

Tibs prodded his horse to the front casually. He'd told Lerola he needed to check something with Rigel when the person he'd sensed had reached the halfway point between him and the edge of his sense. One person on horseback was the best he could make out now. Some metal, but nothing more than any traveler might be expected to have on them for defense.

He moved his shoulder when Graiden looked in his direction to show he was no longer impeded by it. He'd had to play at his shoulder still being stiff for two weeks after healing in, but he'd decided it had been long enough.

"Tyborg," the caravan leader greeted him from the bench at the front of his wagon. "Here to let me know you want to scout ahead?"

"No." Tibs went for casual instead of offended. "I wanted to check if we'd made up the time we lost to the storm." He hadn't had to announce his outings for this part of the trip since they had only consisted of chasing the larger animals away. A well placed essence sting had been enough with most, and if it wasn't, going among the trees to 'relieve' himself only meant letting his partner of the day know.

"Will reach the city on time. Whatever you have planned there, you won't be late."

Tibs nodded. Charabelum didn't have a dungeon, but it had a university, which meant scholars and collections of books. He'd have to find out how extensive it was, and the subjects they covered before deciding if it was worth breaking with the caravan there. The merchants who had told him about the university hadn't known that information.

"With a little luck, we might even have made up the time to spend most of the day in Iritel."

"How far is—"

"There's something ahead!" one of the forward guard yelled, racing back.

"What is it?" Graiden asked, slowing his horse to a walk by them.

"I don't know. I came to warn you as soon as we made out the dust cloud. It was small, though. Misheal will follow as soon as she makes out enough to assess the threat."

Graiden looked over his shoulder. "Stop the caravan!"

"Gray," Rigel sighed as the order was passed along. "We have a schedule to keep."

"And how easy is that going to be if we ride into an ambush?"

"Julen said it's a small cloud. I'm sure it's nothing."

"Love, if you want to put yourself a chief of the guards, you're welcome to do that and then tell everyone what to do. Until then. You put your safety in my hands, and your schedule can go f—"

"Graiden! I will not have you use that kind of language outside our room."

The chief shook his head, and Tibs couldn't tell if he was annoyed or amused.

Tibs was. He always enjoyed banter between people who were special to each other, especially when they didn't also insist on bringing their bed play into it. He liked the reminder of old friends, but could also do without remembering those descriptions.

In the distance, Tibs sensed Misheal remaining in position while the rider approached, then slowed. She didn't see them as a threat. Tibs didn't know her well, but she had been with the caravan for years, so she would be a decent judge of what threats were.

They came to a stop next to her, and quickly they were both approaching. No weapons had been drawn, and now that they were closer, Tibs made out a break in the rider's shoulder.

An injured rider meant trouble ahead. He pushed his sense as far as he could, then further until the headache was too much, but there was nothing out of the ordinary.

An etching of Purity dealt with most of it, but he'd yet to find the right etching to completely remove those kinds of headaches.

By the time Misheal was visible, with the rider at her side, there were over two and zero guards at the front of the caravan. Bringing it to a stop in the middle of the day, away from anything, always caused the guards to prepare for trouble.

The rider was short and lean; in leathers designed to be lightweight instead of providing protection. The satchels at the back of the horse were large and made of thick leather. Their clasps were metal and had a lock. They wouldn't keep a skilled thief out for long, but they would ensure no one simply opened it, grabbed something, and ran.

The man was a courier. The kind people who couldn't afford messengers used. The messenger groups catered to the nobles and merchants. The people who needed things delivered quickly. They used the transportation platforms and charged accordingly.

Couriers traveled by the best method affordable to them and couldn't even assure the sender their package would reach its destination. Traveling alone meant being able to do so quickly, but made them particularly appealing to bandits.

By the dried blood on this man's shoulder, he'd escaped such a faith.

Tibs was surprised the horse was unharmed. As valuable as they were, nearly all of them were branded, making them more useful to bandits as food, instead of something to sell or ride. Courier horses were trained to be faithful to only one rider, from what Tibs had learned.

Misheal stopped when they were close enough not to have to shout and took the other rider's reins.

"What happened to you?" Graiden asked.

"Bandits," the rider replied, then nearly tipped over, but Misheal caught his arm, causing him to yell in pain, as that was the injured one. It did serve to make him more alert.

Tibs couldn't sense tiredness in people, but he could see it on the man's face.

"How far?"

The man had trouble focusing. "Two nights? I don't know how far in the day I was. I just pushed Racer as hard as I could to escape, then kept going in case they chased me. I barely slept."

"How many?"

The rider shook his head. "I only saw three. They were watching the road. They tried to block me, but Racer rode through. One of them put an arrow into me when I rode away."

"The wound is real," Misheal said, and the rider looked at her in disbelief.

Tibs hadn't had to deal with trick bandits might use as part of approaching a caravan, but he'd heard stories. Claiming to be injured and seeking shelter was a popular one it seemed.

“Can I see to him?” Sarnita asked.

Graiden took his time answering, then nodded.

“I’m not keeping the caravan stopped,” Rigel said.

“Three are a lookout for approaching caravan,” Graiden said. “Which means there is a camp close enough they can gather everyone. It doesn’t matter if it’s a dozen or six. They attack in mass and people here get hurt.”

“They are two days away, Gray. When the courier was racing away. Look at him. You think he stopped for more than a piss or a shit? It’s going to take us five days to get there. You can be there with enough people to deal with them under three. Are you telling me you don’t trust the people you hired to deal with however many bandits there are in two days?”

“Did he just tell Gray to leave him unprotected?” Jeremy whispered. “I thought they were together.”

Tibs ignored him. More interested in the exchanged.

“I’m going to have to take at least half my people with me,” Graiden said. “If something happens while we’re away, you will—”

“Where are they going to come from? The sky? We’ve already traveled this far and if there had been a danger, you would have dealt with it. You’re going to be covering the distance between us and them with half our forces. If there’s trouble there, you’ll deal with it. We are going to be fine continuing while you deal with this.”

Graiden grumbled something unflattering, but Rigel simply smiled.

“Alright,” the chief called. “I need—”

Enough horses were made to step forward; the rest wasn’t audible. Tibs was among them. He’d prefer dealing with this before anyone had known, but by going ahead. He hoped to find a way to break off and take care of the bandits before they could be a danger to anyone else.

Graiden moved before them, sending some back. He was making sure enough of the better trained guards remained behind.

“I’m going too,” Jeremy said when Graiden slowed. The chief let out a snort and a roll of the eyes and continued on.

“You’re going to get yourself killed, kid,” an older guard said.

“I know how to fight,” Jeremy protested.

“This isn’t going to be a fight. Fights are fair, with both sides willing to stop if it gets too bad. This is going to be a massacre. I don’t care if you know how to fight. You better know how to kill if you want to survive what you volunteered for.”

Jeremy looked like he was going to be sick, but he straightened when he noticed Tibs watching him, and put on a brave face.

Tibs hated that he seemed to be the reason Jeremy was doing this. He didn’t know why the young man wanted to impress him, and he couldn’t control it. He just hoped he did know how to kill, because if it came down to it, Tibs wouldn’t be in a position to look after anyone other than himself.

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Tibs rubbed his temple. The etching barely helped at this point. He’d been pushing his sense too far, too often, but he’d finally gotten something, and with the sun

going down, now was the best time to deal with it.

He hurried to reach the front of the group, where Graiden was. The man glared at Tibs. They were in the period when they let the horses take it easy.

“I think I should scout ahead.”

Graiden gave him a disbelieving look. “We’re nowhere close to them yet. We’ll camp for the night once the sun touches the horizon, then we’ll ride for two fingers’ worth and after that, I’ll send people to scout.”

That would put them much closer than Graiden seemed to think, but Tibs couldn’t tell him that.

“They might have scouts of their own. If they send word we’re coming, they will—”

“I told you no, Tyborg. You think I don’t know what you’re doing?” he added as Tibs opened his mouth to protest again. He snapped his shut, irrationally believing Graiden knew he had elements. “You aren’t some hero in a bard’s song. You’re always off ‘scouting’ for Rigel, and he thinks it’s why we’ve had such a quiet trip. But you’re out there looking for adventure. Hoping you’ll come across just what we’re heading for and you’re too abyss young to understand that you don’t deal with bandits alone. So, you are going to stay right here. You are going to stay safe.”

Tibs nodded. If he couldn’t do this with Graiden’s indirect approval, he’d do it without it. It would be simple enough to slip out during the night. Channeling air, he’d be able to reach the bandits much faster, and if he couldn’t return before morning? Well, it would only be a few days on his own until he reached the next village.

“You,” Graiden snapped, pulling Tibs out of his planning. “Are going to stick by him. If you let Tyborg out of your sight, I will skin you alive. Is that clear?”

“Yes, yes, sir. It is,” Jeremy replied, looking like he was trying to cover up his excitement.

“Look,” Graiden told Tibs as he opened his mouth to protest. “I know you think you’d be safe, that you’d be fine and that you’d come back and we’d all rejoice what you did for us. I was young once too. That’s why I’m not letting you do this. And I don’t care how pissed you are about it. I can deal with your hate a lot easier than your death.”

Tibs closed his mouth. He wasn’t winning this, short of explaining to the man what he could do. And even that might not help. Graiden hadn’t said anything against magic or the people who wielded it, but Tibs couldn’t risk he was just keeping his dislike silent.

He rode away, Jeremy at his side.

“I’ll go with you,” the young man whispered.

Tibs nearly chuckled at the absurdity of him thinking coming along would help anything. He shook his head.

There would be in the night. Tibs would deal with the bandits then.