

It was getting late, and I was getting worried.

Cali hadn't yet returned from her shopping excursion and unless a seriously dangerous situation had arisen that she just couldn't ignore, she always returned at a specific time. Cali loved to be punctual, seeing no reason to do anything otherwise. There were a lot of little things like that to learn when you spend so much time travelling together.

"You are pacing again."

I sighed, "I know, Tahar. I can't sit still when I start to worry about something."

I knew Cali could handle herself in most situations – but recent events indicated that this wasn't a matter of combat skill. The fact that she wasn't with us told me that one of two things was happening, she was late for a good reason, or that some dead meat had grabbed and bagged her to try and get at me. It was a common strategy for bounty hunters to target friends and family, trading them in exchange for the mark. That would be the only way that someone could theoretically capture me. I was too powerful for a dime-a-dozen bandit or mercenary to take down.

But even the most powerful beings had emotions.

There were no two ways about it, I had gotten attached to Cali. I'd been lying to myself time and time again by insisting that it was professional. If it was professional, we would have parted ways a long time ago as I did with everyone I worked with. Cali had stuck around and I'd permitted her to do so. She was the first person that I'd really opened up to since I arrived in this world. The only person I allowed to watch my back. It was funny to recall that all of this happened just because I was trying to ward her away from Bell.

Happy coincidences did exist even when you lived a tough life. I was waiting for the penny to drop. Someone would waltz up to the front of the inn and explain where she had gotten to. They'd demand my surrender in exchange for her life, presuming they would even honour such a contract in the first place. True to form, a rotund man emerged from one of the alleyways and approached me with a cocky smirk on his face.

He wore nothing but a leather vest and tatty pants, and he was missing most of his teeth. If this was the quality of man that Marcus had scrounged up with so much money on offer, it was clear that he'd managed to capture Cali and was trying to extort me. He looked like he'd fall over in a stiff breeze, never mind survive a punch from me.

"Ren Kageyama?"

I glared at him, "Make it quick."

"We've got your girl. Ashmorn, big halberd. If you want to get her back in one piece, you'll offer yourself to us and let us get the bounty. I don't much care about what you do after that."

"Did Marcus put you up to this?"

"How'd you reckon?"

"He's the only one who'd be fucking stupid enough to cross me again; and he's the one who's familiar with me and her."

He scratched his dome and nodded dimly, "Sure did. That guy really has a grudge out for you, but he promised to split the cash if we helped him bag that woman. He wants to see you tomorrow morning, at sunrise, on George's Road at the plaza, unarmed and unarmoured."

"And what about Cali?"

"Marcus doesn't want to tell you where she is, says you'll kill everyone and take her back. She'll be there. We'll chain you up, or whatever he wants to do, and let her go. She isn't worth anything. But if we see any funny business from you – we'll put a knife in her and that'll be that."

Marcus was going to try and screw me over, I knew it. It didn't matter what I decided to do here, it was a false choice. Marcus was spiteful enough and crazy enough to kill Cali and risk pissing me off. Not that he needed to make me any angrier than I already was. I could hear my teeth grinding against each other as I clenched my jaw and tried to keep myself cool.

"Fine. I'll be there."

With his message delivered and an aura of death hovering over him like a storm cloud, he made a wise choice and got out of my way before I snapped his neck with my bare hands. Tahar was visibly worried as my face twisted in fury. "Marcus is a dead man. When I get my fucking hands on him, they're not going to be able to ID his corpse."

She stepped up and tried to dissipate my fury, "Ren, calm down. You won't be able to rescue Cali if you are not thinking rationally."

"Do I even need to be rational here? Marcus is nothing! I already beat him down once, and I've only gotten stronger since then!"

"You may be able to do that, but Cali is not you."

She didn't need to say it. I knew that all too well. I just wanted to vent my frustration somehow and impotent words seemed more constructive than punching the nearest brick wall and potentially destroying someone's home. I should have considered this possibility when I learned about the bounty. We needed to stick together at all times to prevent this kind of kidnapping from being effective. I threw my hands up and fell down onto the inn's front step with a clatter.

"Shit. What a load of shit."

The George's Road Plaza was in one of the denser areas of the city. I was familiar with the area, and from that an idea started to form in my head. If we got an early start the following day, we could search for where they were keeping Cali and try to get her out of there. Tahar's tracking skills were second to none. A group of booted feet moving towards a certain place? She could follow that and lead us right to them.

"Okay. We're going to go to sleep nice and early, and then we're gonna' find where they're keeping Cali using your tracking skills."

Tahar nodded, "Good. We should also plan just in case we cannot find her."

"I know he said no funny business, but you could easily hit the person holding her, couldn't you?"

I'd seen even more impressive feats of marksmanship from her before. Hitting a person while avoiding Cali wouldn't be too much of a problem, especially if she used one of her bow skills to increase the accuracy and velocity of her shot. Tahar was rightly nervous about shooting so close to

her friend and rival in romance. The consequences of not doing so were even more severe. I couldn't trust Marcus to follow through on his end of the exchange. He could tie me up and order them to kill her regardless. I needed to convince Tahar that it was the right thing to do.

"I am uncertain, and if they spot me – they will surely move Cali to protect themselves."

"Then we need to make sure that they don't see you."

We returned to the room and started to hash out some of the finer details. Come what may, Marcus was going to regret crossing me a second time.

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"Message delivered, boss."

Marcus grinned from beneath his beard and laughed heartily, "Fantastic! I wish I could have been there to see the look on his face." The rest of the crew hung close to the table as he outlined the plan that they'd be following the next morning.

"Why do you have such a huge grudge against this guy anyway?"

"He's bad news. I work one job with him and my entire band gets chewed up by some fucking monster, and then he goes and destroys the whole bloody duchy while he's at it!"

A solemn silence settled into the warehouse as the group recalled the chaos that was unleashed just a few short weeks ago. Thousands of refugees from Pascen flooded into the Federation, many of them brought directly to Dalston so they could be re-homed and reunited with their family and friends. The stories that came from there were harrowing. Great beasts cloaked in dark sickness descended unto them in packs, ripping and tearing the people to shreds.

Those who survived the initial onslaught cowered within the walls of the city. Food and water started to become scarce, leading to violence and tension between them that posed just as much of a threat as the supernatural beasts that clawed at the barricades. Every day more and more would die in the attacks. Some of the men Marcus recruited knew people who lived there, and a smaller number of them still lost relatives to the disaster.

"I just don't get it. Could one bloke really cause that much destruction?"

Another jumped in, "Didn't that woman with the big hat say that he used some kind of sword to wither a Branch?"

"You don't even know what a Branch is!"

"I do!"

Marcus cut through the scuffle with the definitive version of events, "He did wither that Branch, and the sword he used is cursed. I saw it with my own two eyes, I did. I was never one to believe in that Branch Church nonsense – but what I saw is starting to make me think again. There are things out there that none of us can fully understand."

His gaze turned to the Ashmorn illuminated in the middle of the floor, tied to a chair, unmoving, unspeaking. The full extent of her passiveness came as a shock. She wasn't affected in the slightest by the dire circumstances she found herself in. Marcus was curious about her personal story, but asking her probing questions after taking her hostage wasn't going to produce any answers.

Ren never gave the impression that he was the caring type. Marcus had seen hundreds of men like him before, haggard and desperate. Eyes filled with dread and hunger. There was nothing that they

would not do to make it through the week. They'd lie, cheat and steal with impunity, with no regard for their victims. His methods had the stink of a thief all over and no amount of armour was going to hide that from his attention.

To hear people speak of him on the streets made his veins fill with lava. It was white-hot rage that was instinctual. Those who had nothing but praise for his participation in the war knew nothing of the man, nothing of what he had done, and nothing of his lack of virtue. Marcus was no saint; but he would never stoop to the same level as Ren. Marcus believed in the value of honour first and the weight of money second.

Marcus turned back to his crew with a hazy stare, "I can't stand it. All of those people, standing there with their flapping tongues – talking so glibly about all of the good men who died because of what he did. All he need do is kill a single enemy commander and everyone is treating him like the Gods' gift to our continent! Aye, they needn't worry themselves with the details. It's easier and more comforting to imagine your cause as the most righteous among them. The biggest evils can be absolved by appealing to the right side."

"How are we going to kill him?" the messenger asked.

"How else?" Marcus chuckled, "We stab him, choke him, decapitate him. I don't care what it takes, and if all that fails – we'll drag him to the watchmen so they can figure it out instead. But I don't think that'll happen. We're gonna' make sure that he's dead."

The others shared a worried look as Marcus started to fantasize about his prospective killing of Ren Kageyama. None saw fit to protest. There was simply too much money on the line for them to back out now. They could only cross their fingers and hope that Marcus' plan worked the way it was supposed to.