

The two men who broke into our inn room should have shared some of that bravery with the rest of the people waiting in the wings because during the ten-minute walk to the watchmen's house to see what the fuss was about, not a single one decided to try and take me on as they had. There were weary glances and hushed whispers, but not a single attack. Still – it made my hackles raise as I felt so many eyes staring directly at me. I was a man who once strived to avoid gathering attention in everything that I did.

There were more than a handful of gobsmacked faces amongst the crowd as I walked up to the bounty board to see what price someone had thrown down on me. It was much worse than I could have expected before seeing the evidence with my own eyes. Someone had managed to put together five thousand gold bars, and was offering to split it between anyone who was willing to capture or kill me.

And did they ever want everyone to know about it. The entire board was plastered with my name and face. There was no point in me tearing them down. Word of mouth meant that there was no way of containing the information once it was leaked out to the populace. Five thousand gold bars was more money than some of the nobles had on hand, it was the kind of cash that only a madman would be willing to part with for the head of one person. This was not an everyday bounty offer. The funder had to have serious influence, money, and a cause for which they were willing to spend it.

I grabbed one of them just for the memories and scouted the area for the watchman on point. They usually had one or two people waiting outside of the building to accept captured bounties. They were also the first point of contact for anyone wanting to put a price on someone's head. As a rule of thumb, they wouldn't accept a contract without strong evidence that the person had committed a crime. The issue was that the government didn't want to put lots of money down on people who committed minor infractions.

If your house in a poor district was burglarized and you wanted the person responsible caught, that would come with a price tag. Some cities and towns would match any contribution made by the victim to double the pot but it still wasn't enough to make up for the upfront cost that it incurred. Many crimes went without resolution or investigation because of this. Justice isn't blind, and it certainly isn't free. A price this large could have only come from a collection of nobles pooling their funds, or an institution with deep pockets. Only a scant few would be willing to part with this much money for my sake.

"He's right there..."

I could hear them whispering to each other. They didn't have the balls to try anything. I pocketed the poster to mount above my future fireplace and headed over to a nearby watchman. He tensed up as he noticed my approach.

"Who put five thousand bloody bars on my head?"

He swallowed, "I'm afraid I can't reveal that information to you."

I stared him down, "Are you not going to try and arrest me?"

He shook his head and said no more. That answered that. All of the watchmen had heard about my ominous reputation already. In fact, it seemed that a virulent outbreak of timidity had spread between the assembled mercenaries and scoundrels. Heads turned to the nearest blank wall or muddy puddle as I looked out across them on the sidelines.

The watchmen weren't going to offer me the information I wanted without coercion, but they were strangely resistant to being bribed when it came to the matter of bounties. That was because they took a cut of the proceeds when it was completed – so more expensive bounties were harder to scry. I wrecked my brain for who else I could ask about why so much money had been thrown down.

While I was busy worrying about where to go next, out of the crowd came a single man. He raised his sword into the air and charged at me with a loud cry, fully intent on being the first person to lay claim to the immense bounty that had been placed on me. I saw him coming from a mile away. I turned on my heel and deflected his swing using my gauntlet, before pancaking him with a punch to the face. He flipped head over heel and landed into the mud in a heap. The onlookers winced at the demonstration of how easy it was for me to dismantle them.

"They must be crazy putting a bounty on him..."

"I heard that he killed forty soldiers in Blackwake, in one fight!"

"Isn't that Blackvein? You wouldn't catch me dead trying to kill that guy."

The carefully balanced tension between their recklessness and greed had returned to normal. This bounty was subject to gridlock already. Nobody wanted to end up like the guy I'd just flattened and left bleeding on the ground. That was the thing. I was too strong for anybody to put a stop to now. I could do anything I wanted with no consequence. With that said, being followed around by bounty hunters for the rest of time was not great. I didn't need my downtime to be interrupted by a pack of morons busting down my door and having a go.

Elise Xerces would know. She was the one who handled the sharp end of keeping the law intact in Dalston. There was no guarantee that she would offer me a meeting. She had better things to do; and it was likely that the bounty notice had already passed over her desk and been signed.

But it was worth trying.

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Much to my surprise, when I arrived at the fort – I was immediately granted entrance once I asked to see Elise. It seemed that my previous work in killing Lord Forester had afforded me that privilege at least. She was waiting for me in the same office where we first met, though her uniform was adorned with several additional medals, stripes and frills that weren't there before. She'd been promoted.

"Hello Warsister."

"It's Warmajor now," she commented, "I didn't expect you to come and seek me out, though it's a nice change of pace after having Jalski barking into my ear time and time again. What seems to be the issue?"

I stayed by the door just in case; "It looks like someone put a huge bounty on my head. I was wondering if you knew anything about it."

Elise's brow raised, "A bounty? I'm certain that I'd remember a bounty for you coming through here. I'm afraid that I've seen no such thing."

"And you aren't just saying that to get me out of the way?"

Elise sighed, "Not the trusting sort, are you? I'm only willing to tell you because there is no bounty. There are no names or faces that I can hand over, so I'm free to share that information. Consider it a

second payment for your hard work in the Forester affair. The reason I get to wear this uniform is because of that. How much did they put onto you?"

"Five thousand gold."

Elise sputtered in disbelief, "F-Five thousand? I don't even have that kind of money to throw around!"

"So, if you didn't match the initial offer with more cash..."

"...Then someone put up the entire sum to pass over my approval. Some of the biggest businesses in the city don't make that through an entire year. The only place I could think of it coming from is the city budget."

"The budget?"

"You know Governor Jalski already. He's only interested in boosting his chances in the next election for the post. He thinks that getting rid of you will be the thing he needs to win again. He's been coming into my office and demanding that I put a bounty up for weeks. It looks like he decided that pilfering the coffers is preferable to providing me with a valid reason."

That sounded very illegal. That money was meant to be spent on maintaining the army and what little passed for infrastructure in the Federation. People would be outraged if they discovered that the Governor had overrode the Warmajor's objections and pissed it away to try and kill me. Elise was of the same mind. I could see a vein starting to form on her forehead as anger simmered under the surface.

"I'm going to wring his scrawny little neck when he shows his face around here again!"

"It's nothing urgent. My reputation precedes me, only the incompetent are willing to try it."

Elise leaned back in her seat and grumbled, "Not to mention that the Federalists love you. You're practically a hero."

"What are you going to do about it?"

She threw up her hands in frustration, "It's going to be a slow process of getting that money back. Try not to die before then, because there'll be hell to pay when they find out that five thousand gold bars just went missing. I'm going to have to forward it to the appropriate authority because the Governor and I are technically on equal footing. Then they'll launch an investigation and get him into hot water. That should force him to rescind the offer."

"Okay. I'll try."

Elise qualified things before I could leave, "But don't think that I'm doing this because we're friends, Ren. You step out of line and I'll deal with you just like I would anybody else."

"You don't need to tell me."

With that warning, I walked through the door and was escorted back to the front gate. I didn't trust Elise all that much – even if she was old acquaintances with Cali. Cali's shine wasn't going to rub off on me because she was a member of my party. Elise treated me with a similar level of distrust to anyone else, but it was obvious that she was not aware of the bounty that had been placed. She would have stern words to share with the Governor in that case.

I understood the Governor's motivations perfectly well. Politicians were always looking for the next great scapegoat. If he felt that it would advantage him to make me a public enemy, he'd do so. But was it worth risking the wrath of the Warmajor? She was furious and there would be questions to answer about why he was spending the taxpayer's money on the scheme. If there was one thing that the average citizen hated it was having their money blown on ego-driven projects like this.

Still, it was interesting to see that five thousand gold bars still weren't enough to send the entire district collapsing down onto my position. Has my reputation really grown that large? Five thousand gold bars were enough to live several lifetimes without ever having to worry about providing for yourself. I was tempted to turn myself in and break out of whatever cell they threw me into, just to claim the reward.

I started heading back to the inn. As I moved through the streets, several people called out to me with nothing but praise for what I did in Blackwake. It made me wonder, wouldn't trotting me out as some kind of folk hero work much better than trying to kill me? Cali's popularity might not have transferred to me, but my sudden acclaim could easily give credibility to a political candidate.

It did bear repeating that there were many Sull supporters in the East of the Federation. This territory was the borderline between the old and new way of doing things, and a lot of people got caught up in the middle of it. If that group was more politically active than the Federalists, then pitting himself against me would have been a wiser play. In the end, I imagined it as nothing more than a passing fad.

People would take or leave me depending on what it cost *them*.