo's reply, as he intently stared at the fellow without blinking.

"Uh... Okay... S.J.! A customer wants to see you!!!" the young man cried out, standing up to go to the back of the store.

"Coming, coming," replied a tired, heavy voice. Moments later, the fellow returned from the back and continued with his work, and soon after came the black-haired man from before. He had his eyes closed, though, as he made his way to the front

of the store, and slipped on his eyeglasses before opening his eyes to look at the customer.

At first, Apollo stood there, not a single word was able to escape his lips as he stared intently into the other's eyes. Their light hazel blue color brought so many memories back to the blond man, so many in fact that he couldn't catch his breath for a moment. *'It's been twenty fucking years...'* he thought. If it weren't for the other speaking, Apollo would have remained speechless.

"Well, I'm Sanjuro and I run the store here. How may I help you?" the man asked, crossing his arms across his chest.

Shaking his head, the blond allowed a smile to paint itself onto his lips. "Sanjuro, it's a pleasure to meet you at last," he said, holding out a hand. Sanjuro took it into his own, and after a single, firm shake, released it. "I've 'eard so much about your shop, and 'ad to absolutely see it and its owner for myself. 'owever, I 'ave a... *Private* request for you."

"We can go into my office if you wish," the man named Sanjuro said, raising an eyebrow at the blond's request.

"If we could that would be wonderful!"

"Very well," nodded Sanjuro. With that, the black-haired man led the blond to his office, offering him a seat as he himself sat down behind the desk, turning to face Apollo. It wasn't unusual for people to give rather strange requests, since it was a smith's shop. Then, Sanjuro, being who he was, usually always did whatever he could in order to make sure his customers were satisfied—so long as they paid well. Laying his elbows on the desk and his head into his palm, he examined the blond-haired man. His accent was much thicker than his own, and there was something on the back of his mind that was bugging the hell out of him. There was something about this man that made his stomach drop, and he swore that it had to do with the feeling that this wasn't the first time he's seen him. Whatever it was, he could think of nothing to pin the exact cause down. He pushed the thought aside and released a short breath before speaking. "So, your request, Mister—..." he began, cutting the sentence short and gazing promptly at the other.

"Ah, I'm Apollo," the blond introduced, situating himself across from Sanjuro.

"Well, Apollo. What is this request of yours?"

"You see, Sanjuro, I've 'eard about your shop plenty of times. I've never 'eard anythin' negative about it, and since 'and-forged metal-works such as your own really peak my interest, I simply 'ad to come and find out more about this shop. I did a bit o' research to find out whom its owner was, and, well, was completely taken by surprise when I found out that this shop was run by you," Apollo said, looking at Sanjuro with his eyes slightly narrowed and brows slightly furrowed.

“How so?” Sanjuro responded, quirking his eyebrow and leaning back in his chair.

“Well, you see, it’s been 20 years and I suppose my memories may be a bit fuzzy, but your name ‘it me as extremely familiar. Now, mind you, Sanjuro isn’t a very common name, so that was why it caught my attention,” Apollo began, glancing at the black-haired man who was simply staring back, never diverting his gaze. With a deep inhalation, the blond slouched back into his own chair, leaning his head back to stare intently at the ceiling. This definitely wasn’t going to be as easy as his other tasks...

“You see, Sanjuro. I’m adopted,” he finally continued, folding an arm behind his head. “My parents both died from a disease around twenty years ago,” he went on, pausing to glance down at Sanjuro and allow him to process what he was saying. “We were emigrating from Australia, and apparently someone ‘ad been carrying a rather nasty disease. Because of it, my entire family got sick, but I was able to get attention quickly and was fine. My father died shortly after we arrived ‘ere, and my mother died on the steps of the orphanage. ‘owever, I wasn’t the only survivor. I ‘ad a brother.” He paused again, slowly sitting straight up, and looking at Sanjuro, who was still staring at Apollo. The blond could see sweat beading on the black-haired man’s forehead, and after the edges of his lips twitched for a second, he continued. “‘e was two years younger than me, five at the time, and got pretty sick. ‘e was conscious enough, though, to be able to speak, but the orphanage’s owner and I soon found out—after Mother ‘ad passed away—that the sickness ‘ad some’ow managed to wipe ‘is memories clean.

“It wasn’t but shortly after that someone had arrived and decided to adopt me. I didn’t want to leave my brother, but the man didn’t want ‘im—‘e thought the child was going to die. I didn’t want to leave ‘im, but this man was the father of a friend whom I grew very close to. So I requested to the one who ran the orphanage to never tell ‘im ‘is last name. What ‘appened to ‘im after I left, I thought I would never know...” The blond released a breath he was holding. He looked at Sanjuro, before he looked away and mumbled, “...it was probably the worst mistake I ‘ad ever made...”

Sanjuro simply sat there, speechless. He had no idea what the hell this man was talking about—or, well, he *didn’t* want to believe what he was talking about. The fact remained, however, that some of the story sounded extremely familiar. He couldn’t fathom how it was possible that somebody else could have such a similar story, the story of his own past. However, “What the hell does this have to do with the request?” he asked, shaking his hands out—he only now realized he had been clenching them this entire time.

“It ‘as nothing to do with a sword, Sanjuro. I just said that so we could speak in private,” Apollo explained.

“Then why in god’s name are you telling me this?” Sanjuro responded in a raised voice.

“Because, Sanjuro... For twenty years, I could do nothing but wonder what ‘ad ‘appened to my younger brother. It is only now that I got a lead.” The blond looked at Sanjuro and studied his features. “I can recall almost perfectly that ‘e ‘ad the prettiest ‘azel blue eyes, ‘is skin was rather light, and ‘e was always a thin little bloke.”

A silence suddenly filled the room. Sanjuro couldn’t find his voice, and he could feel himself breathing faster. He had to stop himself from looking into the reflection of the glass on a framed picture on his desk. No matter how hard he tried, however, he couldn’t stop himself from remembering how he came from an orphanage, and how he could remember *nothing* before the fifth year of his life. The black-haired man shook his head and tried to appear as though the story hadn’t fazed him at all. “And what of it?” he asked at last.

“...My brother’s name is Sanjuro...” Apollo said, finding his own fists clenching but he quickly relaxed them upon realizing it, and inhaled deeply before exhaling slowly.

Sanjuro froze, before he released a forced and doubtful laugh. “So what... I share the same name as your b-... Brother,” he stuttered, finding it harder to remain calm.

“You know Mrs. Glade?” Apollo asked, and Sanjuro froze. That was the name of the orphanage’s head caretaker... The one he had come from...

The man nodded, and Apollo continued. “Do you remember anything before you were five?” Sanjuro shook his head nervously. At this point, Apollo reached into his pocket, and Sanjuro stared at him, finding it harder to keep his brows from furrowing and hands from trembling. The blond man pulled out a sheet of yellow-white paper whose edges were worn. It was turned upside down, however, but it was obvious enough that it was some sort of photograph. Trying to remain calm, Sanjuro resisted the temptation to ask what the photo was of.

Continuing, Apollo asked, “Were you sick at the time?” And Apollo flipped the sheet over. At the sight of the content of the photo, Sanjuro’s pupils dilated, his heart beat faster, his hands trembled, and sweat drenched his forehead.

In the photograph there was a happy family of four. To the left was a middle-aged man with short black hair and his eyes were closed with a smile on his lips. A young-looking, middle-aged woman stood next to him with long blonde hair and blue eyes, holding a small child in her arms. This child had raggedy blond hair and a cheesy grin on his façade, holding tightly onto his mother’s arms with one hand, and held the other with two fingers up behind the head of the last person in the picture. The last person was a small, frail-looking child held securely within the man’s arms with raggedy, black hair, and hazel blue eyes.

Sanjuro had seen that picture before, and as a matter of fact, he had an identical one back at his house, framed simply, and was resting on his living room coffee table.

The corner however, had been torn off, so Sanjuro always assumed those fingers were his mother's, never once questioning why they were so small.

His hands shook even more, and Sanjuro found himself unable to speak. There was nothing but silence in the air for a few moments, before Sanjuro clenched his jaw and furrowed his eyebrows deeply, feeling his entire body tense up.

"W-Who the hell are you?!" Sanjuro exclaimed as he stood up from his seat, nearly knocking it over, and slammed his palms down onto the desk's top. "How the hell do you know all this?! H-How did you get that picture?! Who sent you?!" he continued in a wavering voice, enraged that this man was able to recite such a story. As far as he knew, absolutely *nobody* knew anything about his past, so it couldn't be pure coincidence that somebody could come along and have such a similar story to his own. That picture that now lay on the desk was the absolute last straw! What sort of hoax was this?!

Releasing a slow breath, Apollo blinked and stood up to look at Sanjuro straight into his eyes. His brows remained furrowed, his lips were slightly pursed, and his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. A moment passed before he finally said, "Sanjuro. I'm your *brother*."