

If Cali was capable of feeling emotions like other people did, she was certain that she would have a skip in her step. Things had been going very well. Ren had returned her feelings, which meant that there was a chance they could start a real relationship soon. Ren had also been holding up his end of the bargain that he had almost certainly forgotten; consistently pulling her into extremely dangerous and exciting situations. While she was liable to air her complaints about having to stop and wait in Dalston again – she had to admit that there was an equal amount of downtime when she was running solo too. The peaks were higher and the troughs were too.

Ren was a trouble magnet. He couldn't even stay in a peaceful town for a few days without running into something or someone trying to kill him. Cali wished that she could also learn to harness this incredible power, but it was not like any of the other spells that she had learned on the road. A conspiratorial belief in Ren holding a secret mana reserve that he used to inflict himself with immense misery was one of the stray thoughts pinging around in her brain.

Cali had decided to do something useful with the downtime and stock up on everything she needed for the next leg of the journey. Adelbern would soon return with another task for them to complete, one which would hopefully push them to their limits. The only issue was that Ren had only grown more powerful since then – potentially trivialising whatever they faced next. She exhaled into the cool morning air and shook her head. There was no need to be so pessimistic before she learned what the next task actually was.

The most interesting part about her trip was what the other citizens of the city were talking about. Without Ren, there was a more honest undercurrent to the discussions happening on the doorsteps and in the taverns that lined the streets. A majority of people considered Ren a hero for killing Forester, while others resented him for supposedly destroying Pascen and sending refugees flooding into the Federation; many of those people had family ties with those affected and killed.

But no matter what they believed, none were willing to leap into an offensive posture over it. There was tension building through the public discourse. There only needed to be a single spark to set things off and cause turmoil in the city. The fact that a stranger had placed an obscene bounty on his head was good enough to do it. Opinions didn't count for much when there was money on the line, even an impassive observer could be convinced by five thousand gold bars.

Ren would be conjuring a way to get the bounty for himself as she spoke.

Cali rounded a corner and headed through a wide alleyway to avoid the foot traffic on the main road. As she emerged out onto the parallel avenue, she was blindsided and tackled to the ground by a burly stranger. Before she could swing at him using her halberd, it was ragged from her grip and tossed onto the ground. Cali growled as her attacker was joined by three more, who crowded around her and pinned down her limbs so that she couldn't move.

A length of rope was drawn and her hands tied behind her back. The largest thug pulled her back to her feet and presented her to a man emerging from the crowd of onlookers. It was Marcus, sporting the biggest shit-eating grin that she'd yet seen in her years on this earth.

"Look what we managed to snag lads, the perfect piece of bait to bring in our boy."

That made sense, Cali mused to herself. If Marcus couldn't beat Ren in a straight fight, he was going to try and target a real vulnerability – that being his partners. Cali remained completely unmoved by the grand reveal. Marcus' smile fell slightly as he realised that she had no intention of giving him the reaction he desired.

“Oh, I forgot; you’re that emotionless psycho bitch.”

“It is nice to see you again too, Marcus.”

He wagged his finger in her face, “Don’t try to play nice with me. I’m not letting you go until Ren shows his face and lets us haul him to the watchmen!”

Cali stared back, “I am not certain that you could kill him even if he stood there and did nothing.”

“Everything dies if you stab it enough times,” Marcus barked back, “And it’s going to be even easier with how many people want his head on a plate. Maybe I’ll charge them for the pleasure of having a shot.”

Cali had nothing to say in response to Marcus’ premature gloating. He’d already jumped off the deep end after his men died, and Ren showing him a bit of mercy hadn’t taught him a damn thing. He was still intent on extracting his revenge, somehow. It wasn’t going to be easy. Ren would try to rescue her before he’d ever consider giving himself up. Marcus just didn’t get how he operated. Marcus waved to his new mercenary group and led them and Cali away from the scene before anyone could ask questions about the daylight kidnapping.

“If Ren thinks he can fuck with me, he’s got another thing coming.”

His nose was still crooked – implying that he failed to find proper medical attention before the bone was set in the wrong place. Ren had done a number on him during their fistfight at the docks, and he’d only grown stronger since. Cali kept a close eye on where she was being taken, just like Ren had taught her. Awareness was the first step to success. She needed to keep her mind open to escape routes or essential information that could be useful later.

Marcus had seemingly requisitioned a warehouse in the commercial area of the city. A small, two-story shack shoved between larger and more sturdy buildings, with big barn doors and an open window and pulley system to load cargo in and out of the attic. There were several signs that Marcus and his gang were using it as a temporary living quarters, with sleeping bags and discarded items littering the space. Marcus forced Cali to sit down in the centre of the room on an uncomfortable wooden chair while the others locked the door.

One of the men, an oaf with a shaved head and crooked teeth, nudged him in the side. “Hey, why can’t we have some fun with this girlie before we use her for the job?”

“We don’t do that kinda’ thing in my band – mate.”

He was offended; “Why the fuck not? You’re tellin’ me that you don’t want to have a go with her? Look at the size of her tits!”

“I don’t find it tasteful, and I already told you that I expected you to act like a bunch of professionals when you’re working with me! If you’ve got a problem with it, you can piss off and we’ll take your cut of the pot.”

Some of the other men agreed with Marcus, jeering at him. An older man from the cohort laughed, “There’s two things you don’t want in a business like this. Sex, and uncertainty. Last time some lads decided to ‘relieve’ themselves with the captive, one of them turned into a doe-eyed bastard and cut her loose thinking they were in love!”

Marcus drew his knife and flashed it dangerously, “If I catch any of you doing that bullshit, I’ll cut your balls off myself.”

Cali attempted to rattle him, “Really scraping the barrel now, Marcus. It’s a far cry from the proud lot you were working with before.” The breath left her lungs as Marcus swung with his open hand and pummelled her in the stomach.

“Just because we’re not raping you doesn’t mean you’re allowed to run your mouth. Gag her so I don’t have to listen to her!”

Cali resigned herself to a long, boring wait as a smaller rope was used to hold her jaw open. One of the mercenaries had pilfered her Halberd and was inspecting it under the light of a nearby lamp. The last thing Cali wanted was for them to sell her beloved weapon for spare change. They had no idea how valuable it really was.

“You’re telling me that she’s a mage?” he queried while fiddling with the loading mechanism, “I thought she’d be harder to catch.”

Marcus sat across from him and cleared his throat, “Mages aren’t anything special if you can get the jump on ‘em. Just watch out if they point that open end at you. I’ve seen more than a few people get turned into roast beef just from a simple fireball spell.”

That put fear into him. He threw the Halberd down onto the ground before he accidentally killed himself with it. Cali rolled her eyes at his superstitious response. It took years of training to properly fire a spell using a catalyst. A buffoon like him couldn’t hope to do so by accident. There were ten men in total, all of whom did not present the most flattering image of Marcus’ rallying cries. They were old, out of shape, or seemingly lacking in intelligence.

Marcus had caught on to one thing; he couldn’t beat Ren in a direct confrontation, so the quality of the hands he hired was immaterial to the outcome of his plan. He just needed them to keep an eye on her until the time came to spring his trap and exchange her for Ren. With that said, the rest of the group immediately dispersed to the four corners of the warehouse, drinking, napping and playing cards instead of what he was paying them for. If only she could rip her bindings to pieces like Ren did in Blackwake. Escape would be a simple affair.

Alas, she did not have the ability to tear coiled tether to pieces with her bare hands. She closed her eyes and prepared for a long, boring period of playing hostage until Marcus decided to make his next move. The only point of interest was Marcus’ wrestling with the others over how much of a share they’d take away once they cashed in the bounty.

“Are you sure that this is gonna’ work?” the larger man asked, “What’s stopping him from just high-tailing it without her?”

Marcus was getting tired of explaining, “Listen – this bird is one of the two he’s been running around with for the past few months. Why would he do that if he didn’t like her? Men get really attached to their women. He’s going to come running to try and rescue her once we give him the ultimatum. All you need to do is keep her at knifepoint and slash her throat if he tries anything funny.”

“And what’s stopping him from running at us and killing us?”

Marcus sputtered, “What do you mean? We’re gonna’ have his girl! He can’t move without us killing her.”

“I heard from some other folks that he’s so fast that you can’t even see him. He’s like a blur! One second you’re standing there, thinking you’re about to have a fair fight, and the next your head is rolling on the floor.”

“Who the fuck did you hear that from?” Marcus exclaimed.

“John, he told me that he killed forty lads in the blink of an eye.”

Marcus shook his head, “What a load of horse shit. Do you seriously believe any of that crap? First it was thirty, then forty, and now he did it so fast that nobody could even see him?”

“Well – they said that the number of dead was accurate...”

“And? They’ve been puffing this guy up for months to take everyone’s minds off the war! I guarantee that every single thing they’ve said is untrue. Forty people, give me a break.”

Marcus was in for a very rude awakening.