

Marcus was already using the rest of his crew as human shields and making a play to stay away from the fighting. It was the kind of craven tactic I expected from him, but to cut and run while the rest of your groupies were dying in a melee was disgraceful in the extreme. Tahar followed up her brutal headshot with a few more, shredding people to pieces and sending them flying into the mud. It seemed as if threatening her good friend was enough of a reason to cross the line. I didn't disagree with her on that front.

Perhaps he should have made a better plan though. His current one was still compromised by his unwillingness to heed other people's warnings. It was a motley crew of fighters who had absolutely no business dealing with me. I almost felt bad after I turned the first guy into a shish kebab using Stigma, almost. I was all out of sympathy for them after they dragged Cali into this mess. I wasn't going to hold back.

It would be a fruitless effort to recall every detail of the ensuing chaos. Bodies flew en masse as both sides attempted to see a quick end to the battle. What should have been a forgone conclusion was anything but with me on one side. I was strong enough to kill forty men with significantly more training and experience than the collection of dregs that Marcus collected with promises of immense wealth. One, two, three. The last man crumpled to the floor as Stigma smashed through his wooden-board shield like it was made from paper, leaving him with a chest-wide gash across his front.

I became so engrossed in slaying all who dared attack me that I didn't notice Cali sneaking up on me.

"Ren, I do not have my Halberd."

"Shit! You scared the hell out of me!"

It was an honest reaction - it was hard to hear her over the sounds of people screaming and shouting. I cut down another man as he tried to blindside me from the left while I was distracted. Cali ducked down and stole his sword, quickly putting it to use and adding another life to her own killing tally. She ducked out of the way as another arrow flew and struck down a man wielding a wooden club; "I see that Tahar has abandoned her sense of pacifism."

"You better thank her when we meet up again!" I grunted, "She's doing this for your sake."

"This is all very unnecessary, I was about to make my escape."

"Bullshit."

With a mighty swing, I cleaved two heads from two pairs of shoulders at the same time. Sensing that I needed to do more to scare away our attackers, I kicked into high gear and started what could best be described as a vicious, one-sided massacre. None of the men who Marcus mustered were even worthy of the effort it took to dispatch of them. Blood and viscera flew freely as I sliced, diced and bisected with no regard for keeping my boots clean. The numbers got thin very quickly indeed, and Marcus was left staring at the carnage that we collectively unleashed.

Was it a problem that I was becoming numb to this sort of thing? I knew that behind the eyes of every man I killed, there was a collection of family and friends, people who would feel a great loss if they died here. I killed another four of them like I was cutting down weeds in a garden. Some of them dropped their weapons and fled. Tahar was just as devastating from her perch on the roof. Those who stood out in the open or tried to meet us in the middle were likely to be shot in the back before reaching us.

I wiped the blood from my eyes with the back of my hand and tried to focus. I needed to protect Cali from them, she couldn't take hits like I could. That was the entire reason we were in this situation in the first place. I caught one of them so hard that he flew off of his feet and collided with another, knocking them down to the ground and almost drowning them in their blood. It was a short and mania-inducing fight. I stood there and held my ground, swinging wildly like a man possessed.

"They're all dead, Ren. You can stop now."

I allowed Stigma to rest in the dirt.

Two dozen bodies laid in the formerly pristine plaza. The white cobbles had been left drenched blood red. They'd be picking out bits and pieces of human for some time to come. The entire thing was a wild, madness fuelled blur that I only returned from when the fighting was over and no more voices could be heard. Marcus was standing there shell-shocked by the ease at which I dispatched his men.

"Now, are you going to explain to me where that money came from?" I asked.

"You're a fucking monster! Stay away from me!"

Not what I wanted to hear. I grabbed him before he could get away and threw him into the dirt, which made it perfectly clear to him that there was no getting away from me now.

"My last bit of patience is done with, Marcus. I let you off easy last time, and this is how you decided to repay me? Contrary to what you think, I don't like killing people if I don't have to. I would have been happy to let you go about your business if you'd just stayed out of my way."

Marcus started talking in a desperate attempt to stave off my fury, "Okay! Okay! I'll tell you what I heard, but I don't know everything – do you think that I have that kind of money to throw around?"

"I already guessed that from the quality of your men."

"I heard some rumours that the Governor was the one putting up the cash, but he asked the watchmen to keep it a secret because it came from the public coffers. If you want to get rid of it you're going to have to go and find him. I swear!"

"And where the hell did you put Cali's halberd?"

Marcus replied as quick as a whip, "It's in the warehouse on Barkhorn Street." He held his hands out in front of him in a vain attempt to protect himself from my attacks. I stared him down for a moment longer as Tahar landed beside us and scared the seven hells out of him.

"I suspected as much," Cali said, "I know where that is. We can go and retrieve it."

Marcus moved to another stage of grief; bargaining.

"I didn't mean anything personal by this, Ren. I really didn't. You know how the game's played, don't you? It was too much money for anybody to turn down. If you were in my shoes, you'd do the same thing!"

"I seem to recall you saying that you were going to kill Cali even after I handed myself over – something about making me suffer?" I was enjoying watching him squirm way too much. I was almost worrying myself. Sensing that I was unmoved by his pleas for mercy, he turned to anger instead.

“You think you can just walk around and do shit like this without anyone noticing Ren?” he yelled, his face turning red in a blind fury, “I’m not the only one who has it out for you. You better keep a close eye on those two fucking whores behind you – or somebody will serve you their fucking heads on a plate!”

“Charming.”

I’d had enough. I brought Stigma’s bloodied edge down through his skull and cleaved his head clean in two. He died as he lived, unaware of his own weaknesses and outraged at things outside of his control. I pushed his head back with my boot and stabbed him in the chest, consuming his soul and his abilities for my own use. It was very satisfying to see his body wither slightly. I turned back and reckoned with the huge amount of damage that we caused during the fight. There were bodies everywhere, sitting on benches, slumped into the grass, or pulverised against solid walls by Tahar’s arrows.

“That wasn’t much of a challenge,” Cali quipped, “Not even exciting.”

I cleared my throat and nodded in Tahar’s direction. Unusually, Cali picked up on my social cue.

“Thank you for this Tahar - you sacrificed a virtue for me.”

Tahar smiled with some sadness in her gaze, “What are virtues for, if not to be broken? I could not allow them to kill a close friend like this.”

It surprised me how quickly the entire situation resolved itself, but I suppose it was in line with Sakura’s precious rule of threes. Marcus and I started as allies, met as enemies, and said farewell as victim and offender. He was a throwback at this point – someone who I had long since left behind thanks to my accelerated stat growth and skill stealing. The only realistic outcome for this fight was a crushing defeat, a massacre even. It was funny that in a world where there were hard numbers attached to every person and living thing, Marcus still miscalculated my strength based on his own biases.

There was no convincing some people. All the numbers and evidence in the world weren’t enough to change the mind of the dogmatic. Marcus believed earnestly that he was righteous and that was all that mattered to the outcome. Using maths never occurred to him because it would demand an acknowledgement that he was out of his depth. Marcus wanted to kill me and it didn’t matter how it came about. It was impossible to fully insulate people from ignorance when emotions were running high.

“They didn’t rough you up too bad, did they?” I asked. It was too late to dole out an appropriate punishment if they had.

Cali shook her head, “They punched me once or twice, but otherwise left me alone. I don’t mean to imitate you but I barely felt a thing.”

Cali led us back to where the warehouse was located. Nobody saw fit to pursue us after such a violent fight in a high-class district of the city, though I was fairly confident that I’d killed a few watchmen who tried to jump in and take a share of the bounty. While in any other town that was liable to make things worse, over here most of the watchmen didn’t much care for solidarity in the workplace. Getting your head chopped off would be seen as their fault for abandoning their posts and chasing bounties instead of doing their jobs.

“It should be in here, give me a moment.”

Cali dipped into the building and returned a minute later with her Halberd and other belongings in tow. She frowned while ruffling through her bag.

“Is something wrong?”

“They took my potions.”

“And not the money?”

“No, that’s still here. They must have been planning to split it up later.”

Thank goodness for that. Cali was funding a lot of these ventures through her noble bank account. It was a relief that none of her irreplaceable or expensive things were missing. None of the men Marcus brought were brave enough to try and use her weapon without preparation first, the only smart choice they’d made thus far. I sighed and tried to clean off my face a little so that I didn’t look like a blood-soaked psychopath. A bath would do us wonders.

“I don’t know how we’re going to handle the Governor spending public money on this bullshit. That’s a step above my usual pay grade.”

Cali was straight to the point as ever, “Warmajor Xerces will handle it. She has a personal vendetta against individuals who abuse public money in such a way.”

“Really? A public official holding another to account, that’d be a first.”

“Xerces is a stickler for the rules. Going over the heads of the local military officials to place a private bounty using public money is a plain violation of the principles on which the Federation was founded. The Governor could face serious consequences for doing so.”

“Well, she better get around to busting his ass soon. I don’t want to deal with this any longer than we have to.”

“I agree. I expected being wanted by an entire city to be more stimulating than this.”