

Chapter 30

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Carina demanded of Jackal.

Tibs hadn’t intended to start an argument when he’d told Jackal about what he’d heard in his father’s house. He’d just returned to their room, and the fighter had been there, along with the others, including Mez.

“What would you have done?” Jackal replied. “You’re all already on my father’s bad side. There’s no point in making it worse for any of you.”

Carina was the only one angry. Mez was distracted, and Khumdar mulling over the information. Probably looking for what fit with the secrets he’d already found out. Tibs needed to talk with the cleric about those, see if he knew anything that would help him keep Sebastian from causing trouble like the fire.

Tibs was certain that was the man’s work.

“We can help,” Carina said, then dropped onto her bed. “We can take whatever your father sends. We’ve survived the dungeon.”

“My father isn’t a dungeon. He doesn’t play by any rules.”

“What do you make your father’s claim that only you can save your family?” Khumdar asked. “That he said ‘it was read’ implies a prophecy. Do you have an idea who this ‘she’ be, that it could have changed your behavior if he had told you?”

Jackal rolled his eyes. “There is no ‘she’. There is no prophecy. It’s just a story he made up to try to control me.”

“He was talking to himself,” Carina said. “Why say that if it’s not real?”

“How do I know?” Jackal said in exasperation. “Maybe he said it so often he believes it now.”

“What is the story,” Khumdar asked, “if you do not mind telling us?”

Jackal sighed. “Supposedly when I was born, there was a seer there, and she claimed that I would one day rule the family, that because I would be there, our family would achieve the dreams those before me have had. That without me there, our name would be forgotten to time and the abyss.”

“Is that a thing?” Mez asked, looking up. “I thought seers were just in stories.”

Carina and Khumdar exchanged a look.

“It’s...” Carina hesitated. “Adventurers with Void as an element will something know things out of sequence. There have been tests done, and those who participated have been able to predict the result of Kartelon with enough accuracy that the Sorcerers in Amstirden have an arrangement with the transportation group so that any attendants who show inclinations to prediction will go for testing.”

“What’s Kartelon?” Mez asked before Tibs could. “Sounds like a game, but I’ve never heard the name.”

Carina rubbed her face. “It is a game of chance. A wheel with numbers on it is spun with a die in it. The more faces on the die, the harder the game is and the more the players can make from their bets.”

“Oh, Run Dice?” Jackal said, sitting up. “My father owns a few of those tables. Utterly rigged.”

“No, a properly set up one will give you a random result within the range determined by the dice. One with six faces is the simplest game and will give you one of nearly four hundred results. Then it goes up from there. The Amstirden Sorcerers use one with a one-hundred-faced die, so the odds of anyone guessing the result are low enough that anyone able to do it reliably has something special. The only ones to have done it have Void as their element.” She looked about to add something.

“But,” Khumdar took over, “while I do not benefit from having read what sorcerer had done to study it. I have heard stories. If those are to be believed, anyone with a talent for predicting what will happen does not live very long.”

“But if they know what’s going to happen,” Tibs said, “can’t they avoid what’s going to hurt them?”

“The stories say those people go insane,” the cleric said. “They turn into raving lunatics, are what those stories said.”

“It’s more that the more accurate the adventurer is at predicting what will happen,” Carina picked up, “the quicker their mind deteriorate. The researchers describe it as them losing touch with the now, so that they can’t function anymore.”

“Now I know my father was lying,” Jackal said. “He claimed that she was there for every one of his children being born.” He stood. “Come on, I’m done talking about this without at least some ale in me. Let’s go to the inn. Once I’m numb, you can go back to talking about visions and adventurers going mad.”

* * * * *

Tibs studied the barrels lining the wall.

Drinking the ale had proved to be more of an adventure than usual as, for the first time since Tibs started drinking there, they had bad ale. A bad barrel happened, Kroseph had reassured them, but when Jackal pressed, he’d admitted this was the seventh barrel in their cellar that had turned out to be bad.

Jackal had been quick to claim his father was responsible, but Mez pointed out there was no way to open a barrel to add anything that would make the ale go bad. As part of learning to be a noble, his family had sent him to work in a brewery, so he explained how barrels were sealed, and how they were stored on their side. He’d gone into the reasons, but Tibs had already been thinking of other things.

Things that lead him to be in the inn’s cellar this night, instead of on the roofs.

Tibs had known he could get in with no one noticing him. What he’d wanted to know was if anyone else could do it.

He wasn’t impressed.

Only Garlan worked at night. He was the strongest and meanest looking of Kroseph’s brother, so his presence was enough to keep the nighttime drinkers from causing trouble. But he was also the cook and the server, which meant that with only a little patience, someone could get close to the kitchen, then in and through the door leading to the cellar without being noticed. Leaving would only require the same.

So, Sebastian could pay someone to get in. Then what?

As Mez had explained, the barrels were on their sides, held in place with wooden blocks and stacked three high, the highest the cellar's ceiling allowed. They were made of wooden slates, held in place by metal rings, just like the rain barrels. He couldn't remove a ring without the ale escaping. He couldn't remove a slate without leaving evidence it had been tampered with.

Kroseh had assured Jackal that none of the barrels had been tampered with.

It would take someone with wood as their element, Tibs decided. Or someone with water, to hold the ale in place while they removed the rings. Only even that would leave marks as the metal ring scraped against the wood.

He sensed the liquid in the barrel, and the mix of essences there felt the same as that in the tankard he drank from. Water, earth air fire, in varying quantities, and he was surprised to sense a little corruption. There were more essences. He'd noticed that everything, even what he thought of as being of an element, had a lot more essences within them than just that one.

What did corruption have to do in ale?

What did corruption do?

His only experience with it was Don and when he had corruption in his essence. He'd thought it was a bad element, but while there was something not entirely trustworthy about the element, they had been friendly.

Every barrel had corruption in it, but Tibs figured that if he added more, no matter what its purpose was, it would make the ale go bad.

So had Don done this?

No. Tibs didn't believe that. For as much of an asshole as the sorcerer was, he liked the inn. More than that, Don thought of the town as his, too. He'd hurt someone in it that bothered him, but not the town itself.

Did Sebastian have an adventurer with corruption? He hadn't sensed an element in anyone he'd seen near the man's house, or those he knew worked for him, but Jackal had made it clear his father was as rich as some nobles. So he could pay one to come and ruin the ale.

Or he could have an item that let him do it. Tibs hadn't been able to work out what the woven items Sebastian wore did, but some had corruption as part of their weave. Complex items seemed to have a little of all essences, just like everything else.

Left with only maybes on all the questions he had, Tibs snuck out of the inn and went roof running. He needed some certainties to balance out the maybes, and the best way he knew how to accomplish that was to break into a house or two, and tonight, they were going to be noble's houses.

* * * * *

"Can essence make a lock?" Tibs asked Alistair.

His teacher sighed. "Please focus, Tibs.

"I am."

They were seated on the floor of the training room within the guild building, eyes

closed. Had been for too long, as far as Tibs cared for.

“I’m feeling my reserve. I’m pushing the essence against the ‘edge’ of it. But I don’t know what’s supposed to happen, so I’m asking you a question.”

“What is supposed to happen.” Alistair said, his tone strained. “Is that you need to work out how to get your essence to seep through the border of your reserve and into your body. One of the aspects of being Rho, on your way to Lambda, is to get your essence to suffuse your body.”

“Wouldn’t that be easier by just overfilling my reserve?” Tibs asked, thinking back to what had happened when he’d absorbed Bardik’s essence.

“If that could be done, I expect it would make it easier. But remember what I told you. Overfilling your reserve is dangerous.”

It had been painful, but nothing bad had happened because of it. Well, other than being drenched in corruption, but that had been Bardik’s doing, not his reserve spilling over.

“Does being about to move essence in my body let me have more of it? That would have been nice to work on earlier.”

Alistair chuckled. “No, you’re not getting a larger reserve out of this. What suffusing your body does is reinforce it, gets it ready for the next stage.”

“I thought Rho was about learning that I didn’t have to just repeat how I was told to use essence.”

“You already know that.”

“Then when are you going to teach me how to do more?”

“When you’re ready.”

Tibs sighed. “So, can essence be made into a lock?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“There’s a house with essence woven through the windows and doors.”

“It seems like you’ve just answered your question.”

Tibs opened his eyes. “How do I get through it?”

“You get the key.” Alistair’s legs were crossed strangely. Both feet over the calves. Tibs had tried, but it was painful.

“I can’t get the key.”

“Then you can’t get through it.”

“So, they’re the perfect lock?” Tibs didn’t believe in those, but that now he needed to keep in mind what essence could do.

Alistair glared at Tibs. “That is not what we are working on, Tibs.”

“It’s what’s on my mind.” He smiled. “I’m not going to be able to focus on anything else.”

“There are times, Tibs, when I seriously believe you do not wish to improve your essence.”

Tibs shrugged. “I’m inquisitive. I can’t help it.”

Alistair raised an eyebrow.

“The word was in a book Carina’s having me read.” He’d liked the word, so he’d been

practicing saying it and had waited for the perfect time to use it.

“Maybe I should get you a book explaining the principles of essence etching versus that of weaving,” his teacher said, hints of a threat in his tone.

Maybe he should have used the word with someone else. “I’d rather you tell me,” Tibs said casually, but he could tell Alistair saw his discomfort. “It hurts less.” He rubbed his temple for emphasis.

“It’ll hurt regardless once you start working on it. It is a complicated process to understand, but one you need before you can progress.”

Tibs nodded. “So the essence lock, it’s perfect?”

Alistair rubbed his temple and gave Tibs an annoyed look. “No. There are no locks that can’t be defeated, but one of those will be as close as it’s possible to get.” He closed his eyes, took a few breaths, and when he opened them, the annoyance was gone. When his teacher spoke, it was as an instructor again. “A lock will always have weaknesses. Tell me what could be the weakness of one made of essence.”

“The key,” Tibs said immediately, since if he had that, he could easily bypass it. He thought about it. “The person who has it. I could trick them into opening it for me.”

Alistair nodded and waited.

Tibs shook his head. He was certain it had other weaknesses, but he couldn’t think of any. “If a lock like that is so good, why don’t every house have them? That’s the only house I’ve found with them. Even the nobles rely on latches instead of essence.”

“Setting aside arrogance as a reason.” Alistair chuckled and Tibs could envision a noble thinking they were too good for an essence lock. “That window you noticed. It’s now basically a magical item.”

“Oh.” That was one thing Tibs hadn’t thought about.

“Yes. And as I’ve explained, those are difficult and expensive to make. The more essence used, the more difficult, and therefore, the more expensive such a lock would be. I’m surprised even one of the nobles has gone to that extent.” He considered something. “Could you tell how many essences were used in the lock?”

Tibs gave Alistair his ‘are you really asking *that* question’ look, then remember how his teacher liked to work. “Is there a way I can tell what other essences are?” right now he could only differentiate those essences he had.

Alistair smiled. “Remember how I told you that with enough training, you can disrupt someone else’s essence, even if it isn’t your own? That’s because, with that level of experience, you learn to tell minute differences between the essences. With enough skill and practice, you could tease about what essence compose a weave. Of course, the more complex the weave, the hard that will be.”

“It’s all that mixing of essence, right?”

“Along with the fact that a complex weave is also denser than simple ones. The strands of essence are packed so tight that it makes telling them apart even harder. One of the main reasons they aren’t used is that they are more than even a noble will need. Mechanical locks can be quite complex, enough they will stop all but the best thief. That this one went to this expense makes me question what they might be expecting of a dungeon

town this new.”

“They’d know the rogues here have essence.”

“Yes, but they’d also know that no one who is currently running the dungeon would have the training to be able to do more than sense there is essence used in the window. And being able to use an element will not make getting through such a lock possible.”

He extended his hand and water lines formed over it. “A simple weave uses multiple essences to stop you because you only have one of them.” He broke a water line with a finger. “You pluck this line, but the rest is still there to trigger when you break them. Most Rho rogue lacks your training to be able to even tell there would be more essence. So they’d be caught. That noble should consider that to be enough.”

Tibs extended his hand and mimicked the pattern, then, taking a chance, he added more lines until they became nearly impossible to tell about. “It felt more like this.”

“That’s... overkill.”

“How would someone who wanted to get into that house do it?”

Alistair narrowed his eyes. “Don’t even think of attempting it.”

“I’m not,” Tibs replied reflexively. “I’m just curious.”

“Trying it will end up killing someone, probably you, Tibs.”

“Could you do it?”

“I’d need a team. How large would depend on how many essences are used? I’d need at least one person who can tell them apart, so a sorcerer, then it would depend on what they tell me.

“All the others would be rogues?”

Alistair’s suspicious expression turned pensive. “Ideally. But I don’t know rogues that cover every element. Fortunately, because of how teams are built, nearly every class will pick up something from their rogue, so it’s just a question of finding someone with the element and enough knowledge to be helpful. Helping break a lock doesn’t require the kind of skill that needs a lifetime to learn. Does that answer your question?”

Tibs nodded. He wasn’t getting into Sebastian’s house any further than the fireplace unless he found it extinguished, and he expected that even with the weather never being so cold as to require a fire at all times, the man wouldn’t let it go out.

Unless he could make a team of rogues he trusted with his secret.

“Can we go back to your training, then? You won’t be able to reach Lambda without that.”

“How will I tell when I’ve managed it?” Tibs asked, setting the question of Sebastian aside for the moment.

“Tibs,” Alistair warned, then seemed surprised the question was on topic. “Once you’ve suffused your body with water essence, you will take on some of its characteristics. Your motions will be smoother, you’ll be harder to hold, slipping out of bonds will be easier.”

“Alright.” Tibs closed his eyes. That settled that worry at least. His body was already suffused with an essence, and that wasn’t water. He wouldn’t be the cause of his team breaking up.