

Two days later and the wanted posters were gone.

Warmajor Xerces had allegedly found the Governor and almost strangled him to death for wasting such a large amount of public money in a hairbrained embezzlement scheme. He was promptly arrested and forced to cancel the bounty. With no money on my head, the number of people trying to murder me in the streets took a sudden and noticeable fall.

"I'm glad that your friend works so quickly, Cali."

"We are co-workers, not friends."

"I think she cares about you, just a little."

"Like you do for me?"

I clammed up, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Her ruby eyes stared straight through me, "While I'm no expert on the subject of emotions, the expression on your face during that last fight was the most distressed I've ever seen you. Tahar suggested that it was because you harboured feelings for me and feared that I would die."

I sent a glare Tahar's way, who sheepishly ducked out of sight before I could call her out on sharing my private information so openly. I sighed and turned back to the table, "Okay. I guess the cat's out of the bag now. But I wasn't doing a very good job of hiding it. If I didn't care about you, we wouldn't have travelled together for so long."

"You always told me that it was because we had a profitable partnership."

I shrugged, "We do."

Cali took a moment to compose her next question; "I already asked you once before, but you told me that you wanted to see me 'grow,' would you say that I have achieved that?"

In many ways, Cali had done exactly as I asked. Through our journeys together I'd come to recognise the ways she behaved and emoted. They were subtle, but they did exist. Those flashes of outward emotions grew with time. Instead of focusing entirely on the thrill of almost being killed, Cali was starting to appreciate and enjoy other sensations as well. I couldn't take sole credit for doing it. It was a combination of our time together and the assistance of Tahar.

Having someone who took her seriously and spoke with her frankly was a huge boon. Cali lived in a society that was so traumatised by past events that many of them grew up with emotional problems like she did. The only course of action I could think of was spending time with her and exposing her to other people and perspectives.

Even now, I could see that she was worried about what my answer was going to be.

"I think you're ready. Part of me was too worried about forcing something on you, but if you're still so invested in giving it a try – I can't keep saying no."

Cali's face was a complex mixture of shock and joy. Her cheekbones quivered up and down and she tried to settle on one of the two. Joy won out in the end. For the first time outside of battle, she broke out into a genuine smile of happiness. She looked down at the table that sat between us and calmed herself down.

"Thank you, Ren. I was afraid that you would reject me again."

“You? Afraid of something?”

She nodded and turned her eyes upwards, “If that is the feeling that I was experiencing, then yes. Though I am never certain.”

“You’ll learn what they all mean in time. It’s about what they make you do in the end.”

Tahar burst back into the inn room with her feathered arms waving in the air, “Congratulations, you two!”

Cali frowned, “You are Ren’s bride too, Tahar.”

She paused, “I am?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and grumbled, “If Cali is okay with it – I suppose we should try it out.”

I really was worried about them, and that was enough to convince me that these two had wormed their way into the blackened piece of scrap that I called a heart. It felt sudden but it had been building up to this point for almost a full year. I was always terrified of letting other people into my life to share in my struggles. I’d seen so many of my rogue acquaintances come and go, leaving behind family and friends.

Cali and Tahar showed me something important. There was no sense in living in fear of what would happen to those you cared about once you were gone. I couldn’t expect to have a second chance of things again when this life came to an end like my last one. Why not enjoy it while I had the chance? There were other people out there forming bonds and enjoying relationships, and some of them were in worse positions than I was.

In fact, with all of the money we’d earned recently, it was possible for us to buy our own place and call it quits. I just needed to find enough things to kill to extend my body’s clock for that bit longer. If breaking the curse wasn’t possible – living to eighty or ninety would do me just fine. The problem was finding something with enough soul energy to provide me with those years. I didn’t want to have to leave town, again and again, to kill the local wildlife or go bandit hunting.

Despite this new resolution, I understood that matters hadn’t been settled with Adelbern and the Inquisitors. The Absolver was still plotting something and I was the key to it. I could worry about making them happy later once everything was cleared up. Despite this being such a tectonic shift in our relationship, it was rather anticlimactic. That was my fault for expecting everything to be cinematic. We were so concerned about getting away from the watchmen that I didn’t consider professing my undying love and concern for her at the time.

Cali steepled her fingers, “So. Now that we’re an item – what should we do?”

I laughed and covered my eyes, “God help me.”

“Couples usually engage in intimate activities,” Tahar offered unhelpfully.

“Yeah – I get that much. But it just feels kinda’ weird jumping into it without building up to that point first. I don’t know if Cali’s ever gotten off without being attacked or injured first.”

“I have not,” she responded honestly.

“We have already seen you naked,” Tahar added.

I stood from the table and held up my hands in mock defeat, “Listen – there’s a big difference between seeing me getting into the bathtub and actually having sex. Not that I have a problem with that, I’m saying that we only agreed to this arrangement a few seconds ago. Are you sure you don’t want some time to think it over before making such a big change?”

Tahar tilted her head to one side, “Why would I not want to sleep with my mate?”

Cali was equally ruthless, “You’ve commented that we act like a ‘married couple’ on several occasions already. The only one who has evaded displays of affection is you.”

I didn’t think she’d remember all of the times I joked about that while we were on the road. It was aimed more at Tahar than her anyway, Cali was a lonesome soul who tended to look after herself. Tahar would only draw her out of her shell with the offer of good food. There was truth to the statement that the way into someone’s heart was through their stomach.

As much as I enjoyed looking at them both, I wasn’t in much of a sexy mood. It was a good thing that we held off on doing something too – because there was a frantic knocking at the door soon after that would have been much more awkward to handle if we were halfway through jumping each other’s bones. I walked over and opened it, revealing the flustered face of one Adelbern Weiss.

“Adelbern? You’re back with another job already.”

“I wish. It’s something more urgent than that. Do you mind if I step in?”

I moved aside and allowed him to enter our new and improved inn room. The last innkeeper kicked us out after one of his doors got kicked down and blood started leaking onto the ground floor. It was his fault for not making the place watertight. As for Adelbern, his face really sold the urgency that he was speaking of. I hadn’t ever seen him look this panicked or flustered.

“You’re not going to be happy about this,” he warned.

“Give it to me straight. There’s no time to screw around if it’s that important.”

Adelbern laughed, “We’re in deep shit, my friend.”

“Why?”

“One of the men who was meant to transport the cursed relic across the border was a turncoat. He looked inside the lockbox and removed the relic before it reached me. I had to go chasing them across the Federation just to find out who did it, but I was too slow. The news has already reached the fort, and the Absolver is presumably in custody or dead.”

My heart skipped a beat. I knew something like this was going to happen eventually.

“Wait, so the Inquisition is falling apart right now?”

“Yes, but your primary concern should be what happens to the cursed relics. If someone else takes charge in the midst of the chaos, you will lose your window of opportunity to collect those which remain. It is unlikely that they will decide to dispense them to you as the present Absolver has.”

I groaned and slicked back my hair, “We don’t have much of a choice then, do we?”

“The relics have been removed from the vault already, and the Absolver is the only one who knows where they are hidden. We need to find him before they put him to the sword. Even if he tries to blackmail them using that information, the more impulsive members may still wish to see his end.”

“We’d better hope that I’ve absorbed enough skills to go through with this. Those Inquisitors are no joke in a fight.”

Adelbern was tense, “Normally I would describe attacking the fort as a suicide mission – but you may die if you do not get the pieces back. There is no time for us to worry about it.”

I’d heard legends about the Inquisitor’s largest fort – the base of their operations and the place from which their power flowed through Sull. It was the single largest fortified location on the continent, designed to repel all forms of attack through sheer size. Even ignoring that there were thousands of well-trained warriors waiting inside to fight back against whatever foe emerged. It was dangerous, but going in while everyone was busy fighting each other was going to be the only way to succeed.

“Are you sure that rescuing the Absolver is the only way? Didn’t he tell you where he hid them?”

Adelbern shook his head, “He doesn’t trust anyone – not even me. Everything has to be carefully planned and considered with multiple contingencies just in case something goes wrong. He reminds me of you.”

“I’m sure we’re very much different,” I snapped back.

“To make sure that the scheme went off without a hitch nobody was told anything more than what they needed to know. I’ve got a general idea of how it works since I’m the one who has to get in contact with you. None of the others know for what purpose their services were required. We’ll need to speak with the man himself to find out.”

I sighed, “Okay. But I still don’t see how three of us are going to be able to break into there and do this even if everyone is struggling for control. I can kill forty barely trained militiamen and maybe a few Inquisitors, but if they start overwhelming me in the hundreds there isn’t much I can do. I don’t imagine that you’re going to be helping us out?”

“I might be good with a sword, but I won’t tip the scales for you. I’m already a marked man for working so closely with the Absolver. They’ll try to arrest me as soon as I walk through the front gates.”

I frowned, “So all that shit about waiting for the ‘right moment’ to make a difference was just that, then?”

“There’s only so much I can do. Not everyone has the benefit of your strength, Ren.”

“That’s not the point. You keep talking to me like you’re planning on taking them down from the inside, but all you’ve got for me is a bunch of excuses. What’s the difference between you and every other scumbag who rides around using that authority to abuse innocent people? You’re going to keep waiting and waiting and waiting until it’s too late.”

Adelbern’s mouth gaped open like a goldfish as he tried to find the words to fight back against my accusation, but he knew the truth of it. I was right. He’d spent so long telling himself that he was going to be the hero that he’d lost sight of what that actually meant. As he was now, he did nothing but allow them to keep doing the same stuff that he vowed to put an end to.

“Everybody thinks that they’re valuable and that they’re hot shit, that they’re the key to solving a particular problem. I’ve got news for you Adel; most of us are disposable. If you want to be a hero who saves people but won’t do it without the right number, you’re not much of a hero at all.”

“As I said, we can’t all be you.”

