

“Ren, may we speak for a moment?”

Before I could think about organising a trip to the border (this time by paying for a carriage ride,) Tahar pulled me aside and asked to speak with me. There was no convention against her speaking her mind to me, though she was rather reserved in being honest on certain topics. Her tribe had a set of values that they stuck very closely to. Just like with other societies – certain subjects were sensitive and taboo to speak of with strangers.

“You can always talk to me about whatever is eating at you, Tahar. We’ve been together long enough.”

“Ah, it’s nothing too grave,” she said, “While you and Cali were searching for the blacksmith, I completed a few tasks of my own. I’m afraid to say that I heard some rather unflattering rumours about you.”

I laughed, “That’s not news to me. I can’t even walk down the road without hearing the same few things repeated over and over again.”

Tahar was still pensive; “Hm. While their words are not troublesome for you, I also heard that a local mercenary is attempting to assemble a team to defeat you. They said that his name was Marcus, and I believe that you know him.”

I groaned. This guy again?

“He’s not going to be a problem. I’ve handled a lot worse than what he has to offer.”

Tahar sat at the table and intertwined her clawed fingers, “I understand that you are a very capable warrior, it is part of why I desire a closer relationship. But that does not stop me from worrying about you. Even the mightiest beasts can be felled by enough hands. I find myself thinking that we will reach a tipping point soon.”

I had to agree to disagree on that point. I had not yet seen any evidence that Marcus was capable of putting together a ‘hunting party’ capable of killing me. I’d fought a dragon, trained soldiers and Sakura, all of whom posed a much bigger threat than he ever did. At the same time – it would be stupid of me to write off Tahar’s feelings by insisting that the numbers didn’t add up. I was the only one who knew the true extent of my strength and how it could be applied. It was no fault of hers that she couldn’t comprehend it. If I was on the other end of the conversation I would have felt the same way. Without experiencing it first-hand, I’d believe that this was a scenario from which there was no escape.

I had promised to be more open with her about what I was thinking and feeling. The prospect of a relationship with her and Cali was one which had become increasingly probable with time. Tahar had removed most of her cold-weather gear and was enjoying the heat coming from the furnace in one corner of our inn room. My own armour was starting to irritate me, so I peeled away some of the layers and tried my best to unwind.

“I don’t want to disregard your worries out of hand, but Marcus himself isn’t much a leader of men, nor is he much of a fighter. I’ve already beaten him back once.”

Tahar nodded, “I see.”

“He’s definitely not going to find anybody skilled loitering around in the streets either. People with the talent to back up their big talk won’t work for free. I doubt he has the money to throw around to hire a band himself.”

Being the leader of a mercenary group was a step up from rogue for sure, but it still didn't promise immense riches to those who participated. The money would have to be divided up between the different members, and prices were on a downturn with the activity in the war slowing. Soon, if they agreed to a lasting peace, many of them would struggle to find work. That was the problem with living by the sword. When nobody wants to fight - there is no demand for you. And a less loyal group of people you'll never find. Nobody would be joining his party on the promise of a future payment or a favour.

"Has Cali spoken to you about... that?"

I laughed, "That?"

Cali flushed red, "It's a difficult topic!"

There was nothing storybook about it, nor was there a climatic time and place in which to confess our deeply held feelings. This was a real relationship that we were trying to develop, and one between three people was even trickier than normal. I was no pick-up artist in my old life, and the full extent of my romantic endeavours in this one was two drunken visits to a brothel with some rogue friends. I didn't even remember the second time clearly thanks to how sloshed I was. Not that I was planning on sharing that story with anyone. What happens in the brothel stays in the brothel.

"She hasn't. You know her, if she wanted to talk about it she would at the worst possible time. I'm starting to think that she's gained a little tact when it comes to that kind of thing, which is what I wanted to see before moving ahead with it."

Tahar smiled, "You are a noble person. Many others would have taken advantage of her vulnerability to enrich themselves."

"I wouldn't call myself noble, but I've always tried to live by a standard I set for myself. Not just for her sake, but for my own. I'd feel horrible if I did something like that to Cali, or anyone else for that matter." I'd rob, threaten and coerce, but emotionally manipulating Cali for no purpose other than to sleep with her was a no-go. If I was that desperate to have sex there were still plenty of brothels that I could visit to do just that.

Aside from all of that, I was most worried about the emotional side of things. I never scored a girlfriend in my old life - and sleeping with a prostitute was not a substitute for real experience. Being a rogue meant that I had little time to do so here either. Now there were two different women who were determined to be my first. If I was being honest with myself I'd argue that we were halfway there already. We'd been in close proximity for weeks and months, sharing everything with each other whether we wanted to or not.

It was simply impossible for us to avoid seeing each other naked. Cali was the main offender; she didn't give a single shit about covering herself up when she was taking her clothes off to bathe or clean them. I'd gotten a full-frontal blast of Tahar's body when we first met on Versia, but in the colder climate of Sull she had taken to wearing clothes, a leather skirt, and a wolf pelt on one shoulder that she hunted in the early days of our travels.

"Cali is much more daring than I am," Tahar replied, "She was the one who was willing to ask you first."

"But the chief said that we needed to become partners."

Tahar concurred, "He did. But I have since learned that there is still distance to be bridged even in that case. A partnership with only one partner is no good."

"I guess you're right about that."

The topic shifted from the sticky subject of romance and onto something lighter as we relaxed together. Tahar's language skills had come on by leaps and bounds thanks to Cali's persistent tutoring and the full immersion into Sull society. She had even graduated to using analogies and turns of phrase like a native speaker. It was impressive and spoke to her intelligence.

Our leisure time was rudely interrupted by a loud knocking on the door. I stood from my chair and approached while someone tried to shout through the gap between the frame. "Come out of there Ren, we know you're staying here!" I remained silent but grabbed a knife from the table. Stigma was too long to use in an enclosed space without catching a wall or ceiling. I had no idea what the hell was going on.

The outsiders threw caution to the wind and started to ram the door from the other end. I stepped back as it swung open and a hapless goon charged in with a sword held above his head. I stepped in and slashed his throat with the dagger before he could cause any damage. He clutched his bleeding neck and dropped the sword, stumbling over to the right side of the room in a failing attempt to prevent any more blood from escaping the wound.

Undeterred, the next attacker egressed through the door and tried a similar tactic. I elected to keep him alive this time. I slipped the dagger into my other hand and clocked him across the left ear with a hook. His balance left him as he staggered back into the hallway, almost hitting his head against the hallway's wall in the process. I followed him out and grabbed him by the back of his shirt, dragging him back into the room and battering him into the floor with a punch to the face. That was enough to put him to sleep for a moment. The man I had slashed had already passed out in a pool of his own blood. The innkeeper was not going to be happy about the mess.

Tahar looked at the scene with wide eyes. She was surprised by the suddenness of the fight, but I'd been around the block enough times to handle some amateur shit like this. I slapped the cheek of the still-living man and brought him back to the surface. "Who the fuck is paying you?" I yelled. He shied away from me as he tried to get his bearings once more. There was a sheer look of terror on his face as he finally understood that his ambush had gone horribly wrong.

"Who paid you?" I asked again.

He shook his head, "Nobody! There's a huge bloody bounty on your head – they just posted it outside of the watchmen's place!"

I thanked him for the information by hauling him back to his feet and throwing him out of the room. He crashed against the wall with a loud thud and was knocked out all over again. I did the same for his now-dead friend, dragging him away by his feet and leaving them both in a pile.

"Fucking bounty hunters," I spat. As I turned back and started to put on my gear, Tahar was still unsure of what to do.

"Why are they chasing you?"

"I don't know. I'm going to have to go and find out."

What kind of profound dramatic irony was it that Tahar was just speaking about this before it happened? It was almost enough to make me think that she had manifested it into reality through

her words. Magic worked like that – it was technically possible. I grumbled to myself and set about putting on the rest of my armour. It was going to be a serious pain in the ass to find out who had put money down on me.

It must have been a lot for two guys to break into an inn and potentially get themselves into trouble. I had no doubt that there were some who overestimated themselves and were willing to do it for very little, but the majority were not so easily swayed given my reputation. When you could assign a hard number to how strong somebody was, it changed the internal calculus you committed before each and every fight.

In some cases, those fights would end before they even started as one side got cold feet and backed down. On the opposite side of things, it was also a good way for people to judge when they had an advantage. I'd seen a lot of fights start because someone sneakily read another's stats in a bar and figured that they could take an easy win from them.

"Would you like me to come with you?"

"I'll be okay. I'm just checking things out, I'll be able to get away from trouble easily enough if the odds aren't looking good. If Cali comes back and asks where I am, tell her what's going on."

Tahar complied but still started to get her things together just in case we needed to make a speedy exit from the city. I had been through this same process a hundred times before, but never due to a bounty being posted on me. It was still extremely frustrating to be forced into moving if that was what it came to in the end.

For now – I just needed to get my feet on the ground and figure out where the money had come from.