

Chapter 53

Clapping his hands and rubbing them briskly together, Altres ripped off the sheets, bundled up the dead Assassins in separate burial shrouds, and looked at his remaining captives.

He clucked his tongue at them and pulled their wigs off. “Whatever am I to do with you?” He pointed at one of the students. “You tried to punch me when I was simply disarming you, very unsportsmanlike. You *bit me*, what kind of savage does that? Did they teach you that in Melee 101? And *you*, oh-ho-ho, you have fire, boy. True fire. Nearly got me with my own knife!”

Altres wagged a finger at each of the students in turn as if they were all a bunch of naughty puppies who had just gone to the bathroom on his favorite rug.

He wasn't *mad*, he was *disappointed*.

That did nothing to quell the fear rising in each of the students. They had just seen one of the best Assassins from their Guildhall dispatched as if it were mere child's play.

Nothing they had been able to dig up on Altres suggested he was anything but what he seemed.

With a sigh, Altres sat down on the edge of the bed, his back to the trio of surviving students. “I'll need to get a new bed, of course. That goes without saying. Poison and blood? Nasty combination. No doubt there will be more. I could send the Guild a note, but I'd rather not let them know where I am just yet. They can be nosy. But even if the Guild pulls out, there's nothing stopping a mercenary or some petty thief looking for a little extra money.”

Altres sighed, looked at them over his crimson shoulder, and shook his head again. “Ah well, guess it was good while it lasted.”

He bounced off the bed, turned with a flourish to his captives and said, “All those who want to live, raise your hands.”

Nobody did.

“Oh, right, the paralyzing agent!” He shook his head. “You’ll have to forgive me. It’s been a hectic few days.”

He used no antidote that any of the students could see. His fingers twisted in ways that suggested he was not just double-jointed, but triple or quadruple somehow.

There was no other way to describe how his fingers moved *through* each other at times while they flashed in a complex dance.

One by one, the students regained the use of their limbs, then finally their voices.

Wisely, they decided to stay put, but from the way they blinked and glanced all around the room, Altres could tell they were ready to bolt.

“The way I see it,” he told them, severing their bonds with the flick of a dagger. “You have two choices. Go back to the Guild, find a new master, explain what happened and go through the whole process again. Or... let me teach you a thing or two. I’m fresh out of impressionable young minds. Yours will do nicely.”

The students rubbed at their raw and chafed wrists and ankles, slowly getting up out of the blood-soaked bed. They looked to their fallen comrade, and their master.

At the best of times, there was only the barest hint of loyalty between student and master. The good ones, the truly excellent of their breed, engendered a mixture of fear and awe so powerful that even when the student became a master themselves, they showed respect to their former teacher.

Besides, nobody wanted to encourage the killing of teachers as a method of advancement.

That way lay madness and dragons.

“Well?” Altres said impatiently. “Things are about to get real heated here soon. I could use some people who are quick on their feet, willing to learn on the job, and are more than eager to get their blades wet. I can’t promise you’ll survive, but if you stay, I’ll teach you things that your old master didn’t even know existed.”

“And if we leave?” a young woman asked. She looked absolutely terrified, but there was steel in her spine.

“Then I’ll thank you to not let the door hit you on the way out,” Altres said.

“You won’t kill us?” she asked, perplexed.

“Not unless you’d like me to. It would be very informative. Alas, you wouldn’t get the chance to grow from the experience.”

The students looked at one another, then, as a single unit, they dropped to one knee. All three of them drew their arms into a X over their chest and held the post.

It was the pose of submission from student to master. In some rare instances, you could use it to entreat an Assassin to spare your life. Of course, only the Guildmembers knew that pose, so it was often a tense situation.

Altres snorted derisively. He had never liked all the pomp and ceremony of the Guild. It produced excellent Assassins, but whenever they hit the slightest bump, they defaulted to their training instead of thinking on their feet.

Granted, that was *the point*.

Everything was a test with the Guild. Graduating just meant you advanced to more esoteric and dangerous tests where the pass/fail was often indistinguishable from life/death. Learning to unravel what the Guild taught you was the final test that only 13 had been able to pass in the last century.

“I mean it,” Altres said scoldingly. “Murkmire is about to boil over into open rebellion. The Guild is going to back out soon, whether they like it or not. Nobody wants to get their hands dirty with this, but if you stay, I will make damn sure you’re up to your elbows in it. This is your last chance to back out and go back to Fallwreath or wherever you’re from. You’ll get no further chances to skip back with your tails tucked between your legs.”

None of them moved a muscle.

“Very well,” Altres said, a hint of pride in his voice. He had expected at least the young man to bolt. He looked skittish and far too easily spooked despite his skill. “What are your names?”

They didn’t speak, and then Altres remembered his own strange training beneath the Mistress.

Right.

He pointed to the leftmost one, the bulky figure that, despite her musculature, could never be confused for a man.

The young woman turned her rose-colored eyes set into a darkly tanned face toward him. She removed her cowl to reveal short, chin-length hair with a faint blue sheen. “Nyrr, Master.”

Altres shifted his finger. “You?”

The young man did the same as Nyrr. He looked up with pale green eyes, a mane of crimson red hair spilled out of his cowl. He looked like a noble’s son, not an uncommon occupation for a third or even second-born son. Somebody who could take on a “gentleman’s” occupation while keeping out of trouble.

They stood no chance of taking over the family business, whatever it was, so they were usually cut loose with fully paid tuition. His fine pale features and proud tilt to his chin told Altres this boy might be more trouble than he first thought.

“Wadu, master.”

Before being asked, the last of their number, a gorgeous young woman with honey-colored hair and gray eyes flipped back her cowl and said, in a lilting accent that chilled Altres to the bone, “Ithla, master.”

Even through the many years that separated him from those dark days, Altres felt a shiver of fear at that accent. The accent of his homeland.

It was the proper way to address a new master. An Assassin gave up their surname in exchange for wiping away who they were before they entered the Guild.

They would get the chance to pick new names for themselves, but if they were lucky, their master or the Guild itself would provide them with honorifics.

Until that point, their pasts were meaningless, their surnames stricken from the records.

Altres drummed his fingers on his thigh. “Okay, enough of that ‘master’ stuff. Always hated it, always will. If you need to call me something, call me Altres or not at all.”

He pointed at the flame-haired noble. “I don’t want to have to tell you when to speak.” His gaze bounced to the honey-haired girl from his home. “This is going to be a very different learning experience than you are used to. I will use your talents, but not before I ascertain what they are. But I will require *all* of you to exercise initiative. I cannot tell you what to do every step of the way. You’ll have to think for yourselves.”

His eyes fell on the large girl, Nyrr. She looked like him when he was in her position. Full of fire and hatred. Oh, she had somebody in mind that she wanted to kill or his name wasn’t Altres... which, technically it wasn’t, but that was beside the point.

“Do you all understand me?” Altres asked.

Unsteadily, one by one, they rose from swearing fealty to their new master. “Yes... sir, Altres,” Wadu said.

“Good. Now, your first order of business is to tell me everything you found out about your client.”

They looked at each other nervously, then the two forms in burial shrouds.

Altres rolled his eyes theatrically. “All right, downstairs then. Let’s have a drink!”

Each of the Assassins followed him down.

Wadu kept his hand as far away from the various knives on his person as possible. He watched Altres move without once looking over his back at them, or even glancing at the nearby mirrors and polished surfaces.

Why isn't he watching his back? Does he trust us that much?

A small voice told him that the tiefling didn't. Not if he could take out Vyrrik with such ease. Wadu didn't know what Altres had shown his former master, but it had been enough to silence the old man into shock and awe.

That was enough for Wadu, though he still found this tiefling odd. He knew he wasn't a noble anymore, but he still thought of himself as better than others. It was hard not to, even when his name was struck from his House.

He would be forgotten, a Lost Scion until he gained a second name and returned of his own volition.

Of course, Wadu had no intention of returning to his happy family just so his wretch of a mother could parade him like some sort of trophy, then put him on display as if her terrible abuses had somehow made him who he was.

Like many noble born sons and daughters that went to the Guild, Wadu fully intended to return to his home with all the skills he learned at the Guild.

Not to reunite, but to bury.

An Assassin wasn't supposed to take the life of another unless they were paid to do so, a contract sent through the Guild itself. But that would be easy. There were more than enough people who had already covertly approached him about doing it once he graduated.

Wadu would have done it for a single [Spark].

Altres led them downstairs, clapped his hands to bring the lights back up, and waved his fingers at a table that set itself. Chairs flipped off the tabletop and were promptly filled in with his fellow students.

“Who do you want us to kill?” Nyrr said in her gruff voice.

She tried to act cool and detached, but Wadu could see the tendons standing out on her neck. She was petrified.

“Some very bad people,” Altres said, bringing back a tray of drinks for everybody. “Now, let's drink to loosen those lips!”

Wadu looked at Ithla. She shrugged and knocked back the fiery liquid. Her gray eyes watered and she coughed out a plume of blue smoke before she took her shot glass and tapped it twice on the table.

Altres winked at her. “A daughter of Dalmanii through and through,” he said as he poured another shot for her.

Wadu beat Nyrr by a hair. He wished he had taken longer to gauge what was going on, but he didn't want to look ungrateful. Vyrik had done far stranger and more humiliating “loyalty tests” than this.

The young man's vision blurred. He nearly blacked out. Wadu struggled to breathe. Every inch of his throat burned like somebody had started a bonfire in his larynx.

Not as soon as he would have liked, the pain gave way to a smooth, smoky sensation that tasted as if the air had turned to blueberries.

“Good!” Altres said with a grin. “Now that we’ve got the pleasantries out of the way. Tell me everything Vyrik had you do from the moment you reached Murkmire. You’ll get to watch something very interesting!” he promised them.

“What’s that?” Ithla asked, her eyes sparkling with interest.

The devil put his hands on the table and looked at them all with those lilac pupilless eyes. “The ‘Return to Sender’ gambit.”

Wadu wasn’t the only one who gasped.

The Guild absolutely forbade such actions. It was something that no student learned, instead it was said they would only be able to learn it once they were masters themselves and had the experience to know when to execute the Guild’s will.

Any student caught using such a gambit would be hunted relentlessly by their own masters and classmen until they were dead.

Normally, if a deal went sour, the Guild stepped in to handle it. If Altres thought he could flout the Guild’s laws... then this was *definitely* the sort of man Wadu wanted to learn from.

Things were about to get interesting indeed.