

CHAPTER 69 – DEATH TRAP

Luke hauled both bodies to the ground, rolling to get leverage on Yind's bulky form and topple her to the side. The cat-like drake scabbled, made a sound a lot like a yowl, and then collapsed to the side, crushing Luke's arm with a spike of pain.

It wasn't broken, it just hurt like hell. It was like getting his arm pinned under a motorcycle.

"Don't!" Luke warned them urgently. "Whatever killed your master is still active!"

A ring of runes, made of pearl and fused with the floor, surrounded the base of the deadly obelisk. Runes that Master Frendlebren's skeleton was still touching.

The struggling continued, though less from Alfair's side.

"Please," Luke begged them through clenched teeth. "Don't let what happened to him befall you as well."

He was strong, but his strength was severely lacking compared to Yind's. She pulled him for a few more inches before some part of her heard Luke's pleading tone. She rolled off his arm and looked at him, then at the body.

Luke slowly got up, rubbing the life back into his arm. He glanced at the books on the desks and then back at the obelisk and the body.

"I don't understand," Alfair said. "He was a Master Runegraver. How could he be defeated like this?"

Luke frowned, taking in the books on runes, the obsidian [Stele], and then—his eyes snapped back to the [Stele] still clenched in Master Frendlebren's fingers.

At first glance, he had taken it to be a fingertip, but now he saw it was a gorgeous [Stele] the likes of which befitted a master.

It wouldn't go over well if he looted Master Frendlebren's body, no matter that he couldn't use it anymore. That sort of act had already gone over terribly for Luke, and he wasn't about to repeat in front of two friends he actually cared about.

For some reason, he doubted it would work so long as that deadly obelisk stood. Trying to loot it, even with his shadow powers, might result in a connection that would kill him.

While he would get sent back safely, there wasn't time to spare anymore.

And as much as Luke was sure it wouldn't *actually* kill him, he had a finite number of chances remaining for entering the Gordian. By this point, he was down to 7 nodes and if the expanding spiral of death kept growing, he would likely have less than that upon exiting.

"How did you know he died?" Luke asked, gesturing toward the short, stout skeleton. He certainly seemed the right size for a dwarf. A shame he didn't have a beard. Luke would have liked to see a dwarven beard in person.

To hear Alfair talk of his master, it had been a glorious thing festooned with magical talismans and jewels.

"His [Soul Marker] went dark," Alfair explained. "It's common practice for field-masters to keep a [Soul Marker] back at Sorcerri so that if they perish, people are made aware and preparations can be made to retrieve their body."

Luke looked around at the room. He didn't see much evidence of retrieval.

Alfair understood where his mind was going. "We knew it was within the Gordian, but we did not know why. And knowing that this was Master Frendlebren's magnum opus, few faculty members

felt comfortable trespassing in order to retrieve his remains. After all, if he succumbed to his own project, a Master Runegraver himself, what hope did anybody else have?”

“But you went after him anyway,” Luke pointed out.

“Yes... well, I am not exactly known for my calm and rational approach to things,” Alfair said with a cough. “Besides, Master Frenlebren was a good dwarf. He taught me much. It was the least I could do to give his remains a final rest. Dwarves, no matter how high and magical they become, are a people of the stone. It was my master’s wish to rejoin his ancestors.”

Yind padded around and brushed against Alfair in a kind gesture of affection. She appeared to appreciate his efforts. Then she curled up on the ground, watching the obelisk and her fallen master’s body with an unblinking gold gaze.

Luke gently patted her rump. “Sorry, girl. I’ll try to get him out.”

Her curled ears quivered at that. At least he was able to give her some hope.

Alfair turned an incredulous stare at Luke. “I don’t mean to be rude, but if Master Frenlebren was killed by this, the odds of you being able to succeed where he failed are quite low.”

Luke, who had been paying a great deal more attention than Alfair, motioned to the hole in the dwarven robes. “Well, we’ll see. He was wounded before coming into this area. I think he was already dying by the time he arrived. He might have...” Luke trailed off, unable to say the words aloud.

He didn’t know Master Frenlebren, but he didn’t think it would go over very well if he told his grieving student and companion that he might have killed himself.

If the wound was bad enough and he was facing either a protracted and agonizing death or a quick and painless one... Luke knew what

he would do, but he understood some people might want to take the easier way out.

“Might have what?” Alfair asked.

Luke shook his head. *No, that’s not right. He was injured, but he still had time to scratch out a warning. There’s something I’m not seeing.*

“There’s no blood,” Luke heard himself blurt out.

“What?”

Luke motioned to the floor leading from the doorway to the obelisk. “If he was wounded before getting in the room, he would leave a trail, right? Something. Instead, there are opened books, diagrams... we can see exactly what he was working on. We both know your master was paranoid about people stealing his research. But look at all of this. If you had the understanding, you could probably piece together what he was doing just by reading his last notes and the places he had bookmarked.”

Luke paced up and down the room, keeping a wide berth of the obelisk. “It’s likely he came here, started researching what to do... and while trying to disarm the obelisk or reconfigure it—I’m not sure which—somebody attacked him. And knowing somebody would be coming to look for his body, he etched out a warning with the last of his energy.”

Alfair’s eyes misted over. He scrubbed them savagely. “Except no one did,” Alfair whispered miserably. “Until now.”

“He knew you would, eventually,” Luke added. “That is what the [Soul Marker] is for, right? Was there anybody in the Sorcerii that would want him dead?”

Alfair laughed. “They are all high-level mages, masters of a thousand different fields and disciplines. You don’t get to that level of recognition and prestige without accumulating enemies by the dozen.”

“Well, hopefully they aren’t still somehow around,” Luke said, glancing at the books and papers.

Yind lifted her head and sniffed the air. Pages rustled on the nearby desks. She crossed her paws and rested her chin back on them. She was not relaxed, but it was clear that the shadow drake sensed no danger.

That was good enough for Luke.

“Who would do such a thing?” Alfair asked the room at large.

“We can figure out who the killer was later,” Luke said. “Right now, what’s important is that we disarm the trap. Whoever it is, they’re long gone by now. You said this happened a year or so ago?”

Alfair nodded.

“Then unless they’ve been hiding in here this entire time, I think it’s fairly safe to say that they’re gone, wouldn’t you?”

Alfair looked doubtful. “Perhaps. You don’t know the masters of Sorcerii like I do, Luke. Some of them earned their place by stabbing the back of the man or woman above them in the hierarchy. Not all of them are like that, but there are enough.”

Luke reassessed his rose-tinted view of Sorcerri. It still sounded like fun. If Luke was being honest with himself, it sounded *more* interesting now than before. He liked danger.

He didn’t bother to tell Alfair that.

“Help me comb through these books and notes,” Luke said. “Some of these I can’t read. It looks like a cipher of some sort. Look for something he might have used as a key.”

Alfair leaned over one of the desks. “Yes, that’s his personal code. Very difficult to break. Would you like me to read it to you?”

“You know how to break his cipher?” Luke asked. This was on an entirely different level than the one Luke cracked.

“Of course. I was his star pupil.”

Hours went by as they went through the papers and books. Luke was getting a massive headache, but he was also beginning to understand what was going on here.

At the core of it, this obelisk was a very deadly form of a challenge-response authentication system. The runes in gold, woven throughout the pale stone of the obelisk, were the challenge. The response was meant to be the inlaid pearl on the floor.

Luke could see a few runes that would allow him to alter the composition of those pearlescent runes to provide an answer. With the code broken courtesy of Alfair, Luke hungrily read the coded passages.

The problem was, Luke didn't fully understand the challenge. It was something to do with the order of runes and their hierarchy as they related to the quantity of Dunamis they could handle.

Every rune was different, and though Luke was far from an expert, he knew enough runes by now that he could glean a potential answer from all the work Master Frenlebren did.

“He was close to answer,” Luke told Alfair. “I'm willing to bet he would have solved it if not for the assassination. Sorry,” he added when he saw the elf wince. “Listen, I'm going to make an attempt to answer it, all right? I think I know what went wrong.”

Luke believed that Frenlebren was issuing a warning about the obelisk. But he couldn't figure out what. He had a hunch that he might have been a little hasty in holding back Alfair and Yind, but he wasn't about to test it himself.

He summoned an Echo to bend down and touch the body's ankle.

It didn't even have time to salute before it was blown apart into shreds of shadow that faded before they hit the bookshelves.

I should learn to trust my instincts better.

“Okay, the runes are definitely dangerous.” Luke frowned at the body. At least he had the brains enough to use an Echo instead of himself.

Luke revisited the books and notes, doing his best to piece everything together. Alfair tried to help where he could, but otherwise understood that Luke was focusing and needed his full attention for what was in front of him.

It was like an open-book exam except if he was wrong, he would be sent back to the refuge and have maybe 1 or 2 more chances before he was killed.

He had to get this right.

Luke studied and pored over the materials that the late Master Frendlebren had gathered for himself. He felt bad that he was practically cribbing off the dead guy, but without his help, Luke would have had no shot at solving the challenge-response.

Finally, after what felt like days, Luke surfaced from his latest book.

Without a word, he went over to the pearl runes, took out his [Stele] and started to draw the runes that were missing. He was careful to avoid touching the dwarf’s remains. Master Frendlebren had been mostly right, but even if the assassin hadn’t killed him, he would have gotten the answer wrong.

It was a simple mistake, one that Luke had nearly made until he triple-checked his work. It was the equivalent of placing an errant semicolon in programming. Simple, but devastating all the same.

Luke recreated the inner ring of runes outside the first, making sure not to touch them until he was finished. Only then did he tentatively draw the line through the runes that would connect them to the obelisk, creating an answer to its challenge.

“Listen, if I’m wrong I’ll be back as —” Luke started to say.

There was a faint buzzing sound, and then the world went dark.