

## Planning-27

“Not so fast,” Jackal had said, after Don was done being amazed at his pouch of containing, like the fighter called it.

The sorcerer had reached in and pulls out on the sword Jackal hadn’t sold yet, then had spent a long time staring and glaring at it, as if that would make it reveal its secret before handing it back and heading out, muttering about looking for special books.

“So,” Jackal said as he and Tibs walked toward the warehousing neighborhood, “Metal?”

Tibs nodded.

“How did you manage that? And why didn’t you tell me?”

“One of the assassins stabbed me with a sword, but missed my heart. Instead of dying, I had an audience, and—”

Jackal grabbed Tibs by the arm and spun him. “An assassin? And this is the first time I hear about it?”

“I didn’t die, and I’ve dealt—”

“Because you were lucky.”

“Luck’s not a thing.”

“And it’s a good thing you dealt with them. That means I don’t have to hunt them down.”

“Not him. He was gone when I came back. It’s the others I dealt with.”

“Others.” Jackal glared at him. “There have been other attempts on your life and you never thought to tell me?”

Tibs shrugged. “I figured you knew. You told me your father would have something in place to avenge his death.”

“Yeah, these attacks on the town, the guards have been mostly dealing with. Because you never told me you were also a target, I figured my father never thought to tell anyone about you specifically.”

“They know.”

Jackal glared at him, then his expression softened and he let Tibs go, walking again. “And you didn’t tell me about metal because you didn’t want me to know about the attacks?”

“I just didn’t think about. It’s been busy, with the guards constantly on the lookout for our patrols and where we kept our supplies, then working with Darran to get more without attracting attention, figuring out where to store them, and looking into which Omega teams we’re going to help train. With them living with people instead of the barracks like before, it’s complicating things.”

“So that’s also why you didn’t train with it. It’s the reason you were all murder focused after switching to it to deal with the lightning.”

“Yes,” Tibs lied. “Metal is stubborn. Not really flexible about how she goes about getting what she wants.”

Jackal chuckled. “Metal, inflexible. That’s funny.”

“Why?”

“Because metal tends to be rather flexible. It takes a lot to break a sword or a piece of armor that’s made of metal.”

“I thought it was just because metal’s hard.”

“Stone harder, well, some are. But it’s not flexible, so it’s easier to make it shatter than metal.” He motioned to the warehouse as they approached. “But right now, you’re going to train with it, because I don’t want that stubbornness to be why Don finds out about you.”

“Telling him about the pouch is dangerous.”

“Yes, but the reason I gave him works, if the guild asks. And everyone knows I’m so greedy that I’d keep something like that.”

“And after that, they are going to have ways of checking every team for something like that they’re hiding.”

“Which they won’t find, since we’re the only ones who... Oh, Abyss, I didn’t think about that part. Do you think he’s going to tell them?”

“Don isn’t lying when he says he wants to be part of the team, and when he says he wants to change, but he wants to be important too. He could decide that telling the guild will get him that.”

“Abyss. I’ll tell Mez so he can keep an eye on him. They seem to be getting along.” Jackal opened the door and stepped in, stopping at the people there, clearing debris left from Tibs’s training.

Tibs looked around at them. He should have been paying attention. He'd have sensed the workers.

"Can I help you?" a woman asked, noticing them as she picked up a broken crate.

"We heard the noise," Tibs replied, "and came in to see what was happening."

"The new owner needs the space cleared for his stock. No one realized the inside had been vandalized during the attack."

"I thought this was Harmel Leather Works' warehouse."

She shrugged. "No idea about that. I just do the work." He nodded to the door. "And you two shouldn't be in there."

Tibs headed out, and a second later Jackal followed.

"Well, that's a problem," the fighter said.

"Who's Harmel? I don't remember any shop owner with that name."

"That's because they aren't real. My father had a bunch of business like that for when he wanted to establish a footing in one of the neighborhood that were able to keep him out directly."

Tibs frowned. "We started using it before your father knew you were here." Jackal didn't answer immediately, which made Tibs glance at him.

"It's possible this is how he found out. When I told you no one would care we used it, it's because I had Harmel take possession of it. I know who my father's legal contact is for those kinds of acquisitions, and the codes that tell her this is something not to be discussed. And because my father's careful, he never uses the same people to communicate with her, so she wouldn't have a reason to question any of it. My father shouldn't have been aware of what I did, but it's possible he did. Sorry."

Tibs shrugged. "Can you arrange another one?"

"I doubt it. Right now, my brothers and sisters are fighting over who'll take over, and any of the other groups who were looking for any chance to break my family's hold over the city. Every one he employed will know of his death and that until the dust settles, nothing is to happen. Some will vanish with whatever coins my father had entrusted them with. Other will remain loyal to my family and yet others will that the coins of whoever offers."

"So once someone is in charge, they'll stop the attack on the town?"

Jackal considered it. "I doubt anyone will know how. We all knew how vindictive he was. It's what kept my siblings from removing him, but because he knew it was a possibility, he arranged it without any of them knowing. So, they can't stop it. I wonder if my father left any coins for the family to continue, or he dropped it all in his revenge."

"So this will never end."

"Well, that assassin thinks you died, so once he claims his reward, there won't be a reason for things to go on."

"How long will that take?"

"No idea. What did he take for proof?"

Tibs shrugged.

"No missing limbs you used Purity to regrow and didn't tell me about?"

"I can do that?"

"What can't you do with all those essences?"

"Too much."

Tibs considered that. He could heal himself with Purity and regrowing part of his body was just a form of healing himself. How did he go about finding out? He'd have to cut off something. It would have to be small, and a part that wouldn't impede him if it didn't regrow. A toe? The little one.

Now, where could he go to test that?

"I preferred you when you got solemn and angry," Jackal said.

"That's not useful."

"But you'd have told me about the attack and the audience then."

"I was—"

"It wouldn't have mattered. You'd have been angry, you'd have looked for your attacker, you would have told me so I could help. This cold isn't you, Tibs."

"It's what I need right now."

Jackal sighed. "So you can have more audience. Which one's next?"

"I don't know. I asked Water, and she said any one I want."

"And of course you didn't tell me about that audience either. So, which one do you want to get first

then?”

“I don’t know. The only sure way to have the audience I know of is to nearly die from the element. How do I die from the mind element?”

“That one’s easy; think too hard.”

“How about Void? Crystal? Wood? Or any of the others I don’t know.”

“Don can tell you about them, I figure. Crystal and Wood are easy. A weapon made of them stabbed nearly into your heart.”

Tibs glanced at his friend, trying to decide if there had been an edge to the words. “I’d have to explain to him why I want to know.”

“You’re just curious about it,” Jackal replied. “That’s worked every other time you have some question about something no one thought you should ask about.”

Tibs nodded. “Do you know a place we can go to so you can cut off my little toe and I can see if I can regrow it?”

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Tibs moved his toes in his boot as he looked over the report Darran had sent him. He had all his toes, because Jackal had refused to help him and forbidden him to even try. Tibs didn’t have to listen to the fighter, but he’d realized that to suffuse himself with Purity meant letting go of the ice. He could do so for short period of times, but how long would it take to regrow a toe? What happened if the pain overwhelmed him in the middle of it?

Ultimately, he decided he didn’t need to test it now. Eventually, Sto would hurt him in a way that required him to do something drastic to heal himself. And the dungeon was a safer place to have a meltdown if it happened.

The report was a list of equipment Darran could get him with time frames and costs. He was a lot of coins now, enough, he realized, that he might be able to pay what he owed the guild once he reached Epsilon, if he hadn’t destroyed it by then. And right now, it was better invested in helping the Omegas and developing Upsilon survive.

He made notes regarding which he wanted, balancing the selection toward armors and weapons he could get sooner, rather than better or cheaper. Once he was done, he added a comment about obtaining a building where all this could be kept that wouldn’t be noticed by the guards.

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Don was seated at the table when Tibs quietly stepped into the room after his nightly roof-running and breaking into a noble’s house. The only illumination was the lamp the sorcerer used to write notes on papers while looking over the diagram from one of the pages they’d gotten from the dungeon.

Tibs made it to the chest, opening it, before Don noticed him. Tibs removed his dark clothes.

“How late is it?” Don asked.

“Very.” The house had been challenging; a mix of good locks, subtle use of enchantment and attentive guards. He’d still made it inside and into an office. There he’d taken a silver since he couldn’t find a copper.

“I don’t know if I’m going to be able to do anything with these.” Don tapped the diagram. “I haven’t reached the stage when my teacher’s explained how to add the etching to create more complex results.”

Tibs stepped to the table and looked at the lines and symbols. “Don’t the books tell you?”

“I’ve asked for the merchants to bring some, but they’re too expensive and no one here is advance enough to make it worth their while.”

“That’s Kha,” Tibs said, tapping one of the symbols. “This one is Bor, that one is Ank.” He looked through the others. “I don’t recognize any others.”

Don stared at Tibs. “You read Arcanus?”

Tibs shrugged. “I don’t know what it’s called, but Alistair’s started teaching me how to add them to my etchings. Ank, Fet, Kha and Bor are the ones we’re been working with.”

“You aren’t even Lambda. What is he doing teaching you advanced Etching? My teacher has started preparing me for my test to graduate to Zeta and he won’t teach that to me yet.”

“What’s the test?”

“What? The test?” Don seemed confused at the sudden change. “It’s about taking the essence I’ve suffused throughout my body and getting it to flow through only one specific channel. Once I can get that to happen, I can graduate to Zeta.” He narrowed his eyes. “Can you even suffused your body with Water yet?”

Tibs nodded. “How do you make that happen?” He sensed for Don’s essence. There was the usual hint of it that tinted the essence coursing through his body, the way everyone had the life essence coursing through

them. Were they the channels he meant?

“It’s about exercising my mind on— wait. Why am I answering you? Why is your teacher telling you about Arcanus when you’re just Rho?”

“I told him to. We’ve had to work differently from the start because of my age, so I’m continuing.”

Don watched him. “My teacher told me that I couldn’t work with Arcanus until my body was strong enough. Are you telling me he lied to me?”

Tibs shrugged. “He works for the guild. But,” he added, “Alistair did warn me that there are reasons the guild does things in a specific way. And that most of them are about ensuring we survive the learning.”

“But that Alistair is still teaching you these.” He tapped the diagram.

“We’re rogues,” Tibs answered. “Following the rules isn’t really what we do.”