

“They’ve been moving around a lot,” Tahar sighed. We’d gotten up as early as realistically possible and started searching the area around our eventual meeting point. It looked as if Marcus had lucked his way into an effective counter-strategy to Tahar’s tracking skills. He’d hired a base of operations in a high-traffic area. Normally that would cause problems with a lot of witnesses being around to keep an eye on you, but it made our lives much harder by obscuring their movements through the city.

Tahar’s tracking was a form of magic and it was capable of incredible things, but this was a messy melee of a place where thousands of people passed through every hour. Nobody was more frustrated than Tahar. She was very attached to Cali. They’d spent days and nights going over her language lessons before we turned in to sleep.

“I cannot find them. Their trace is lost amongst this throng of people!” she grumbled.

We were both starting to fray at the edges a little. How much I cared about Cali and Tahar had snuck up on me. I’d convinced myself for a long time that I wasn’t worthy of companionship or affection, so much so that even when it was staring me in the face I tried to reject it out of hand or make excuses as to why it wasn’t really the case.

Cali being kidnapped was an example of why I behaved that way, but now I understood that the benefits outweighed the risks. We all lived dangerous lives and she knew that better than anyone. That was why Cali stuck with me, it was why she left her homeland, crossed the straits, and came here to the continent.

For Tahar, Cali was a close friend – even if Cali tried to pass herself off as a rival for my affections. Tahar was just too kind to see her that way, even if she demanded time and time again for Tahar to take things seriously. It was almost sisterly in a way. They’d argue with each other, but make up in the end and they’d never want the other to get hurt in any way.

Even I had to admit that we’d bitten off more than we could chew. I hadn’t visited this quarter of the city in a long, long time – and a lot of things had changed since then. The sector cleaned up its act a bunch while I wasn’t paying attention. The buildings were fixed and the foot traffic showed that the watchmen were taking the area’s security more seriously than before. This place used to be a total dump, just another dive to throw onto the pile of neglected areas in Dalston.

“Marcus must be investing a lot into this plan of his. The rent around here must be way higher than it used to be, you don’t just throw some bronze onto the table and get a safehouse for a few nights.”

We backed away from the main road and found a quiet patch to speak in. It was already busy at this time of the morning, the working people got up at the crack of dawn and headed to work for long shifts. The nine-to-five job hadn’t been invented just yet.

“What are we going to do?”

“It looks like we’re going to have to get her back at the meeting place they gave us, but that presents a lot of problems I’d rather not deal with. Marcus is going to try and use Cali as a human shield to keep me away. I don’t imagine he’s going to let me get in close without trying to kill her.”

I was about to wade back into a tricky subject. Tahar did not like doling out violence to other intelligent beings, as was her right to do so. She’d managed to stick with us for months without ever actually killing someone, presuming that the Inquisitor she struck was only injured. Her skills as a marksman were going to be sorely needed here. I didn’t need to say anything. Tahar already knew what the stakes were.

"I must be the one to release Cali from their grasp."

"But they might not give you a choice to just wound them this time, are you prepared to step over that line?"

Tahar seemed unsure, so I offered her some advice.

"I suppose I shouldn't put it in such stark works. There's a big difference between someone who kills just for the fun of it and someone who preserves their belief in the value of life."

"Do you value life?"

I nodded, "Sure, but I've probably killed more people than most by this point. Sometimes you don't have the space to think things through before they go wrong. In that kind of situation, the only thing you can do is hope for the best and try to survive. If you gave me a way out that didn't involve hurting anybody, I'd take it."

"I understand."

"It's good that you keep asking yourself that question. Are you ready to kill this person? It shows that you're still on the right side of things, that you aren't just doing it for your own enjoyment or benefit. A life is valuable. Everyone only has one of them, well, only has one unless they use dark magic to bring themselves back..."

"I owe Cali too much to let her come to harm. These people have done wrong to her, they seek to threaten her life. When the time comes – I will be ready to strike with my full strength. I cannot risk seeing her hurt because of my hesitation." Tahar had such a resolute look on her face that I couldn't help but chuckle at her. She was every bit the perched eagle that her hands and feet made her seem

"You know, when you first started tagging along as my fiancé I was worried about you, about how you'd act in a place where violence is so normal. I'm glad to say that my worry was misplaced. You've learned a lot since you joined us."

Tahar nodded, "My mother once said to me that one must change for their partner's sake. The wind carries us to unknown horizons. We cannot change the way of the world by ourselves, so we must look inward instead."

"She sounds like a very smart woman. I didn't want to bring you here if you weren't ready to adjust, I was even thinking about how to send you back home if things got too much for you."

Tahar smiled, "I meant every word of what I said back then. You are brave and strong, if not very noble. Any hunter from my tribe would be honoured to take a partner such as you. I wish to ride with you until the end, Ren."

"Hopefully that end is far in the distance, then."

I didn't mean to make Tahar swoon with my response, but I'd developed a problematic silver tongue over my many years of being a scoundrel. Her eyes widened and her heart skipped a beat for just a moment, so much so that I was able to notice the change in her stance immediately. Why didn't I just get down onto one knee and propose while I was at it?

The flirting could wait for later. I wasn't going to steal a first kiss with Tahar while Cali was still locked up somewhere. If they touched a single hair on her head, there'd be hell to pay. Marcus was at the top of my shitlist for organising this plot in the first place. He was being sent six feet under no matter

what happened when we finally met face-to-face. He was going to seriously regret trying to fuck with me again.

“Alright then. Tahar, I want you up on the rooftops and out of sight. The plaza’s a pretty good area for us to launch an ambush on them, but before we start attacking them – I want to see if Marcus will keep his end of the bargain and let Cali go.”

Marcus was going to be in a tough spot. He needed to keep Cali out of my reach while also demonstrating that she was safe. That meant she had to be nearby when we made the trade. I suspected that she’d be held at knifepoint or threatened with injury to make that happen. Playing possum was a possibility here. Offering myself to Marcus, securing her release, and then breaking out using my incredible strength. There were too many variables to make a solid call on the spot. Tahar was going to be essential to our success as a backup.

Get Cali into eyeshot and make sure that nobody was close enough to kill her – that was the key.

“Let’s head over there and get ready.”

Tahar followed me through the winding streets of the district until we reached the plaza. It was a pleasant residential service that the city installed to increase land values, a neatly trimmed and freshly paved parkland that served many functions. This early in the morning you could find town criers delivering news from the council. It was not an enviable job to have as some residents stupidly believed that attacking them was an appropriate outlet to show their distaste for government policy.

“Of all the places to do a hostage exchange...”

I swore that there were watchmen nearby. Marcus would have to work quickly or things could get seriously messy. More than a handful of the nearby residents noticed the heavily armed mercenary wandering through and made themselves sparse before things kicked off. There was only one reason for my type to come here, and it was always to start some trouble.

Tahar found a good spot to set her sights from. She leapt up the side of a nearby building, using the windows as handholds to pull herself up onto the roof. They were solid and made from tiles, so she had a much easier time finding firm footing. She ducked behind the ridge of one of the semi-detached houses and hid out of sight. Since they were double stacked with small gardens out back, there was no way for people on the street to see her.

I sat down on one of the benches and kept myself vigilant for any signs of Marcus and his cronies. There was a fifty-fifty chance that he was full of shit and I’d just walked into the middle of an ambush, but I couldn’t risk it. Cali’s life was at stake. As the morning rush hour crowds died down, I was finally met by the familiar snarl of Marcus himself, swaggering out of an alleyway like he was the king of the mountain. Several other goons came with him, wielding crude weapons and wearing no armour. I was starting to suspect that he didn’t take me seriously.

“Ren, so nice to see you again.”

“Cut the bullshit, Marcus. You know the reason I’m here.”

“To answer for your crimes?”

“To get Cali back.”

Marcus scoffed, and nodded to an unseen gang member behind me. I twisted around and saw some fat, bald asshole pushing Cali out from the dark. She was a little winded and dirty, but otherwise

unharméd. Two other guards stood with him, daggers at the ready should I go against Marcus' orders. I stood from the bench and turned back to him.

"Alright. Are you going to play nice this time?" I asked, "I'm willing to."

Marcus frowned, "Of course. I don't have a grudge with her, just you. Let me cuff your arms, and I'll tell them to let her go."

Yeah, and I was the emperor of Japan...

Regardless, I couldn't reach the men surrounding Cali before they stabbed her. I nodded and held my hands behind my back, showing him that I was fully intent on doing as he commanded for once. Marcus quickly retrieved a pair of iron cuffs and slapped them onto my wrists, locking them shut with a small key. I kept a close eye on Cali while he screwed around making sure that they were secure.

There was a moment of silence where I knew that Marcus was going to double-cross me.

"You really think I'm going to let that Ashmorn whore go? I'm going to gut her right in front of you." He waved to the man holding her back, "Kill her!"

Before he could even consider doing such a thing, a ballista sized arrow flew from stage right and struck him in the skull. Pieces of bone and brain matter flew across the floor as the sheer impact of it mashed his head to pieces like a ripe watermelon. He fell to the floor in a bloody heap, Tahar had made a hell of an entrance for her first kill. From atop the roof across the way – there wasn't a single sign of hesitation on her face. She was going to protect Cali no matter what it took.

Not that Cali was going to sit there and do nothing, as one of the other men tried to get her, she leapt over him and wrapped her constricted arms around his neck, choking him out and leaving him to wallow in his friend's viscera.

"Damn it, he has an archer!" Marcus cried.

I swivelled back around and pulled as hard as I could. A loud cracking noise alerted Marcus to the sudden lack of structural integrity in the handcuffs he had brought with him. The chains gave way and snapped in two, freeing my arms and allowing me to draw my sword. More and more men poured into the courtyard from every angle, including some of the watchmen that I had clocked during the trip there. Made sense. This bounty was legit, as in it had real government money behind it.

"That was the last mistake you're ever gonna' make, Marcus."

His confidence remained unshaken, in fact, he looked even happier now that more bodies had flooded the area to try and swamp me.

"We'll see about that. Not even you can get out of this one!"

Ignorance is bliss, I suppose.

