

While Ren was busy offering his thanks to Derian Rivers, Cali and Tahar had walked into the front garden for some fresh air. Cali could feel her cheeks burning and her mind buzzing thanks to the copious quantities of wine she had drunk. Still, her feet remained steady even as her vision blurred. She would not lose her footing, through injury and inebriation alike. The two waited beneath one of the trees, a dense trunk with overhanging branches. It was a cold evening but the alcohol kept them warm.

Now that they were free from the clutches of their overenthusiastic host – Cali had time to compose a question that had been on her mind since the previous night. Tahar had endeavoured to clean Ren's body of blood and ichor. She had stepped forth and earned a right that Cali herself did not, she broke another barrier between her and Ren.

Cali couldn't explain the queer feeling in her chest from when she observed Tahar bathing him. Cali's spectrum of experiences and emotions were compromised from an early age, and of that she was already well aware. It was unusual for her to meet someone like Ren who put that fact into consideration when it came to dealing with her. Cali was not stupid. She understood that most men would eagerly take advantage of her perceived ignorance. She viewed relationships and intimacy differently to everyone else.

Knowing that he was an outlander changed things. His odd behaviour came into sharp focus at moments like those. The first time she propositioned him, he refused out of concern for her emotional wellbeing. At the time she had simply believed that he thought of her as a loose woman, throwing her chastity away at the drop of a hat and taking advantage of her looks. A repeat of that same discussion had revealed the truth. For Ren, he would feel immensely guilty if he jumped at the opportunity to be her partner, romantically or sexually.

All of her careful planning crumbled to pieces, tumbling forth from her mouth like sand between spread fingers.

"I was jealous of you. I think."

Tahar jolted, not expecting to be spoken to; "Jealous?"

Cali's brow furrowed, "When I saw you touching Ren yesterday. I was jealous. I think. I think I was jealous." The end of her statement curled upwards into a half-spoken question. She wasn't sure if that was what she really felt. She was asking Tahar to assist her in exploring that sensation. "What does jealousy feel like?"

"You want something that someone else has, that is jealousy. It can be for an object, a station in life, or a person."

Cali didn't need an explanation of what jealousy meant – she wanted to know how it felt.

"Do you ever feel jealous? What is it like?"

Tahar closed her eyes and tried to recall a recent occurrence. She settled on a small thing that had happened on the road to Blackwake before Ren killed Lord Forester. They had set up their camp in a good spot, a location Ren had used several times before while making the same journey. Cali had a habit of stripping down to her underwear while resting after a long walk – her body hardy and capable of handling brief bouts of cold weather.

She may not have realised it, but the way she wore her loose-fitting undershirt and panties made for a titillating show. Cali's body was amazing, Tahar could admit to that, she had womanly curves that

attracted the male gaze in a way that her own could not. Her tribe had always placed a high value on robustness, forging the living body into another tool to be used, but she was no longer on Versia. Men on Sull saw value in the aesthetically pleasing and that was something that Cali held over her head like a sharpened blade.

“And while you were bending over to pick up your bag, I saw his eyes wander to your buttocks.”

Tahar remembered that moment clearly. She was behind Ren at the time. Her heart leap into her throat as she went progressively lower and lower, allowing the full curvature of her legs, thighs and butt be illuminated by the moonlight above. Then came the apex of her dive, where gravity took hold of her chest and exposed their weight by dragging them downwards. Cali didn't mean to offer such a sight to anyone, but she simply did not consider the consequences of her actions.

Tahar bristled with an alien feeling of jealousy – her feathers standing on end as a competitive spark lit her brain with thoughts of showing Ren who the *real* woman was. They left as quickly as they came, as Tahar's kind nature took over and held her back from making a rash decision. Ren averted his eyes as soon as he was cognizant of Cali's undressed form, but he saw it regardless.

“It felt like someone was stabbing me in the chest with a knife. I could feel something rising up in my throat, like I was about to be sick.” The liquid honesty running through her system forced the words from her mouth. Cali was contemplative, comparing it with her own feelings.

“I do not know if I wished to be in your place, but I did want you to stop.”

“But you did not say a word.”

“I didn't. Ren had agreed to your request, and out of a similar kindness I did not bring up an awkward topic with you.”

Tahar smiled, “I see. You were frustrated, but made a decision you believed was rational?”

“Yes.”

“Then you have made the progress that Ren wished to see. Your feelings have always driven your actions, but now you are thinking about what may happen as a result of them. Some would consider it bad to lie, but you acted to ensure everyone's comfort instead of being honest.” Tahar meant every word that she said. Cali was always so honest that it frustrated Ren. She'd blurt out compromising details at random, and she certainly didn't care for sparing anyone's feelings or being diplomatic with them.

Cali reached an odd conclusion, “If we both feel jealous, then I suppose there's nothing to worry about.”

“A sadness shared is misery doubled,” Tahar warned – it was a rough translation of something her father always liked to say. “Besides, there is no reason for us to compete with one another.”

“Easy to say when you're leading.”

Tahar gently scratched some of the dried bark away from the tree's trunk. “I think that is what he wants you to feel, Cali.”

“What does that mean?”

Tahar reworded her observation; “He wants you to be certain that *you* desire him, and not just because you feel it will endear you to him as a fellow mercenary.”

Cali nodded. He did mention something along those lines when they first met. Ren didn't need sexual favours to convince him of Cali's use. She had landed into his lap at the perfect time, a time where his lonesome manner of doing things had started to wear him down from the inside out. It was nothing more than a stroke of chance, and now she knew that offering sex to him wasn't going to change his opinion.

At first she had been outraged that it didn't work the way she wanted, but the more she learned about Ren the more she learned that it was the way he treated everyone he met. He may have been a man forged from a rough background and fraught upbringing, but it had not yet weathered away his kindness or respect for other people. In a sense he was the first person she had ever met who understood her, and the reasons for her doing what she did. His rejection of her first admittance was an extension of that process.

Ren wanted her to make a decision of her own free will, but to what extent could such a nebulous concept be judged? Cali was all too aware that people were formed and shaped by their memories and experiences. Outside influences, decisions made by other people, they were all factors that could affect another's behaviour. Cali was no puppet being made to dance by an unseen hand. She was the way she was because of the things that had happened to her.

"I know there is a goal I must reach, yet I do not know when I have reached it."

Tahar put a hand on her friend's shoulder to offer reassurance, "There are many uncertainties in life, but if you continue to walk this path I am sure that Ren will recognise your change. You spend too much time together for him *not* to."

Cali wasn't finished, "When I see you and Ren together, I wonder if perhaps you are the more appropriate partner for him. Your presence alone has allowed him to enjoy comfort I could never hope to provide. I am no homemaker, and I am cold comfort when it comes to matters like these."

Tahar was steadfast, "And now you express your doubts. Have you not felt the change you sought? Fear, jealousy, doubt, joy – you have started to feel them just as we do. There is more room in your heart than you know; room for things that do not quicken your pulse and fill your blood with lightning."

There was nothing else to be said, and no more time to say it in, as Ren emerged from the house with an attendant in hot pursuit. Both women walked down to the bottom of the small hill and greeted him by the main gate. He'd managed to walk out of the house without any attempts on his life for once.

"I guess that's that," he said. Derian had sent him away with some kind words and an open invitation to visit his exhibit again in the future. Unfortunately, there was no sign of the cursed item he was looking for.

"What are you going to do next?" Cali inquired as they passed through and back onto the main road.

"I couldn't find what I was looking for when I snuck into his collection room. He isn't a complete idiot like I expected, he must be stashing the thing where my grubby little hands can't get a hold of it. Looks like we're doing things the old-fashioned way."

Having to rifle through all of Derian's personal possessions was the last ditch effort that Ren had been trying to avoid from the start; but there were no longer any other avenues to learning where the cursed item had been hidden. Ren really didn't want to do it. Searching through such a large

building was risky and took a long time, time in which someone could potentially witness him doing the deed.

“Why don’t you just tie him to a chair and threaten him instead?”

Ren laughed, “I wish. That kind of thing never works. He’ll just lie to try and cover his own ass.”

Cali made no further arguments on that front. Ren was the experienced thief here, and he knew how to work things when it came to stealing. She could only offer her theories and ideas – knowing full well that many of them would compromise Ren in the way he didn’t wish to be. He could have all of the power in the world and make himself immune to death, but there was no point in living as a pariah.

Her mind drifted back to the other matter. She needed to prove to Ren that she had started to grow a greater spectrum of emotional responses. It was for her own good, even if she couldn’t specify if it made her feel better to know that it was happening. Then, she could start thinking about exploring her burgeoning romantic feelings – if that was what they really were.

Her plan would need to be perfect, devious, and quick. Tahar was trying to get to him before her.