

A Soldier's Life

Chapter 101: Nighttime Visitors

The heavy, thick rain was also loud. We all pulled out oiled cloaks and wrapped ourselves tight. Even under the cloak, my metal helmet echoed a constant cadence of thunks as we pressed on. My immediate thought was remembering our raft trip from the capital. This rain was similar except that it now also had a chill to it. Even with my oiled cloak wrapped tight, my clothes were drenched, and it drained my body heat, and I shivered. Blaze, to my left, was not faring any better. I couldn't see anyone else clearly.

We walked for two hours and finally reached a town with an inn and stable. Adrian did not hesitate to stop. Once we were in the stable, we could hear Adrian's voice clearly. "Feels unnatural. Too much rain, too fast, like when the river flooded on our way to Sobral."

"Is the mage close then?" Lucien said, shivering.

"Hard to tell with weather magic. It might be a powerful elemental or a mage causing it, and he could be standing next to you or fifty miles away. He is definitely aiming to destroy the fields. The last harvest is this month, and dozens of farms are along this road. It is going to be a hard winter this year," Adrian said morosely.

A man came crashing into the stable. He had been running to avoid the rain. "Thought I saw someone out here. Legionnaires, are you staying? This rain seems perilous to travel in." Adrian nodded reluctantly, as we had only traveled half a day. The man smiled, "A large copper for each horse includes feed tonight and tomorrow morning. You will have to muck your own stalls. The stable boy lives a half mile away and will not be in tonight."

"Rooms?" Adrian asked.

"Two left, two beds each. A merchant's guard is already taking up the common room. You can sleep in the loft free if you like," the man offered. I looked up to see large bales of straw along a central walkway above.

Adrian sorted us, "Decimus and Scholar Favian can take one room. Blaze and I, the other. Lucien and Eryk take care of the horses. The loft is yours tonight."

They left us, and Lucien and I used glow stones to hang everything we could to dry them out. All ten stalls had one or two horses, so the noise and scents would be unpleasant tonight.

“You know Lareen has a spell form that could dry these things in seconds,” I told Lucien, trying to make conversation.

“The maid the Duchess assigned you?” he asked, and I confirmed with a nod. “Not as pretty as the one Kolm had assigned, but one of the nicer ones,” he said. “I was assigned a young man, Heath. He is good at his job but not someone I care to keep my bed warm at night.” There was maybe a sense of jealousy in his words.

“Are the others indulging with their servants,” I asked as carefully as possible.

“Most. The Duchess is doing her best to make our company as happy as possible. Everyone is certainly working harder because of it,” Lucien replied while emptying the packs that had accumulated water on the inside. I had the unenviable tasks of mucking the three stalls, checking the horse’s shoes, and cleaning the packed clay with a pick. Lucien began to rub them down, getting as much water off as possible.

It took a good hour before the seven horses were cared for. Blaze brought us steaming bowls of chicken and carrot soup. “The inn is a small converted house, you are not missing much other than the fire.”

The hot soup bowl warmed my hands as I tilted the bowl to my mouth. The soup seemed mostly broth, but it was the heat warming me from the inside out that I craved. Blaze waited till we finished before asking if we wanted another bowl, which we both declined. It had been a large bowl, almost half a gallon. The rain had not slowed and echoed on the roof of the stables. After Blaze left, we checked out the loft.

The loft ran the length of the stables over the center walkway with openings above the stalls. Rough-cut boards made up the floor. There was baled staw at one end. Tiny grains of black rice were everywhere. Well, not rice, mouse, and rat shit. Lucien was already making a hand broom with the straw to sweep an area clear. I did likewise near the ladders.

“Wish I had a thermal stone instead of a glow stone,” Lucien mumbled as he removed his wet clothes and hung them in the rafters. He had just one long

dry shift in his bag that he put on while shivering. "At least the roof is not leaking." His bedroll was obviously wet.

I asked, "What is a thermal stone? Is it for making fires?"

"Can be. Depends on how hot the stone is artificed to get. They are a bit too heavy to carry around. I can not channel aether anyway. You charge it with aether, and it emits heat for a few hours. The first mage company I was in there was a legionnaire who carried a first-sized one with him. It was weak, but he kept it in his bedroll at night."

We set up our damp bedding. "Can you charge this?" He tossed me his glow stone, and I did as requested before sending it back. "We should leave them out to keep the mice at bay," Lucien advised. I nodded and placed a glow stone on either side of me.

I stripped as well, hanging my wet laundry, but Lucien was already trying to sleep, so I took out a dry tunic and sent the wet one to my storage. My dry tunic was quickly dampened in the wet bedroll from my pack. I had one other bedroll in my dimensional space, but it was the heavy one I had taken from the First Citizen Justin when I escorted him with the griffin egg.

Lucien was soon snoring, and I considered using the amulet but decided against it. The pounding rain created white noise, and I drifted off. My dreams were of being swift down a river and over a waterfall and drowning. When I hit the bottom, I was bouncing on the rocks. My eyes shot open. The horses were kicking their stalls, shaking the loft, and neighing in fear of something.

I put on my helm and grabbed my sheathed sword. My spear was left below. Lucien was alert as well, as I could see him sitting up. The rain was still heavy and loud, and I could see some minor flooding in the horse stalls, but that was not what was spooking the horses. From my perch, I could see the stables' doors swinging open. The light from our glowstones illuminated the stables poorly. I remained still and waited, as did Lucien. Whatever shadow was in the doorway was short and humanoid, maybe a child.

The creature cautiously entered, and enough light illuminated the creature for me to identify it. It was a familiar creature, a goblin. This goblin did not have any weapons and was wearing rags. It also had greenish skin, not the brown skin of the ones I had fought before. Even though the light was up in the loft, the creature never looked up as it entered. It was cautiously moving toward our packs.

Lucien gave me the hand sign that I should wait. The loft had two ladders, and both were near me and a distance away from Lucien. He was moving to the edge over the stalls and was going to descend that way to cut off the goblin's retreat.

A second and then a third green goblin entered. The heavy rain was masking any sound we made, but Lucien's movement created shifting shadows, and the last goblin in line looked up. It fled out the door as Lucien swung down and blocked the other two from escaping. I descended quickly, and the two were stuck between us. My blade was drawn, but neither of the goblins had any weapons. Then, one of them drew a small three-inch knife from inside the folds of its rags.

It stood defiantly facing me. The other one faced Lucien but did not pull weapons, but hissed angrily at him. It actually looked to be shaking in fear.

I talked loud enough to be heard over the rain, "Never seen green goblins before."

"They are burrowers and scavengers. We will be doing the locals a favor by eliminating this pair. Too bad more did not enter for us to trap," he replied.

My goblin lunged, and my blade pierced its skull through the eye as I had much longer reach. I flicked it down off my blade and smoothly cut into the neck of the other goblin facing Lucien. Lucien relaxed and turned to the door. I inspected the small creatures. Their bodies were clean from the rain and looked thin and frail. They were not as large as the brown ones I had fought in legion training.

Lucien approached and inspected the bodies, "They either got flooded out, or they come by here regularly. Most likely, they will not be coming back tonight, having lost two of their number."

"Should we go and tell Adrian?" I asked. Lucien looked through the crack in the door. It was still pouring outside. "No, it can wait till morning. They are just nuisances. We will toss these two outside so the blood does not continue to get the horses riled up."

The horses were still anxious in their stalls. The war mounts, who had alerted us, were calm now. I think it was Ginger who had kicked to wake us up. Not caring that Lucien saw, I gave each another apple and rubbed them between

the ears. Lucien tossed both bodies outside. They looked pretty light by the ease with which he threw them.

The adrenaline of combat faded, and I thought about the collector but decided this one was a lost cause with Lucien here. We both lay down again, but I couldn't sleep. Lucien was snoring softly in no time. I stayed up waiting and listening to the rain. About two hours after the goblin's raid, the rain suddenly stopped. The quiet felt odd after hours of hard rain and the constant noise. The horses shifted every few moments in their stall, but otherwise, it was quiet except for some dripping sounds.

I climbed down quietly and looked outside. The goblin bodies were gone. Maybe their companions took them. It was still hours before sunrise, but the blue moon was giving light through thinning clouds. Standing puddles of still water were causing weird reflections of the moon. The air was warmer—more humid as well.

"Everything good down there?" Lucien asked from above me, looking over the edge. I guess I had not been as quiet as I had thought.

"Yeah, it just seems eerie quiet now. The goblin bodies are gone. I am going to get suited and wait till morning in my armor," I said while looking out across the road toward the town buildings. There were a few dim lights in the windows, but I did not see any movement. Lucien groaned in disappointment as he started to dress as well.

Putting on cold, damp clothes is never fun. Lucien was mumbling to himself, and I just suffered through the wet clothes. We were dressed and sitting down by the stalls. Lucien asked, "Do you have another apple?" I handed him one.

While he was munching away, I asked, "Does everything just feel off to you?"

Between bites, he answered, "Magical weather does that. Meddling with weather on this scale will cause problems hundreds of miles away. I don't know what, but I heard a desert on another continent was made because a king wanted his garden watered daily."

"At least it brought warmer weather," I noted. Lucien shrugged.

As soon as the sky turned gray, signaling the sun's imminent arrival, we went to the inn. Blaze was right; this was a small converted house. A hearty fire was burning in the tiny common room, and four men were curled up in front of

it. Lucien did not care if he woke them and moved a table and pair of chairs by the fire for us. The men on the floor cursed us but moved out of the way to sleep elsewhere.

The noise brought the innkeeper, who was in a tiny kitchen in the back. We soon had a breakfast of dense biscuits and eggs scrambled with onion. As we ate, Adrian came down the stairs and grabbed a chair to join us, "Any trouble last night?"

Lucien talked through a mouthful, "Some green goblin thieves. Eryk handled two of them, and the rest ran off. Only saw three."

Adrian nodded unconcerned, "Must have had their burrows flooded out and were hungry. The innkeeper did not mention any goblin problems last night at dinner." The innkeeper was close and placed a plate of biscuits and eggs in front of Adrian.

The innkeeper noted, "Some local farms have been missing some chickens, but no goblin problems reported legionnaire." Adrian nodded to him in thanks.

"Can I get another plate—double portion this time?" I asked, handing him two large copper and my empty plate. I was guessing that was more than enough based on his grateful smile. He brought a plate stacked with scrambled eggs and biscuits and a pitcher of weak ale for me. Adrian poured himself a drink from the pitcher.

As I ate, Adrian and Lucien talked about the goblins. Blaze joined us as I finished the plate. Soon, the alchemist, still red, and the Scholar came down. Lucien and I went and readied the horses. An hour later, we were on the road heading east. The town had been on a hill off the road and fared well in the heavy rain.

The road was made of packed with clay and dirt; some standing puddles were up to two feet deep. A rushing stream was as high as a stone bridge crossing. The reluctant riding horses had to be led across by their reigns.

The bridge crossing was the only danger we encountered in the morning. The rain had not reached more than twenty miles from our town. Adrian pushed us as hard as the alchemist could handle. I kept a close eye on Ginger behind me on the lead line. She was a tough horse and kept up with our party. She had a limp, but Lucien assured me it was not affecting her overall health.

We stayed in an inn in a town or a city each of the following nights. I was usually with Blaze and Lucien, while Adrian shared a room with our charges. At night, I massaged Ginger's muscles at Lucien's instruction to help the tightness in her hindquarters from the damaged tissue.

During the day, I ended up riding mostly beside the Scholar, as I seemed to be the only one with patience enough to listen to him. He talked about his specialization, the Elven language. I listened and even took the time to learn a few words and phrases.

Most nights, I was in the dreamscape for four or five hours, splitting time between studying the Tsinga books, the time affinity spell form, and practicing with the dreamscape manifestations of Konstantin, Adrian, and Xavier.

We reached the city of Loule in five days and stayed the night in the Legion Hall. Even the alchemist and Scholar stayed in the Hall. It was breaking the rules, but Adrian did not care as the Hall was mostly empty. This stop put us just forty miles from Sobral. The alchemist's skin was fading daily, and he was more pink than red after the week we traveled with him. I think he was relieved that the red was actually fading, and he swore he would get back at the old alchemist in Lorvo who did this to him.

Adrian informed us that he planned to push the last forty miles the next day, eager to end this recruitment assignment.

Chapter 102: Surprise Awakening

Adrian pushed us to the final stretch of forty miles to Sobral. Not so much us, as we had gotten our riding legs, but Decimus was still struggling since it was his first time riding more than an hour at a time. The alchemist had almost gotten his riding legs when we reached Sobral. At least he had stopped moaning every time Adrian ordered a light trot. I hope I had not been that bad while learning to ride.

The road had that déjà vu feeling when traveling somewhere you have been before but in the opposite direction. Around midday and about fifteen miles from Sobral, we passed two carts of a miserable-looking farmer heading toward Sobral with three teenage children helping him. Adrian trotted up to them and asked, "Any trouble in the area?"

The man and children looked in rough shape, with filthy clothes and dirt marring their features. The older farmer grunted, "Tornado tore through the fields." He indicated and kicked his cart, "This is all that is left."

Adrian shifted uncomfortably in his saddle, "How many fields were hit?" I noticed he had a bandaged and braced knee and was limping when I approached.

"All of them," he lamented. "Mine and my two neighbors, at least. Lost most of our livestock as well, legionnaire. Gonna sell what we can in Sobral before trying to rebuild with my children." He looked like a beaten man, and the two boys and his daughter would not make eye contact with any of us. I could see why if everything you worked for was ripped from you.

I noticed his cart had some butchered meat, bundles of carrots, and some other field crops he salvaged. I leaned forward in my saddle, "Sir, my horses love carrots. Can I purchase that bundle there?" I summoned a large silver to my hand and tossed it gently at him before he could respond. He caught it inexpertly and stared in disbelief at the coin and then the carrots. He couldn't believe I was offering ten silver for something that would cost two or three copper at most. He finally understood my charity and retrieved and handed me the dozen large carrots. Atlas was excited as the carrots passed close to his head, and Ginger walked up her lead line to sniff the carrots in my lap.

Lucien nodded to me, "You are a good man, Eryk."

I shrugged, brushing it off, "I was out of apples." That was not true, as I had about a dozen left, but he did not need to know that.

Adrian also tossed the farmer a large silver, "Give Eryk another bundle. We do not want Eryk to be the only generous one today." Lucien and Blaze followed suit, two more large silver tossed and received.

As we rode on, I had four bundles of carrots awkwardly in my arms, "Do I have to be the one to carry all of these?"

Adrian smirked, "It was your idea, legionnaire. Deal with the consequences."

Over the last fifteen miles to Sobral, the horses ate well. Sobral was different when we returned. The farmers we passed were not the only ones whom the weather had hit. Carts stuffed high with personal possessions were outside the city, and makeshift camps were set up. Dirty peasants were making way

the best they could. Adrian rode up and talked to the first group, two old men with three women and five children. We waited while he talked with them, and then he rode back to us.

“Refugees from some farms to the west like the farmers we passed. Also, some war refugees from Macha and Vesov. The Bartiradians crossed over from Lortare into Vesov three hundred miles south of Macha,” Adiran told us.

Adrian shook his head remorsefully, “Vesov has nothing of value. They probably are lashing out after Macha. Same with unleashing elementals and monstrosities across the Empire.”

We walked up to the Citadel, and four men in clean uniforms guarded the gate. One asked formally, “State your business in the Citadel of Duchess Veronica Angela.”

Adrian rode forward and patiently answered, “Adrian of Mage Castile’s company is returning from duty with an alchemist and scholar. All men safe and unharmed.”

One of the guards took off at a jog to inform his superior, and he returned a few minutes later. We were waved through. Adrian announced, “I will bring Alchemist Decimus and Scholar Favian to the Duchess. Blaze go care for the equipment, and Lucien and Eryk care for the horses.”

There were actually two stable boys in the stables and a half dozen new horses. After a cursory inspection of the new horses, Lucien commented, “Work horses. The Duchess probably bought them from the refugees. Not bad stock, but not war horses.”

I worked to get the packs off so Blaze could take them in, and then Lucien and I supervised the stable boys as they cared for the horses. Lucien started to teach them the proper way of caring for a mount.

The boys, we learned, were some refugees from Macha that the Duchess had taken into her service. The younger boy explained, “We fled Macha before the Bartiradian army came. We were staying with family in Lignum when the word came that Macha was in ruins. My father’s candle shop was destroyed, so we couldn’t go back. Word came the Duchess of Sobral was hiring any and all workers two weeks ago, so we traveled here with a caravan.”

I understood that it was a smart move on the Duchess' part, except that food would be scarce this winter, and she would not be able to feed her increased population. After the horses were settled, I told the two stablehands, "This girl right here is Ginger. She is my horse. I will be paying for her lodging and feed. No one rides her but me. Also, if one of you could run into the city, fetch the old healer, and bring him to heal her, I would appreciate it. Tell him I will pay his price."

I handed each of them a large copper as a reminder. One of the boys rushed off, and Lucien smirked, "You keep spending your coin like that, and you will have a line of plebians every time you step outside."

"Perhaps," I said, sneaking Ginger an apple when Lucien's back was turned. Atlas looked bewildered; after all, he was the one who had carried me for the last two weeks. I also got him an apple to placate him and addressed Lucien, "But you know we could die tomorrow, and coin is no good to a dead man."

I headed up to my room with my equipment, looking forward to a long bath and hopefully some time with Lareen after I was clean. There were a lot of new faces in the halls of the Citadel. Linus, the company medic, was walking toward me, "Eryk, you made it back in one piece." We clasped forearms in a greeting. "Guess it was not too adventurous if you are all back."

"Not too many problems. Just a few goblins and an ettin," I said casually.

He patted my shoulder, "You have a good sense of humor, Eryk. I have to go work in the clinic for the refugees tonight. I will see you tomorrow at breakfast." There was no point trying to convince him we fought an ettin. Lareen was not in my room, and I guessed she was off doing other duties.

An armor stand was in the room, holding a new set of legion armor. Just the auroch-treated leather variant, not the metal plates the volunteer legion received. It looked new, and I recalled Castile saying the Duchess should get it for me as a reward for killing the mantichore on her lands. A black cape was draped over the shoulders. I removed the cape to see the armor better.

The cape felt off, not cloth but more like soft, worked leather. It had a hood and fit over the armor but could be worn without it. This must be the cloak Maveith made me from the mantichore wings. I stripped off my armor and tried it on. Without the armor, the cloak could be worn like a duster. He must have dyed it black, which was a fitting color.

He had promised me one other thing, but I did not see it here. I compared my old and new armor, and it looked like Kolm, or whoever assembled it, had gotten the sizes close to correct. I stripped in the bathroom and crossed my fingers as I turned on the water. It was not hot but warm. Good enough. I used a washcloth to clean off most of the road dirt.

After I was clean, I lay back in the tub to relax. I heard the door open after a time and yelled, "Lareen, I am in here; you can join me." Maybe I sounded a little too excited, but that excitement was quickly dashed. Konstantin wandered in with Maveith on his heels. The enormous goliath towering over the short Konstantin.

"I think I will pass on joining you, Eryk. The water looks filthy," Konstantin smirked at my disappointment. "Just heard you fought an ettin from Adrian. He said you refused to run and fought beside him."

I ignored Konstantin and addressed Maveith, "Love the cloak, Maveith. Black is the perfect color."

Maveith beamed. In his deep voice, he addressed me, "It is the nicest thing I have ever made." He reached to his belt and held up a large black pouch, "Still working on this for you. I am waiting for some ice drake hide from the capital to do the lining, but it came out well." He stuffed his massive hand inside, and the pouch fit quite snugly. "It is soft and supple. I will give it to you once I have adhered it to the drake lining."

"Thank you, Maveith. I look forward to receiving your gift. How are Trek and Lyonis?" I asked after the other wardens, still ignoring Konstantin to his bemusement.

The large man sat on the table, and it groaned in protest. It was made for sorting clothes, not supporting a goliath. He took one last showing of the pouch, "The size of this pouch will be a great sign of your prowess among my clans." He secured the incomplete sack on his belt. He motioned to Konstantin, "He helped me get Lyonis to the city, and he was healed, as were my lingering injuries. The other two manticores were killed five days ago, three hundred miles northwest. Lyonis and Trek are now helping with the province markers."

Konstantin was done waiting on the reunion and intruded on the conversation, "Your servant, Lareen, is helping in the city feeding the refugees. She will be back late. You have been given three days off by Castile."

I sensed a but coming and tried to get out of whatever Konstantin had planned for me, “Great. I found my first horse, and she needs healing and some care. I hope to get her ride-worthy again and take her on some rides in the woods while foraging for the alchemist.”

Konstantin broke into a grin, “That is great news!” It was like I had fallen into a trap. “The Duchess wants the alchemist working as soon as possible. You can talk with him, see what he needs to start brewing, and take your horse out riding. He is set up in the northwest tower.”

“I thought Castile asked you to appease the alchemist after bringing supplies to the men working in the woods?” Mavieth’s deep voice questioned Konstantin.

“Eryk is already planning to be out there, so he can handle it. He also has the dimensional space, not me. You can join him, Maveith, after you run supplies out to the men digging and laying the marker stones,” Konstantin expertly delegated all his orders out to us.

“What are you going to do while we handle your assignments?” I asked the smug Konstantin.

Konstantin hedged a bit, but then spoke, “I am going to look for signs of Traeliorn Kelran.”

The name tickled something Adrian had said, “The elven summoner? You know where he is?”

“He is definitely on this side of the Aganterao River. The Central Empire has a new monstrosity appearing every week. I may not be able to find him, but I will look for signs of him. Maybe find a campsite he used or his ritual circles for summoning,” he elaborated.

“What about the Hounds? Is that not what they do?” I asked, getting out of the recessed tub.

Konstantin held up a letter, “The Hounds might help track a dangerous mage, but the Mage Companies would be called in when they are found to deal with him. Cornelius asked me to search down this way. His Hounds are deployed on the front and protecting the dig site,” Konstantin admitted. “And he already has a squad that is missing.”

He was mistaken if Konstantin was waiting for me to volunteer to go with him. I would take a few days gathering mushrooms, roots, leaves, and flowers over running off to find one of the most powerful mages on the continent, who would kill me on sight or sic his summoned critters on me.

“Well, have fun,” I smiled at him.

Konstantin hesitated momentarily before making to leave, “I will, Maveith, make sure this one does not get himself killed.”

“Are you going to let him go alone?” Maveith said, watching his back as he left.

“Konstantin can take care of himself. We have our orders.” I dressed in a light shirt and pants. “Maveith, it is good to see you, but I really want to reacquaint myself with my favorite pillow.”

Maveith creased his brow, “Is that a reference to your maid? She said you and her...”

“No, my pillow!” I went into the bedroom to pull the griffin down pillow out of the made bed. Maveith looked at me skeptically but did leave.

I was hungry, but sleep was overtaking me. Unfortunately, It looked like Lareen was not returning tonight. I secured the dreamscape amulet under my shirt and went in to get some practice. I spent my time studying the time spell form for slow aging tonight. The sooner I learned it, the younger I would be for longer. I had been studying for about two hours in the large plush chair with Oscar in my lap when I was suddenly ripped out of the dreamscape.

Lareen was kneeling over me in a nightshirt, her hair cascading around my face, and holding the amulet in her hand. She must have felt it and pulled it from under my shirt. I immediately assumed that I lost contact with the dreamscape when it left contact with my skin. She was fingering and studying the amulet in the minimal light of the fireplace. Seeing I was awake, she asked, “What is this, Eryk?”

Chapter 103

Lareen was kneeling on the bed, holding my amulet. I didn't have a headache or any disorientation from the artifact being removed, so at least I had learned something. I could be awakened if the amulet was removed without ill effects. Now, I needed to deal with the curious woman. She was educated, and I assumed the runic patterns on the outside of the device told her it was magical in nature.

I gave a half-truth, "It helps me sleep. It filters out the nightmares. I have oblivion pills as well."

Lareen was trying to use the minimal firelight to see the device better. She had it in her palm and was running her thumb over it. I gently took it from her hand and put it back under my shirt. It was as big as a pocket watch from Earth, so it created a lump under my shirt. Lareen looked me in the eyes; flashes from the fire danced in her green eyes, "Eryk, I am glad you are back. I slept in your bed every night, hoping that night would be the one return."

She moved in, and we kissed for a long time. She had been busy today and had not bathed. I could taste the salt on her lips and smell her strong, sweaty scent. When we broke the kiss, I asked, "What were you doing today?" I was attempting to take her mind off the amulet.

She stretched out next to me, and we faced each other on our sides. Morning breath was one thing I did not miss about being close to a woman. I was sure my breath was also undesirable, but that was all I could focus on while she talked. "We mostly moved a few hundred bags of wheat flour into the Citadel cellars. The anti-vermin runes are strongest there, and the Duchess did not want spoilage or rats getting into it."

"Who are we?" I asked while her hands drifted to my hips and rubbed my side.

"The other servants in the Citadel. Everyone is working to accommodate the new arrivals." Her hands got bolder, going under my shirt. "We are trying to get ready to feed another thousand people this winter. It might even be more with how fast the refugees are arriving."

She leveraged herself toward me, and my thought as we engaged was I was going to look into finding toothpaste.

In the morning, I overslept, and Lareen was already gone. Her day started just after the first light, when she helped serve breakfast. She worked well into the evening by cleaning up after her charge—me. I dressed but did not wear my

new or old armor. I headed to the northwest tower to find the alchemist, Decimus. I would take it easy this morning and head out after midday to collect his ingredients.

The northwest tower was in a section of the Citadel rarely used. Rooms were empty, and dust lined the window sills. A small spiral staircase wound up around the tower's interior. A door was on each floor. I found Decimus on the third floor, the tower's highest floor. The round room was maybe thirty feet across. Tables and crates were everywhere, extremely disorganized.

Decimus was snoring softly on a cot. The morning light was bleeding through the four windows in the room. The crates must be all the new alchemist gear that the Duchess bought him. His face was still dark pink, and he was drooling. I checked out the views. Two windows looked north and west out into the woods. The east window had obstructed views down into the gardens. The south window gave a view of the city and the river beyond.

From this perspective, the city looked a lot smaller. I could see smoke plumes from the encampments of the refugees. The cot creaked, and I turned to find the bald alchemist sitting up. "Morning, Decimus," I greeted him.

"Eryk? What are you doing here? Is it morning already?" He asked.

"It is. I am here to drop off your crate, although looking at all these crates, I do not think you require it," I observed.

"Ah, young Legionnaire, that is where you are wrong. More equipment means I can have more processes going at once!" He said excitedly. I moved to the table and I placed the gear I had transported for him on it.

"I was told to check with you to get your ingredients so you can begin your work. I also wanted to ask if you made toothpaste." I turned to face the pink man.

"Toothpaste? Do you mean a whitening agent? I can do that, no problem. You just need to fetch me a bucket of goat's milk and urine. Horse or cow urine is best and easiest to collect." He said as he moved to the first crate and started to work the lid off.

"Horse piss and goat's milk whitens teeth?" I asked, a little repulsed.

“Once I process it, yes. It should only take a day, but it will take me most of the day to unpack everything here and get things assembled and set up to my satisfaction. I would ask for your help, but you would just slow me down,” he said as he carefully unpacked the new glassware.

“I think I will pass on the whitening agent. Is there anything for just bad breath?” I inquired of the alchemist.

“Bad breath? There are a dozen different recipes to correct foul breath depending on your flavor preference, and some also have dental restoratives. Do you have any aches?” He did not wait for me to answer before continuing, “I will need a few things I can create from herbs in the garden. Need to extract the oil essence and create a simple base to mix it with and stabilize the compound, but I can make you a wash that should cure your bad breath for a day or two. Any particular herb flavoring you prefer?”

“Mint,” I said firmly.

“I can gather that myself from the cook’s gardens below. Let me write out a list of things that I will need from the local woods. You can forage it for me.” I waited while he scrawled out his shopping list and the amounts he wanted for each.

There were only two I was not familiar with. Konstantin just called one something else, and the other was actually a truffle—a fungus that grew underground. When I asked him how I was to find the fungus, I got a lengthy explanation, “To find a truffle, you need to search in an area with excellent drainage. The ground should be partially sandy as well. There is a small white flowering plant that prefers the same soil. It is easy to identify as the white flowers. The plant is the size of your fist, and the flowers have five petals and light blue veins. Dig carefully in that area for the truffles.”

I nodded but did not think I would be digging for truffles today. I returned to my room to find cold breakfast plates by the window. Lareen must have returned while I visited the alchemists and brought breakfast for both of us to share. I quickly searched her room and the bath for her. She was not here and had probably been required to continue helping with the refugees.

I ate both plates and went to the stables to check on Ginger. The stable boy approached me, “Legionnaire, we talked with the old healer on your behalf. Since it is not for the Duchess, he asked for three gold for the healing on your horse.”

"Is that a lot?" I asked the stable hand. But I realized the stupidity of the question. A large copper was probably a lot to the boy.

The older boy replied, but he was uncertain himself, "A fortune, but I think it is because if he healed your horse, it would use all his aether for the day. At least, that is what he implied."

"Fine, have him come and do it. Do you know where the goliath is?" I asked the pair.

The younger one pointed, and I followed his hand. On the far side of the open courtyard, Maveith was shouldering three large packs. A tossed each boy a single copper and went to talk with Maveith.

Maveith noticed my approach, and his deep voice hit me, "You are too late, Eryk. Konstantin left at first light if you had changed your mind about joining him."

"I was going to offer to go with you, Maveith. But I have to wait for the city's old healer to care for my horse," I said, standing beside him, feeling small.

"I will be gone two days to deliver this food to your legionnaire companions. Adrian said you had a rough trip and need some rest. I will be fine," he intoned and clapped my shoulder.

"Be careful out there. With as much food you are carrying, you would make a delicious target for the refugees," I said to my friend.

Maveith's eyebrows creased, and then he laughed, "Wonderful play of words!" His voice boomed, "Delicious target because I am carrying food. You have the most interesting sense of wordplay, Eryk." He picked up one massive backpack and two satchels and left the yard.

I returned to the stables to wait for the healer and check out Ginger and Atlas. I felt bad Atlas was being replaced, but Ginger was my first. She was also a more impressive warhorse and, I think smarter than the average horse, but that was perhaps my wishful thinking.

The town healer arrived with a neatly white-trimmed beard and wearing expensive-looking clothes. He was more well-off than the average citizen. He approached with the older stable boy leading him, "Legionnaire? Are you the one who wishes your horse healed?"

"I do. I have your requested coin as well," I held up three gold for him to see. He squinted and nodded as if he was dubious that I had the coin to pay him.

"Well, show me to the beast, and I can take a look," we followed the stable boy, who was excited to see the magic healing as well. Ginger had her own stall and immediately nudged me for an apple.

I rubbed the bridge of her nose, "Sometimes I think you just like me because I am your sugar daddy." The old man went into the stall and looked at the three long, deep claw marks on Ginger's rump. She craned her neck but did not move.

"I would hate to have seen whatever did this to your horse. Glad you lived Legionnaire." He faced me, "I can do it. Three gold to correct the muscles. I do not have enough aether to remove the scarring today. Maybe another day." And for some reason, I doubted his sincerity. He would probably ask for more coins to remove the scars later.

"But she will be able to be ridden?" I asked while rubbing behind Ginger's ears.

"Yes. Even today, but you should give her an extra meal for the next two or three days," he held out his hand. He wanted his payment first. I placed the coins in his open palm. He inspected them for a brief moment before moving to his work.

There was nothing to see. He placed both his hands over the scars, and the flesh rippled under his touch. About a minute later, he dropped his hands. He was sweating from the effort, "That is never pleasant. I burned out my aether channels in my youth, and channeling that much aether is painful."

I reassessed my opinion of the old healer. Burnt mages were something Castile told me about. A mage could only use so much aether in a day. If they took aether restoratives and pushed past this limit, they would damage their ability to funnel aether for magic. This would result in painful use of aether and less aether available during the day.

Ginger kicked with the leg that was just healed and seemed happy. She craned her neck. My guess is she had been in pain from the injury, and that was now gone. She nudged the old healer with her powerful neck and knocked him down. Before he could get upset, I told him, "She is thanking you. And so am I," I handed him a fourth gold coin as I helped him up.

The man left happy, and I saddled up Ginger with the stable boys helping. Soon, we were out of the Citadel yard, and Ginger was sprinting energetically through the woods. If a horse could be happy, she was. Maybe I would let her run a bit before looking for the alchemist ingredients.

We darted down the paths and among the trees. I was deep into the woods when I pulled up. A legionnaire was in the middle of the path carrying a deer on his back. He was familiar to me, and I had not seen him in quite some time. Flavius, the archer from Durandus' company. The last time I had seen him, he was seated behind Master Mage Sebastian on a fire drake headed off into the swamp to look for the collector. This should be an interesting conversation.

Chapter 104: A Brief Lesson In Alchemy

Flavius stood in the path and tossed the deer carcasses down with a thud on some grass. He stretched his neck, happy for an excuse to rest. He wiped his hands on nearby grass, "Eryk, you returned with an alchemist?"

I dismounted and led Ginger over to Flavius, "We did. I am guessing that Sebastian found his brother's collector since you returned?"

Flavius eyed me carefully, expressionless, "No. We spent three days looking for it. I was sure we were on the right island, but Sebastian started to doubt me. I was fortunate the Duke's army arrived to tear down the city of Macha."

"Did they really just tear down the outer walls? They must have killed hundreds." I was glad to focus the conversation on something other than the collector.

Flavius nodded slowly, "I was told that over half the occupying Bartiradian army was on the walls. Thousands were killed."

"And now they are rebuilding the city. Seems like a waste," I stated with remorse, thinking about the citizens who stayed, including Carina, the young bath attendant whose brother was a city guard.

"No. That may have been the plan, but the earth mages moved to the storm giant dig site. Sebastian was ordered to patrol the skies with his fire drake, but he was not happy about it. The Dragon Legion arrived just as I was leaving to relieve him," Flavius said seriously.

"The Dragon Legion? I thought they were ceremonial for parades and such," I gripped the reins tighter. Things seemed to be escalating on the eastern front.

Flavius nodded, "They are. Not in my lifetime have they ever been called to duty for a campaign. The Emperor is serious about protecting the dig site and does not want the Griffin Riders of the Bartiradians getting close to seeing what they are doing. A huge magic array has also been constructed to prevent scrying as well."

An odd silence hung between us. Flavius studied me, "I heard about your fight with the manticores. Three kills are beyond impressive for you and the goliath. A pity you didn't have a collector for their essence with you." I could tell he was testing me, so I remained as impassive as I could.

"I agree, but it was mostly Maveith the goliath, he is an impressive warrior," I replied, trying to give the goliath credit and ignore his jab about the collector. His stare intensified, and I started to get a little uncomfortable around Flavius. He was hinting or guessing at something. I tried to break away, "I have to supply the new alchemist with ingredients. I will see you back at the Citadel. Nice kill," I indicated deer.

Flavius looked down at the deer, "Thank you. My father was a woodsman and taught me a fair amount about hunting and tracking prey. Castile has me going out every day and catching what I can to be smoked or salted for the coming winter. The assignment is much better than digging holes with the others."

"Glad you are back, Flavius," I finished the conversation as I mounted and rode off. I could tell the archer-scout had suspicions about me. It was on his face and how he spoke and studied me. After a few minutes, I spotted a large patch of blood grass and pulled out Decimus' list. It was time to get to work.

Riding Ginger saved some time between spotting harvests, but she was also a good watchdog while I worked, pawing the ground to get my attention. The first time was a giant elk in the far distance. An apple reward had her digging into the ground with her hoof every time she noticed something. A raccoon, a massive owl, deer, and even a wolf, not a dire wolf, just a normal-sized wolf. Each time, I gave her a small reward. An apple for the dangerous-looking owl and wolf. And a few pats for the other less threatening creatures accompanied with verbal praise.

The list from Decimus was not extensive; it included just six items but large quantities. My fingernails were black with soil as I worked through the afternoon to complete his list. The only thing I was not able to find were the truffles. I did try to find the white flowers that marked likely spots, but I did not see any.

It was a rather uneventful long afternoon. The air was cool, and I was seeing my first hint that the weather was changing. From what I had been told, the Telhian Empire had a short winter. The Sobral province had trees changing color and leaves starting to fall in reds, oranges, yellows, and browns. It was not so different from Earth, and I recognized many types of trees.

It was close to sunset, so I rode Ginger back toward the city. The woods near the city had a number of foragers. By their rough clothing, these were the refugees. I talked to two pairs, and they were harvesting wild onions and tubers. Both were very simple to find and dig up. I was already aware of how to find both.

I spent some time rubbing Ginger down. She did not need more apples for the day, and I noticed Atlas was not there. The stable boy said one of the Duchess' men took Atlas to run messages to another city. The stable boys did not mind me doing their work for them. Personally, I found the task to be relaxing and good therapy, caring for the animal. I even paid one of the stable boys two large silver to run to purchase horse grooming kits for me. One would be for the stable boys to use on Ginger, and the other is destined for my dimensional space.

I was famished as I went to the dining room for dinner. I had worked hard in the woods and only drank water all day. Castile, Adrian, and Delmar were talking at the head of the table, and I sat near them. Castile nodded to me and asked, "How was your ride today?"

I sat diagonally across from Castile, "I got about half of what the alchemist wanted. Couldn't find his truffles, though." A servant put a large mug of ale in front of me. I looked for Lareen, but she was not one of the servants in the dining hall.

Delmar said between bites, "You need a trained dog to find truffles. And Konstantin was supposed to be gathering for the alchemist—did he go looking for the mage?" I nodded while taking a long pull.

Adrian barked, "He is too impatient. We told him that after settling things and we got some healing potions from the alchemist." Delmar sat back and just grunted in shared annoyance. The three were clearly not happy with Konstantin.

I tried to divert the conversation. I remembered pigs were used on Earth to find truffles. I asked Castile, "Is there any spell that can find truffles?"

Castile smiled, "A few. Simple nature spells, none that I have access to. I actually never heard of a potion requiring truffles. Inquire with the alchemist if it is for his work or a snack." Castile smiled and seemed relaxed for once. She was in control of her short-term destiny even though a lot was going on.

Donte and Benito came and sat at the table, and servants brought out plates and drinks for them. It looked like most of the company was laying markers. Both Donte and Benito had their hair cut and shaved. "I will inquire when I drop today's harvest off with him. What is going on with all the refugees?" I asked while attacking the full plate in front of me.

Castile answered, "We are accepting any and all refugees with employment guaranteed for able-bodied men. The pay is only lodging and two meals for now for unskilled labor."

"What about the woman and children?" I inquired. "I saw a number of them in the camps outside the city."

"They will be fed whether they work or not. We are also trying to find work for them as well," Delmar answered for Castile.

Adrian added irritably, "We are training more city guards as crime is likely to swell with the refugees' arrival."

We ate for a time, and I listened to them discuss the training of the Citadel and town guards. The logistics were interesting. Equipping them and training them seemed to be the most significant issue with the cost of the equipment and only a few of our company in the Citadel at a time. Housing them was not. The Citadel had room for five hundred guards, and two barracks in the city had room for two hundred guards each. Most current city guards lived in personal houses within the city, so the barracks were mostly empty. The city, if you could call it that, only had about six thousand people. It was modest for the Telhian Empire in size but tiny, from my personal experience.

As their conversation faded, I asked, "I saw Flavius in the woods today carrying a deer. Do you want me to hunt while I am out there?" I asked, finishing my plate.

Delmar answered gruffly, trying to add some levity to his tone, "No. Don't waste arrows." He shifted in his seat, "It is important to get the alchemist working." His steely eyes locked onto me, "The healing salves can save a man's life, and if he can truly brew the lesser healing potions, we will be truly blessed by Fortuna. I have an order in for the giant bee honey coming through the capital. Hopefully, the expense was worth it." The honey was the only ingredient we couldn't source locally for the healing potions.

Seeing my empty plate, Castile requested for me to deliver the ingredients. "Bring your harvest to the alchemist, and since you do not require time to rest, continue harvesting for the alchemist. Let me know what he is also planning to use the truffles for."

I climbed the northwest tower and found Decimus still pink-skinned, unpacking and setting up his apparatus. He had lit a few burners, and one table was already starting on one of his processes. I noted that this was the equipment I had transported for him.

He looked up, smiling. Even though he was pink and not red, it was still creepy. "There were three types of mint in the cook's garden. Let me know which one you prefer." He pointed to a table. I walked over to the table and found three bundles of leafy stems. I sniffed them all, and they smelled the same. "Chew on the leaves. That will be the flavor of your wash," Decimus advised, walking over to me.

I did as instructed. The first leaf was peppermint. The second was a spearmint or close to it. I thought the last one had a milder mint taste with a hint of chocolate. I pointed to the peppermint, "This one will be good for me. How long till the mouthwash is ready?"

"A few days. What did you get me today?" He asked eagerly.

I unloaded my harvest for the day, and he started sorting and hemming and hawing as he did so. "I do not see any truffles," he voiced his disappointment.

"No, I did not have any luck. Which potion are they needed for?" I asked casually.

“My foot brew. The one that relieves aches kills foot odor. Don’t think of putting it in your mouth to cure your foul breath. I tried; it will induce violent vomiting.” He finished sorting and looked up, “Not bad. The roots on these two blood grasses got damaged but should be usable.”

I looked at his maze of glassware, “So what will I be helping you with for one day a week?”

“Not for a few weeks, I think,” he said, looking over his burgeoning laboratory. “It will take me three or four days to set up and get some things in process. I will have free time once I get the Duchess’ quota for the healing salve and stamina potions. But I really do need the truffles. The foot treatment was my biggest seller.” I didn’t mention that this city was much poorer than the one we recruited him from.

He was taking the peppermint to a work table, and it appeared he was done with me. Before leaving, I asked, “Why does making a potion take so long?”

The pink alchemist paused in his work. He looked at me and sized me up. Then he explained, “A potion is made up of three parts. The emulsion, the active ingredients, and the stabilizer. For example, the basic healing salve uses blood grass as the emulsion. Once purified and reduced, it is thick and can be applied topically to wounds. The active ingredients are the compounds that need to be purified from other fungi or flora. If the compounds are not pure enough, the potion will not work as intended, sometimes to the detriment of the person treated. The final part is the stabilizer. I use ruby and sapphire dust mostly. The stabilizer holds the aether I channel into it to harmonize the ingredients and indicates the brew’s shelf life.”

I think he was expecting me to be thoroughly confused. Instead, I asked a question, “So if you add more ruby or sapphire dust, it will have a longer shelf life?”

The pink head shook violently, “If only! No. Too much will toxify the brew, but the shelf life is mostly determined by the purity of the ingredients being used and how well they harmonize. Potions made by a dungeon are perfectly harmonized and last for years or decades!”

“We don’t alchemists just figure out what is in dungeon potions and replicate them?” I asked next.

“You make it sound so simple! But no. Most times, when a dungeon’s potions has been successfully deconstructed, and the constituent parts were not sourceable. Also, instead of gem dust, they use pure aetheric essence. If you have ever seen an essence collector work, then sparkling blue-lit smoke is aetheric essence,” Decimus explained.

I looked at his growing expansive array of equipment. “So all this is to just pull certain compounds out of plants and fungi?”

“Yes! The heart of alchemy is purification! Your mouthwash is simple: titrated water soaked in blue mountain flowers, mint and lavender oil for the ingredients, and a touch of sapphire dust, and finally activated with aether. It will leave your mouth minty for hours, and even after the minty taste fades, your breath should not stink for a day or two.” The alchemist was starting to get excited at my interest.

“It is all fascinating. If you don’t mind, could I assist with the mint mouthwash in the evening? So I can follow a process from start to finish,” I requested.

He was about to say yes but paused, a sly look on his face, “If you find me my truffles, I will teach you all about alchemy.” Of course, he would want me to find his truffles.

Chapter 105: Truffle Subcontracting

I left the alchemist in the tower while trying to figure out how to get his truffles. With leaves changing, it meant winter was coming. How much longer would I be able to harvest for the alchemist? There was still some daylight to burn, so I paused in the library. If no one was here, I could perhaps do some research.

The large doors creaked loudly, and I was bewildered to find the Duchess and Scholar Favian inside. “Legionnaire Eryk,” the Duchess spotted me before I could duck out. “Are you looking for me?” She sounded almost hopeful. Having ridden next to Favian for a few days, I knew he talked forever and never seemed to tire.

I made an excuse, “No, I was just looking for Lareen. I don’t know how to draw a hot bath.”

“Ah, most of the servants are in the city. Lareen is as well and won’t be back till sunset,” the Duchess informed me. “But you can help Scholar Favian until she returns.” She turned to face the scholar, “This legionnaire can help you with bringing the books up and down the stairs.” The Duchess escaped past me, nodding to me in thanks for the relief.

The scholar smiled, “I do not really need help. The Duchess was just getting tired of listening to me expound on the variations of the elven script over the centuries. Her collection here is quite remarkable, and she does, as promised, have a number of books from the city of Caelora.”

I looked at the number of books spread out on tables on the first floor. The script was nothing even remotely familiar to me. “Let me take off some of my armor, and I will help you, scholar.”

“Thank you. These stacks here can go back to the third floor. There are two stacks that need to be brought down,” he indicated to the third floor.

I made quick work of exchanging the books. “Have you found anything useful?” I inquired of the scholar while sitting in a padded reading chair.

“Not yet. But there are fascinating histories that are thousands of years old. The books were never cataloged and sorted. My guess is they never had an expert on the language. I am doing my best. The script has a lot of flourishes to it, making it difficult to read, but I am slowly becoming accustomed to it.” He pointed to an open book, “That one so far is the best lead I have found on what the Duchess is looking for.”

“What is she looking for?” I asked, looking at the book. There were some amazing sketches of elves in everyday life. Mostly craftsman.

“The Duchess wants to know if there is anything of value in the region surrounding Caelora. If she reopens the trade road, then the Emperor will expand her duchy to include those lands. Your mage commander will not commit to the effort unless she knows there is actually something valuable in the lands,” the scholar informed me. I had already heard them discussing this before.

“And what is so interesting about this book? It looks like mostly crafters.” I said, still paging through.

“It is an index of master crafters of Caelora from the 4th King’s reign, Ninleyn Eldaerenth. It details the crafter, their profession, and what they were famous for.” He walked over to me and turned the page to an artificer blacksmith.

“This is Nabaera Kinvaen. A famous blacksmith thousands of years ago, but I am interested in this passage here,” he pointed excitedly.

I looked at the unfamiliar scrawl. “What does it say?”

“It describes one of her mithril bowls. It could convert water into milk. But that is not the interesting passage. Where the materials for the bowl came from is! A dungeon the elves called The Shimmering Labyrinth.” The scholar smiled excitedly.

I frowned. If I had my choice, I would never go in one again. What I knew about dungeons was that they appeared over deep ley lines in the earth that ‘fed’ them, according to Castile. Second, a dungeon could be destroyed, according to Delmar. And finally, they were full of horrific monsters.

“How do you know the dungeon is still active and near Caelora?” I asked with skepticism.

Favian smiled, “Because I have found two more passages referring to the dungeon! But you are right that the dungeon could have been destroyed over the centuries. I do not think it is one of the seven dungeons in the Empire. No dungeon in the Empire produces mithril.”

“How would a dungeon remain hidden for so long? I am sure the Empire has already searched the area around Caelora,” I noted.

“But no one has searched in the city extensively. Do you know how the city was conquered?” Favian asked, going into his teacher’s voice I often heard during the ride. Well, I could now, at least, recognize people speaking elvish and say a few phrases. One of the phrases I memorized was, Don’t kill me, I surrender.

“I do not know about the history other than the place is full of specters and wraiths,” I replied.

The scholar smiled, “About fifteen hundred years ago, the Legion surrounded the city and flooded it with poison gas. They killed thousands of elves. What the Legion did not count on was their horrific act generated the specters from the dead. They stand eternal guard against the intruders. The Empire has lost

a number of expeditions over the centuries; that is why I was excited when I heard there was a collection of books recovered from Caelora in Sobral.”

“So the dungeon is in the haunted city? Castile will never have us search the city,” I responded, half-confident.

“You are smart, Eryk. Think about it. Most cities grow up around dungeons for their resources. The number of specters in the city has not diminished in centuries, so it makes sense that there is a ley line underneath the city regenerating them after they are slain,” Favian said clinically.

“So that means the city can never be never be retaken. The specters will always come back; if the dungeon is there, it is inaccessible,” I rationalized.

The old scholar smiled, “Oh, there are ways. The kettle of souls, banishment circles, and giving the remains a final rest spell are just a few ways to permanently end a specter’s existence. And before you ask, the Emperor never had reason to invest in cleansing the city.”

I was thinking about the nightmare wraith the entire time I helped the old scholar ferry books up and down the stairs as he searched for more clues. He continued to help me practice the Elven language as we worked. I never thought I would have a chance to talk with an elf, but it was something to do to keep my mind off the possibility of entering a city full of specters.

I eventually left Scholar Favian deep into the night. I carried my armor to my room and found Lareen asleep in the bed. She looked exhausted, and I tried not to wake her. I took a cold bath and then joined her in the bed. She didn’t stir, so I rolled over and sighed, quickly falling asleep.

In the morning, Lareen woke me with a kiss. I definitely needed that peppermint wash. After a prolonged kiss, she said, “Why didn’t you wake me?”

“You looked exhausted. What did you do in the city yesterday,” I asked, showing interest.

“Meal distribution for the women and children. More and more are showing up every day. One of the children said he saw dragon riders in the sky,” she said in disbelief.

"It is true. Flavius said the Dragon Legion was sent to the eastern front," I replied.

She looked concerned and confused, "That is not possible. They do not fight in the wars." She sat up in the bed suddenly on alert.

"They are scouting for an excavation being done by the Scholarium," I informed her. "I do not think they will be going into direct combat, but I can not say for sure."

Some relief came over her face, and I could figure out why she had been concerned. I asked her, "You know one of the riders?" Her face flushed from the gray light of the morning.

She nodded. I didn't think she would say more, but she did, "We are the same age and had classes together in the Emperor's Palace. He had enough potential to be a Dragon Rider and was training his drake when I came here with Duchess Veronica."

I didn't need to ask if there was something between them. I relaxed on my side, "Have you heard from him since you arrived in Sobral?" Maybe their relationship was platonic.

"Two letters," Lareen said with some excitement. She completely missed the fact that I was maybe jealous. She smiled while telling me, "He had passed the flight trials with his drake, in the first letter. In the second letter, he told me what it was like to fly on a drake. He hoped that I could one day see him fly during an Emperor's celebration."

Great, I was competing against a Dragon Rider. I rolled out of bed and started dressing, and Lareen didn't take a hint. She asked, "Are you going riding north again?"

"Yeah, just a few miles from the wall. I am supplying the alchemist with material," I replied as I started to put on my old armor again today.

"Why don't you wear your new armor?" Lareen asked, smiling. "I was excited to see you in it—and then removing it."

"I am saving it for a special occasion. If I connect with Maveith, I will probably stay at his residence tonight. I need to range further to keep up my harvest

quotas,” I said neutrally. I geared up with my weapons and carried my spear to the stables.

Ginger was excited to see me. As I was saddling her, Maveith walked into the stables. “Want company today?”

“I do, Maveith. Do you know where I can find truffles?” I asked as I worked on Ginger.

“Black or white? I have a bunch of the white stored for winter. The black tastes too much like dirt to me,” his deep voice sounded like he was imparting wisdom to me.

“Either. The alchemist did not specify but said they grew near white flowers,” I replied.

“The white then,” he answered and nodded. “We can discuss compensation for them.”

“Certainly,” I said, relieved. “I wouldn’t mind purchasing you weasel pelts in your guest room as well.” I finished with Ginger and asked, “How do you find your truffles?”

Maveith shrugged, “The wild boars usually dig up the ground when they find them. They don’t get them all, and I get a few.”

“Pigs! I knew it!” I said.

“No, boar,” Maveith corrected me. I didn’t bother to explain they were the same thing.

We walked out of the gates. I was slightly annoyed that even though I was mounted, I was barely taller than the goliath. We walked in silence before I asked, “How are the company men doing with digging holes?”

Maveith laughed, “Good. They had some choice words that you had not participated in the shovel excavation work yet. Brutus said you were too important to come out there yourself and get your hands dirty digging holes. I don’t think he believed me when I told him you killed an adult manticore.”

I tried to say it as openly as I could, “Can you not tell people I killed the female?”

Maveith was at eye level with me and considered my request. There was a long pause, and he made contact with me, "I understand, Eryk. I will not tell anyone else. Many people don't trust people who use poison. I know Flavius was very interested in your kill as well. I told him you used poison to kill the creature. He asked to see the corpse, but it was already two days dead when Konstantin and Flavius arrived."

"Thank you, Maveith. Just take credit for the kill," I said.

"I couldn't do that. I will just not tell them you used poison," he said firmly, closing the matter. A minute later, he asked, "What type of poison did you use anyway? None of the scavengers that fed on the corpse were killed by it."

I didn't want to get caught in a lie. "It doesn't matter. But targets the heart, stops it from beating." Maveith nodded like it made perfect sense to him.

We spent the trip to his cabin looking for harvesting ingredients for the alchemist. It was dusk when we finally got to his residence. He had manticore hides stretched outside on racks, and the odor was terrible. "Do you want to learn how to prepare hides?" Maveith asked, moving to check on his projects.

"No, I am going to clean up at the stream and see if I can get the dirt out from under my nails before sleeping. In the morning, we can discuss compensation for the pelts and truffles." I said, dropping my pack and starting to unsaddle Ginger.

After rubbing down Ginger and cleaning my hands, I went inside the house, and she tried to follow. Maveith immediately said, "I don't know about stabeling her inside, Eryk."

I realized it might not be safe outside for Ginger alone. I tried to joke with Maveith, "It is okay. She is housebroken."

"House-broken..." he puzzled out the phrase. "Then it is okay," he nodded his permission.

I whispered to Ginger, "You better not soil Maveith's floor. I do not want to be cleaning up in the morning." I walked her until she did her business and then brought her inside. I would be crossing my fingers all night.

I left Ginger in the common room and slid into the silky weasel pelts. I was definitely going to purchase these from Maveith tomorrow. I took out my amulet and channeled aether into it...

Chapter 106

I entered the dreamscape and was greeted by Oscar. He seemed so lifelike that I almost felt guilty for always leaving him here alone. Not that I could take him out of here anyway. I started by practicing for an hour with Xavier, Adrian, and Konstantin. Using my air shield was becoming more natural. I also improved by using fewer shields to conserve my meager aether.

After combat training, I tried to change the walls of the dungeon again. The best I could do was paint them or smooth them out by adding material. It looked like the walls were hard boundaries and could not be changed. I found it odd that the walls were apparent boundaries to changes I could make in the amulet's dreamscape. Did that mean I could find where the dungeon hid its core? If this amulet was a copy of the dungeon when I first entered it, I should be able to locate the core. I traveled down to the scorpion room and started digging by mentally removing the sand.

The room was a lot deeper than I expected, going down almost thirty feet before I hit the rocky floor that was not affected by my removal efforts. I completely emptied the entire room and could not find the core. I filled the room back up, disappointed, and watched the snails leave their glowing trails of slime. Maybe I was just assuming there had to be a dungeon core. Delmar told me a dungeon could be destroyed, so I assumed that meant shattering or taking a core.

I returned to the first room and spent a few hours studying the spell form for slow aging. I spent a total of six hours in the dreamscape before returning. I felt completely rested and checked on Ginger. No mess. I took her outside to find it completely dark and a cold drizzle of rain picking up. The night felt alive, with insects and hoots of owls in the distance. Ginger seemed to realize why I had taken her out and quickly did her business without me having to lead her. That deserved an apple when she returned.

Maveith was up when we went back inside and mumbled something about hooves on the stone being loud. I patted Ginger and guessed maybe she was

housebroken. I went to sleep without the amulet and was sucked into a new nightmare.

Castile had led us into the ruins of Caelora. It was midday, but the massive tree in the center of the dead city was blocking out the sun, and the city was dark. Black mold grew on all the crumbling buildings, but we did not see any specters as we went deeper into the city.

As we approached the massive trunk of the tree, Castile called for a halt. She had a worried expression and looked from the direction we had come. Row after row of silver specters blocked our retreat. To make matters even more terrifying, two wispy black creatures stood in front of the specter army.

Wraiths. As they charged us, I realized that I did not know what a specter looked like. Which told me this was a dream. I just sent any specter that got close to me to my dimensional space. I started laughing maniacally that I had beaten the nightmare when the specters were gone.

Everyone was dumbstruck when all the specters and the two wraiths were gone. Konstantin, with his artificed weapon in hand, barked at me, "Eryk, stop spoiling my fun!" I woke shortly after with a grin on my face. I had controlled the nightmare somewhat as I had done in the dreamscape. I dressed as I planned to ride back to the Citadel and help Decimus with the peppermint wash today.

I found Maveith preparing breakfast with Ginger literally looking over his shoulder, deciding if what he was cooking was edible for a horse. A large wicker basket of white truffles sat on the table. I sorted through the bulbous fungi. They looked like stunted potatoes to me. I sniffed one, and the smell reminded me of spicy garlic. "This is great Maveith. What do you want for these?"

Maveith was cooking a colorful array of vegetables in a cast iron pot. He looked at me, "We are friends. An equal volume of food for the winter is acceptable. Something that would keep for months would be appreciated."

I put one of Ginger's saddle bags on the table. I pulled out a stack of wrapped meal bars from my dimensional space and stacked them neatly on the table. I packed the light brown truffles carefully in the bag next. "Maveith, let me know if these are fair. Come, Ginger, I will give you an apple outside."

Ginger looked at the vegetables that were being cooked and then at me before walking outside with me. She had either understood my body language

or my words. She was smart for a horse, but I had no idea how smart horses were. This world was different, so maybe she was not even a real horse. I stopped myself before I went down an introspective rabbit hole. A horse was a horse, of course.

Ginger walked off while I walked around Maveith's rocks and stretched hides. I was looking for any tracks that would signal a dangerous predator visited the area last night. Maveith came outside chewing on one of the ration bars, "This is pretty good. Better than truffles. A good trade, Eryk."

"Glad you like them. Do you want another twenty for the weasel hide blankets?" I asked hopefully. Maveith did not answer but finished the bar he was eating and considering. The ration bars were not good but not terrible, in my opinion.

The bars were a dense, chewy core that was covered in a thick batter and then baked. The resulting meal bar was tightly wrapped in a wax leaf. They were calorie-dense but on the dry side, requiring lots of water to get them down. I did not mind the taste, even if it was bland.

"Twenty bars for each one?" Maveith finally decided.

The pelts were maybe five by eight feet in size. The fur was short, fine, and silky on one side and soft, velvety hide on the other. Each one would roll up to the size of a normal sleeping roll, but were twice as heavy. I thought I was getting a steal. "Maveith, I can get you the bars when we return to the city."

"Agreed," he intoned in his deep voice. "Breakfast is ready." He looked over at Ginger, "She really was housetrained." He said it like he had not believed me.

"Of course, Maveith. Let's eat and start on our way back to Sobral." I tied Ginger with a quick-release knot to a tree and ate with Maveith. Breakfast was carrots, yellow peppers, green onions, and potatoes with a cut-up sausage cooked in bacon fat. I packed up the weasel hides into tight rolls and packed them on Ginger.

We made our trek back to the capital. My legion box was already full, so we only paused for mushrooms and flora that did not need to be fresh for the alchemist. As we were getting closer to the city, there were foragers in the woods again.

While I stabled Ginger, Maveith went to the Citadel as he told me, "I am supposed to check in with the Citadel Captain when I am in the city."

"I will be in the Northwest tower with the alchemist after I am done here. You can find me there, and I will have your meal bars," Maveith nodded, and we parted ways. When the stable boys were not looking, both pelts went into storage. Soon, I finished with Ginger by giving her my last apple.

I carried two saddlebags to the Northwest tower and started up the stairs. I paused, produced a sack, and filled it with fifty ration bars. The extra ten were because I felt guilty for taking advantage of the goliath. But maybe not. These meal bars would probably become quite valuable with the hard winter coming.

Decimus had finished setting up his maze of tables and glassware. He was absorbed in his process and didn't even see me enter. The windows were open, which was good as the number of oil burners made the room hot, and some smells around the tower's floor were unpleasant. Something definitely smelled like burning hair.

"Decimus, I have your truffles," I said, and his head snapped around, his eyes wide. "Have you slept?" I asked, concerned.

"Slept? What? No! Too much to do!" He waved his hands, "All this needs to be watched carefully. You said truffles?" His bloodshot eyes looked a bit maniacal.

I unloaded the bag of truffles on the table, the other saddle bag, and finally, my dimensional space filled with the ingredients best used fresh. I filled up the entire table, and Decimus attacked the piles with glee. "Decimus, you said you would teach me how to make the peppermint wash?" Although I was more inclined to be offering him an oblivion pill than asking for his help.

"What? Yes, yes. Nice job with this. These truffles are fantastic. Come over here." We walked to a table where a glass container was boiling, and the steam was going up into glass tubes. It cooled and then dripped down into a beaker. "Now, this is a delicate process," he started. I rolled my eyes as he was just purifying water.

He continued to explain, "There are tiny particles in water. We are turning the water into steam to free it from the particles that cannot become steam. You can watch the process and ensure this large container stays half full. If the

boiling gets too violent, remove the lid with the tongs here for a moment. Be careful because the boiling water can get too intense and explode!"

For my first lesson in alchemy, I was going to watch the water boil. I almost wished to be training with Konstantin in the yard instead of this. Maveith rescued me an hour later. I think the stone tower shook when he climbed the stairs, but it was just his voice echoing, "Eryk, is this the right tower?" He called up as he climbed.

"Come on in, Maveith!" I called. "I am testing the theory that a watched pot never boils. So far, I thoroughly debunked the myth."

Maveith ducked through the stone archway and looked confused, "Is he pink?"

"Yes," I answered for the alchemist, who was stunned at the sight of the goliath. "Looks like you two have not yet met. Maveith, this is Decimus. Decimus, this is Maveith."

Decimus considered and then just said, "Be careful and do not knock anything over." Maveith frowned at the insinuation he was clumsy just because he was so large.

"Decimus, I am going to leave with Maveith. Your distillation of water is proceeding well. Maybe we can work on the other parts of the wash next time I come?" I asked hopefully. I thought I had been patient and done a fantastic job watching the water turn to steam.

"I had to watch the water purification process for a week before I was allowed to work on compounds," Decimus replied flatly. I just nodded and had no plans to watch water boil for a week. Maybe I was not going to be an amateur alchemist.

Maveith said, "Eryk, Delmar wanted to see you. Some goblins have been harassing farms in the west. He wants to send Flavius, you, me, and Blaze to handle it."

"Green?" I asked, having learned that variety was a nuisance more than a threat.

"I believe so. A number of farms have been raided at night. Small animals keep disappearing. Delmar said we can leave tomorrow," I nodded but was

not looking forward to working with Flavius, who was already suspicious of me.

I handed Maveith his sack of meal bars, and he looked inside with a huge grin. I guessed he really did like the taste. We went and found Delmar drilling some Citadel guards in the spear and shield.

Delmar paused to talk with me, "Eryk, is the alchemist being kept busy?"

"He should have enough supplies for a few days," I replied.

"Excellent. Farmers a few miles from the city are complaining about night raids. Chickens and newborn sheep have gone missing. Leave tomorrow after mid-day meal and spend the night to kill whatever is stealing them." Delmar issued his order.

"Who will be in charge, and who is going?" I asked, even though Maveith had already told me.

Delmar issued his orders, "Flavius will lead you, the goliath and Blaze. You are the freshest group. Everyone else has not returned from their week's rotation digging holes. No horses, you can walk there. The farmer's name is Cassio Cervius. He has two young boys. He supplies a fair amount of grain to the city, so do a good job."

"Will four of us be enough?" I asked, concealing my disappointment.

"We are fairly certain it is just goblins. We were told goblin tracks are all around the farms, and there do not seem to be many of them. Flavius is confident you four can handle it," Delmar said, dismissing me by returning to his instruction.

Maveith and I went to have lunch in the dining room. We found Blaze and Adrian eating at the table. Lunch was just cold sandwich wraps. A servant brought over a bench for Maveith as he would not fit in the chair with armrests. Even after he sat, he had trouble with his knees bumping the table.

Adrian apologized, "Sorry to send you and Blaze out again so soon after our ride, but so many things are happening."

"What has been happening?" I asked as I began to help myself to the sandwiches and weak ale.

“Not much affecting the Sobral province. However, some of the western provinces have been requested to send double shipments of grain to the capital before the winter. The western provinces have not been hit with the summoned monsters. Duke Octavian controls about half of the grain production in the west.” Adrian informed me knowingly.

“So that is good news. Octavian will be giving up more of his harvest,” I deduced.

Adrian barked a laugh, “No, most likely Duke Octavian will be getting a few favors from the Emperor if he does send the requested grain. It is burning Castile something fierce that Duke Octavian may be seen as the hero in this war by providing food to the starving citizens this winter. He will make sure everyone knows it is his bread they are eating. You can be sure of that.”

We finished our meal, and Adrian dropped more bad news on me, “The company is moving to the Citadel barracks in a few days.”

“Why? Are we expecting to be attacked?” I asked, having unpleasant flashes of being in the gate tower in Macha during the attack.

“No. Much worse. Countess Asella Angella and First Citizen Boris Angella will be arriving with their retinue. The Countess is the Duchess’s mother, and Boris is her eldest brother. From what I understand, the Duchess’s city is close to the Eastern Border, and she has decided it is time to visit her daughter in Sobral. The eldest brother is destined to take over the city but is jealous of Veronica for being given a province to rule by the Emperor. Veronica now outranks them both.”

“What does that mean for us?” Blaze asked my own question.

“Just stay out of their way.” He nodded knowingly at us, “Enjoy your last night with a personal servant. I do not see that continuing while they are here.”

“Understood,” I said and stood.

“Maveith, I have had the misfortune of fighting a lot of big things in the last two months. Do you want to go to the grounds and get some practice in?” Maveith looked at Adrian, who nodded in approval.

His deep voice bellowed, "That sounds fun." Of course, my plan was to get enough time sparring with Maveith to add him to my dreamscape. That way, I could get a decent facsimile to practice against while I slept.

Chapter 107

My practice with Maveith was not proceeding as I had envisioned. I was sprawled on the ground for the fifth time this afternoon. My ribs ached as Maveith extended his hand to help me to stand. "You are too bloody strong, Maveith," I complimented him while wincing and focusing on secretly healing a cracked rib. I had not revealed my healing to Maveith, but he had gotten more aggressive with his swings when he noticed I had recovered quickly from his strikes.

"Your invisible shields are no fun to fight against either," he rubbed his groin absentmindedly. He had run into one of the shields when we had started before becoming more cautious and intentionally kicking up more dust with his movements to reveal the air shields.

"I have had enough for today, you?" Maveith nodded in agreement, replacing his club on his belt.

The practice yard had five young citadel guard recruits drilled by the guard's captain while I practiced with Maveith. They watched in disbelief as I, for the most part, held my own against the massive goliath. That was until I had recently run out of aether and had to block his club with my standard shield.

What I learned was I never wanted to be struck by a giant. Maveith's full-force swing was strong enough to shatter my air shield in one swing. That was how he hit me for the first time. The shield slowed his club enough that he just knocked me to the ground, but still, I did not think it was fair. He was also faster than a man his size should be. His second successful strike surprised me with a snap-leg kick to my chest. I had not thought he would use his feet in a fight.

We walked toward the dining room, but I was covered in sweat and dirt. I was still unsure how my relationship with Lareen would play out. She was no longer going to be my attendant. She was also clearly carrying a torch for her friend in the Dragon Legion. We ended up being early for dinner and were given trimmings of the unfinished roast and loaves of fresh herb bread.

Maveith made a sandwich the size of my head and had no trouble consuming it. I filled up on the meat, folding it into sliced bread. Flavius arrived as we were finishing the early meal.

“You two will be coming with me to handle the goblin problem,” Flavius said in a commanding statement. As he sat, servants placed plates in front of him. I waved the servant to get me some of the vegetables Flavius had been given.

I recalled something, produced a pouch from under the table, and tossed it to Flavius. He caught the soft toss, and a look of recognition came across his face. I explained, “After you left with Mage Sebastian, I carried your pack. I thought you would want that back. One gold, eight silver.”

Flavius was surprised and softened. “Thank you, Eryk.” He put his coin pouch away. I had not taken anything from it, and I was sure he would confirm that later in private.

Maveith looked to Flavius, “I am happy to be working with you. It feels like I am part of the company.”

“Goliaths cannot be Legion,” Flavius stated flatly.

“Why not?” I asked. “Maveith would make a hell of a legionnaire. Would cost ten times what a normal man would to clothe and feed him, but he would be ten times as valuable on the battlefield.”

Maveith disagreed with shoveling more food into his mouth, “I only eat twice what a normal man eats, Eryk.” He finished swallowing and added, “And a goliath is worth about five men on the battlefield.”

His absolutely serious delivery had Flavius and me make eye contact and then laugh. Flavius commented with a grin, “I would gladly fight beside a goliath. They are great at drawing the enemy attacks,” Flavius absently stripped the meat from a drumstick with his teeth.

“I can see what you mean. No longer being the tallest man in our company would be welcome. How about it, Maveith? Join Castile’s company?” I asked in jest.

Adrian walked into the dining room, and he had obviously been listening, “I can make that happen. You cannot be a legionnaire, Maveith, but you can be logged as a huntsman, guide, or porter for the company.”

“Huntsman?” Maveith’s deep voice rang out in the hall, focused on the first job.

Adrian sat and talked while he was served. “Huntsman is a mix of guide and purveyor of supplies, basically an additional scout for the company. They are also expected to help us in a fight. Delmar has paid a few in the past to keep our supplies topped off when we are not near a Legion Hall.” He started eagerly on the food placed before him. “Guides are locals that help us in unfamiliar terrain but do not fight with us.”

“I think he would make a great porter,” I rejoined the conversation. I assumed a porter just carried the legion gear.

Adrian was cleaning a chicken leg, “We usually only use porters when we cannot bring horses along for an extended assignment outside the cities.” Adrian sipped his goblet of wine, “Also, Maveith is contracted to the duchess as a warden, so we would need her to release him from her service.” He sized up the goliath, “But I would welcome you as well. Castile wouldn’t be opposed either.”

Maveith was reflecting on the offer as he took advantage of the continuous plates of food being delivered by the servants. “I would have to travel with you? Leave me cabin?”

Adrian nodded. “Contracts are usually termed, and paid up front. You would travel with us and be given a Legion of the Lion badge. It will allow you to use the Legion Halls with us.”

I was confused and asked, “I thought the Empire did not allow non-humans?”

Flavius answered me with a serious tone, “Mage Commanders have more discretion. I have seen halflings and even a dwarf attached to a mage company in the past.”

Maveith’s voice rumbled. “I will consider your offer. I have many endeavors going on at my cabin.” He looked to be thinking and whispered to himself, “I have missed having others to talk to. My fellow wardens generally don’t like company.”

Blaze came in with Lucien, “We moved our packs to the barracks, Adrain. When are the guests arriving?”

“Thank you, Blaze. They arrived in the portal in Parvas yesterday. So maybe five days to make their way down the trade road,” Adrian answered.

I inquired, “Can I move into the northwest tower instead? The floors below the alchemist are empty.” Adrian looked thoughtful, so I added, “Would make it easier as I am helping him gather ingredients and have to help one day a week with his apparatus.”

Adrian slowly nodded. “I will ask Castile and the Duchess. Perhaps we will move a few of the company there. It is at the outer wall?”

I confirmed, “It is. About one hundred feet is cleared from the wall to woods, and the view looks out over the trees.”

“Good. I will let you know when you return from your goblin hunt.” Adrian took his wine goblet and left the dining hall, presumably to talk with Castile.

I had some idle talk with Lucien about how Ginger was doing. Maveith, of course, informed everyone at the table that Ginger was housetrained, which got a lot of laughs until they understood he was absolutely serious. Lucien gave me a curious look, and I just shrugged. It wasn't like I had trained the horse. Maveith really did have a big mouth. I would have to be cautious about what I said and did around him in the future.

I went to my room, probably for the last time, and drew a bath. The water was actually hot this evening, so the servant with the spell form to heat metal was on duty. Without Lareen around, I did my best to clean up and pack for tomorrow's expedition. I briefly wondered how Konstantin was doing in his search for signs of the Elven High Mage Summoner. I was sure he was fine and didn't feel guilty at all for not going with him.

I was in bed early and considered using the amulet. Lareen was already aware of it, so there would be no harm. I much preferred the controlled dreamscape to the unpredictable nightmares I seemed to have. Also, I missed Oscar. I entered the dreamscape and played ball with Oscar for a time before taking a seat in the comfy chair to study the spell form for slow aging. Oscar stretching out in my lap.

It was much more complex than the other spell forms, and there were a number of warnings in the text about mistakes not to make. For instance, I could write the spell form accidentally and not include all of my body. Granted, this was less likely since the warnings were directed at mages who did not

have a high enough time affinity to imprint the spell form. Still, I would proceed with caution.

I was a few hours in when a voice cut my studies. "Where is this place?" I snapped up to see Lareen standing in the middle of the entry chamber.

Oscar looked at me and then at Lareen. "Thanks for letting me know, boy." I stood up, Oscar hoping off my lap and his bob tail wagging as he went to greet Lareen. "Lareen, what are you doing here? Did you channel aether into my amulet?" A thousand things were going through my mind right now. I thought the worst-case scenario was she would pick up the amulet again and take me out of the space. I had not thought two people could utilize the amulet at the same time.

Lareen was walking toward the shelf of books, and I intercepted her, "Did you channel aether into my amulet? The one under my shirt?" I repeated with a little bite this time.

Lareen was trying to read the titles from twenty feet away, but I kept blocking her. "What? Yes. I figured out what it was. This is pretty boring." She gestured to the rock chamber. "I thought you had a better imagination than this Eryk." She was walking toward the opening of the ankheg room since I blocked her path to the bookshelf.

"You need to leave," I said firmly. Lareen ignored me and continued to the next room. I followed her to the chamber. Adrian, Xavier, Lucien, Maveith, Konstantin, and Blaze were playing cards at a table. I had set up the poker table out of some guilt, as I did not know how real these dreamscape people were. I figured I could at least give them something to do.

Konstantin stood eagerly. "Are you ready to get some practice and stop wasting time studying books, Eryk?"

Lareen paused, processing what she saw, so I rushed back and exited the dreamscape. I found Lareen straddling me with her hand under my shirt, holding the amulet. I pushed her off and sent the amulet to my dimensional storage.

Lareen rolled to the floor with a thud, disoriented. Lareen quickly gained her senses. "Why did you do that?" she said, dismayed.

"I did not give you permission to use the amulet," I growled.

"It is a dreamscape amulet! We can do anything inside it." She looked confused. "Why are you upset?"

"Did you tell anyone I had this?" I asked, forcing myself to cool off.

"What? No? I just figured it out this afternoon. I was thinking about the dungeon artifacts we studied at the emperor's palace; it was the only thing that made sense." She stood and went defensive, rubbing her hip, which had bounced on the floor. "I can keep a secret." She said indignantly.

I relaxed. I briefly thought maybe she could tell me more about the device so I could use it more effectively. I shook my head. "Please do. It is precious to me, and this private space is the only way to get a good night's sleep." I looked at her pleadingly.

"But..." She started. "What were you reading?" She didn't realize it was the wrong question. I decided that maybe I couldn't afford to trust her. Too many secrets were on those shelves.

"It is not important. Just do not tell anyone about it." I redirected the conversation. "I need to pack," I said, grabbing a glow stone. "The legionnaires are being sent to the barracks."

Lareen frowned, biting her lip. "That isn't for a few days. We still have a few nights together."

I said with manufactured disappointment, "No, I am leaving tomorrow to hunt goblins," I informed her. I started packing the new armor that the duchess had made for me. Lareen sat on her heels on the bed in her nightshirt, watching me and not helping. I was worried about what was going on in her mind. I dressed in my old armor and bundled the new armor for transport.

As I finished bundling up the armor, Lareen pleaded, "I am sorry. I won't tell anyone about your dungeon amulet. We still have tonight."

I shouldered my backpack, "I have a few things to get done before dawn." I nodded, started walking out of the room, and turned around. I approached the bed, and Lareen looked hopeful, but I grabbed my griffin down pillow before continuing my dramatic exit. I walked the empty hallway at night, headed toward the northeast tower. Maybe Decimus was awake.

Decimus was sleeping in his cot in the dimly lit alchemy lab. A lot of burners had been doused or were no longer heating anything. At least the man was getting some needed rest. I went to the floor below and sent the new armor to my storage. I retrieved one of the weasel pelts and my pillow to sleep on the stone floor. It was definitely getting colder at night. I tossed and turned while I tried to sleep. I had never been good in relationships, but everyone would agree Lareen was in the wrong here, not me. I thought maybe I should talk with her before I left and apologize anyway. Even when I was right, my past girlfriends always appreciated my capitulation when we argued, and I needed Lareen to keep my secret.

I didn't see Lareen at breakfast, and Flavius was anxious to leave even though we were not expected to leave until after midday meal. Shortly after breakfast, Blaze, Flavius, Maveith, and I were walking down the road toward the farm with goblin problems.

Chapter 108: Goblin Slaughter

The road was wet with light rain from last night. I walked next to Maveith with Flavius and Blaze in front. My mind was still turning over the fact that Lareen knew I had a dreamscape amulet. She might know what it was, but I doubt she had figured out just how valuable it was. Six thousand gold was a fortune in the Telhian Empire. I also wanted to keep how I obtained it a secret. Maybe I was selfish, but I did not want to share it.

Lareen did teach me something interesting about the artifact. More than one person could use it at a time. It also added more questions. Was there an upper limit to the number of people? Did everyone using the amulet have the same amount of control over the environment? Would the amulet reset if others activated it?

I was distracted from my thoughts by Blaze and Flavius talking. Blaze asked, "Why are we going to kill goblins? This seems just the type of easy assignment the duchess' new guards could wet their lips on."

Flavius answered, "I asked to go when I heard about the farmer's request."

Blaze pressed, "Why?"

Flavius was quiet for a good few minutes, then he sighed and admitted, “The last goblin uprising, some twenty years ago, when they came north in numbers from the mountains, my family was killed. Killing them helps me feel like I am getting revenge.”

Maveith had overheard as well and said, “Goblins breed quickly, and they have cities deep in the earth filled with them. Most of what you find on the surface are exiles or wanderers.”

Flavius stopped walking and turned around. “How do you know that?”

Maveith shrugged. “There was a goblin sailor on one of the ships I was voyaging on. He was a bit of a pariah like me, and we talked at night on deck.” Seeing Flavius’ intense stare, Maveith added, “He was not a bad sort, but I have also killed my fair share of his kind and have no reluctance to kill more.” Flavius nodded at Maveith.

Flavius was also interested in learning more. “What did he tell you about the underground cities?”

Maveith scrunched his face, retrieving the memories, “The goblin cities have thousands of goblins. They grow and eat mushrooms and lichen. They fish in underground lakes for blind frogs and fish. The goblins are constantly living on alert. He talked mostly about the horrors of The Endless Dark and why he fled.”

Blaze, also interested, asked, “What horrors?”

“Giant tunneling purple worms down there are a blessing and curse. They created a network of passages down there but are also nearly unkillable and mindless. Other than that, there are dark elves, kobolds, dwarves, hibernating dragons, and wandering monsters,” Maveith said, testing his memory.

“I don’t think I want to visit,” Blaze commented. Maveith huffed an amused breath.

Flavius nodded slowly, accepting the answer. “The last goblin uprising was a larger horde than anyone thought possible. If those from The Endless Dark reinforced them, then that makes sense.” He turned and started walking. “No matter. We will kill what goblins we find tonight.”

We passed a wagon of refugees every hour as we walked. Most were thin and dirty. I had no idea the duchess would handle the constant stream of people. The walk to the farm was just over four hours, and we waited for Flavius to talk to the farmer in the field for directions.

When Flavius returned, he explained, "The two buildings there are where the goblins have been raiding at night, chickens and piglets so far. But they will get more bold soon. The farmer has not seen them, but the tracks he found indicate there are maybe half a dozen. Eryk and I will explore beyond the fields, and you two can make camp in that building," he pointed.

I followed Flavius while Maveith and Blaze set up inside the building. As we walked, I scanned the ground with Flavius, looking for signs. Last night's light rain had softened the soil and made tracks difficult to see. Flavius pointed under some trees. "There. I can see the goblins cut the branches to make a path."

I nodded but did not see anything until we approached. The goblins were only three feet in height, so they cleared the lower branches. Flavius studied the small footprints under the tree. He looked up, "Lot of prints, but it could be the same goblin over and over. Definitely goblin prints and fresh. The farmer was right. I will go and tell him. Pick out some spots for snares."

As Flavius left, I was at a loss for choosing the best spots for snares. I didn't even know how to set snares. When Flavius returned, I told him as much, "I have never hunted with snares before. Can you show me?"

Flavius seemed a little annoyed but did explain. He pulled out some fine metal wire. "We will drive a stake into the ground to anchor one end of the wire. The other end, we make a loop like this." He demonstrated.

"And this will hold the goblin? Won't they just cut the wire?" I replied, holding a length of the thin wire.

"The green ones are too stupid. The wire cinches into a knot as well. Normally, I would use this for rabbits, but I have found it works just as well on goblins. They struggle, and the wire cuts into the flesh all the way to the bone, making it near impossible to remove without cutting deep into the leg," he explained. He dropped six prepared twenty-inch stakes from his pack. I helped him for the next hour, drove the stakes in with a rock, and set the wires so that the goblins likely triggered them. He only set the traps on their likely path of retreat into the woods, which I had not thought about.

It seemed a little cruel. I remembered the green goblins I killed in the stables. They seemed more like helpless children than anything. I also did not foresee any opportunity to harvest essence from the goblins we killed with my present company. It would be even more dangerous to use Durandus' collector with Flavius here.

After the midday meal, we returned to the barn where Maveith and Blaze had made camp. It was a livestock building with pigs, chickens, and goats. The smell was not appealing, but this was where we needed to be to confront the goblins. Flavius inspected the barn and pointed. "The windows. When they arrive, three of us will use the windows to catch them outside. Neptune willing, his tear will shine bright tonight, and we will have clear targets with our bows."

I looked and realized I would not be one of the three jumping out the window. Flavius, Blaze, and Maveith were all the archers in our group. I didn't even have a bow. Well, not a bow they knew about.

"We will not leave the barn again for fear of being spotted. Goblins rise about two hours before sunset and are active through the night," Flavius educated us.

Blaze complained, "I am going to smell like a pig. Are you sure we can't wait on the roof?"

Flavius looked up. "I doubt it could support your weight, definitely not the goliath's. We will wait under those windows, and when the sun sets, we will remain completely silent and wait."

We ate dinner. Maveith happily ate two of the ration bars I bartered with him. Blaze had packed our food. The overwhelming smell of the animals made the honey-sweet rolls, sugar beets, and sweet jerky not as tasty. I also guessed Blaze had a bit of a sweet tooth from his selection.

We whispered to each other as evening came. Flavius told the farmer our plan, so he was not going to visit the barn. It meant that we had to feed the animals, which somehow fell to me. I probably gave them too much, but they did not complain. The sky was clear when the sun set, Neptune's tear was soon bright, and we all went silent. The animals had become comfortable with us and were trying to sleep, making weird sounds from flatulence and constantly moving to get comfortable.

After an hour, I thought the goblins would stand us up. After two hours, I was sure of it. Then, one of the sows squealed in unhappiness, and her piglets made soft squeals, trying to hide under her. Other animals started to get anxious as well. The goblins must be near, and the animals could smell or hear them. We still waited for Flavius' signal. My job was to kill any goblin inside the barn. My hand was making my hilt sweaty as I waited perfectly still.

The barn door rattled as the goblins removed the simple bar holding it closed. I could hear them talking in their coarse language as they entered. They sounded suspicious. This would be the third night in a row they raided the same farm. They were not too bright as they entered anyway.

We waited as they entered the barn. A piglet squealed in dismay as it was seized by a goblin who ran out the door with it. The sow crashed in her stall, upset. Finally, Flavius yelled, "Now!"

I rushed out of my dark corner, tossing a glowstone from its black bag. I heard the windows open as the others made their way outside. In the barn's center were four short goblins and one much larger goblin. He was almost my height but still had green skin. The three small ones looked to him for guidance. He wielded something and rushed me.

He had a rusty long sword, which was a surprise in itself. I made an air shield to block his clumsy swing, then stabbed him in the throat. He dropped his sword and grabbed at my blade, sticking in his neck, surprised he had been struck so quickly. The three small greens bolted for the door now that their leader was dead.

I caught one in the back of the head as it ran, but the other two were through the door, and now the archer's problem. I searched the barn as I heard bow twangs outside and squeals of pain from the goblins. I found one tiny goblin, no taller than two feet in height, crouched in an empty pen. It was shaking so violently that I felt pity for it.

I could move the creature to my storage, but did I really want to bottom out my aether right now? We were in the middle of a fight. What would I even do with a goblin child? I was indecisive as the smell of urine became even more pronounced amongst the animals. "You are a fucking idiot, Eryk." I moved the goblin to my storage, bottoming out my aether.

I grabbed my glow stone and confirmed the rest of the barn was clear, and I joined the others outside. The blue water moon gave us enough light to see.

Maveith was retrieving an arrow from a goblin corpse, and Blaze and Flavius were walking toward the woods. It looked like a pair of goblins were caught in the snares we had set. "I got two; how many did you get out here?" I asked Maveith.

Maveith's deep voice came back. "Blaze got three, and Flavius and I two each. Four made it into the woods, and another two were caught." He pointed. I hustled to catch up to Flavius and Blaze.

Flavius hissed. "Caution, Eryk. There were more than I assumed. One of the ones we killed had a sling, too."

"One of the ones in the barn was as tall as me and had a sword," I replied.

"Hag's curses on us. A hobgoblin?" I just shrugged, not knowing what a hobgoblin was.

"Kill the two in the snares while we cover you," Flavius ordered.

I crouched and approached the woods, looking for movement in the shadows. The first goblin was trying to cut off his foot with a rusty knife, and I ended his torment with my blade. I almost tripped on another snare, reaching the second goblin. The second goblin was slightly smarter. It had dug up the stake and was carrying it into the woods, limping. But as soon as it stood, Blaze put an arrow into its throat.

I backed away from the woodline to talk with the others. Flavius had us return to the barn. "Two got away, but that is not a hobgoblin, at least. Looks like a half-breed between a red and a green."

Blaze asked, "What do we do?"

"We got eleven of them, and two got away. The world is a better place for it. Most likely, those two will not stop running till morning. We will bury the corpses in the morning," Flavius informed us.

"Do we have to sleep in the barn?" Blaze asked, hopeful of an alternative.

Flavius nodded. "Yes, it will be safer. We will scout the woods in the morning for tracks to make sure this pack of goblins is not much larger than the two that got away."

We dragged my two goblins outside and slept in the barn. The animals were upset all night due to the smell of blood, and I did not sleep well with the noise. The piglet that had been snatched by a goblin returned in the middle of the night, and Flavius volunteered me to go outside and bring it to its mother. When I came back inside, I noticed Flavius shifting in his bedroll by the window. I was immediately suspicious. Did he check on me? Was he thinking I might use the collector on the dead goblins? I was going to have to be cautious around him.

In the morning, we dug a trench while the farmer watched, satisfied with our work, dumped the bodies inside, and covered them in dirt. We walked the woods, and Flavius identified four sets of tracks fleeing away. We tracked them for half a mile before returning to the farm.

Flavius talked to the farmer, and then we started our walk back to Sobral. What was I going to do with a goblin child in my storage? It could make a nice distracting snack for a monster or a distraction. Or maybe I could try harvesting its essence?

When we arrived in Sobral, I looked forward to a bath and rest. Flavius went to make a report to Castile and the Duchess. I went to the kitchens as it was between midday and dinner. I still smelled like the barn, and they chased me out, handing me a plate of food. I found the common baths in the Citadel and washed up before climbing the Northwest Tower to get some much-needed sleep on the unoccupied floor below the alchemist. I was in a mostly hidden corner of the floor when I donned my amulet and fell into the dreamscape.

Chapter 109: The Duchess' Mother

I felt secure in my little corner of the tower as I entered the dreamscape. Oscar was there to greet me, and I gladly spent a few minutes rubbing his furry belly. I planned to limit my time in the dreamscape to just four hours unless I knew I would not be disturbed. I spent my time studying the spell form tonight. I wanted to learn slow aging as soon as possible. When I returned from the dreamscape, it was dark outside, and apparently, no one had found me bundled in the weasel pelts. Still mentally fatigued from the goblin hunt, I returned for four more hours of study in the dreamscape.

It was still dark when I came out the second time, but I could hear Decimus working above. He apparently liked to talk to himself when he was exhausted.

Eight hours in the amulet had washed away my fatigue like a full night's sleep. I climbed the stairs to help him until sunrise—and breakfast.

The smell of peppermint was strong in the room, and I was hopeful my mouthwash was among his processes. “Decimus, how goes the alchemy?”

The pink man jumped in surprise. “Eryk? I was told you were off killing goblins.”

“That was yesterday. Today, I am hoping to get my peppermint wash.” I sniffed around the room, walking toward the strongest scent of peppermint.

“Ah yes, I purified the lavender yesterday and started in on the peppermint oil this morning. Maybe another day or two. Do you want to see the process?” The excitable pink alchemist asked. I indicated he should proceed. “Just like the lavender, you grind up the leaves into a mash. Then you use the same equipment for the water purification, but this time, you need pressure to force the oil into the air.”

As he explained the process, he didn't understand the chemistry as much as a true scientist from Earth. I paid close attention; it was dangerous as hot liquids were under pressure as he worked. The final collection beaker had a slow drip of oil. I tapped the flask and tasked, “Why not cover the collection beaker? Couldn't dust contaminate it?”

Decimus' pupils, widened, surprised, “Are you sure you are not an alchemist? All my special collection beakers are being used.” He pointed at two tables that had a number of sealed beakers that were collecting fluids and gas from a maze of glass pipes.

He sniffed the peppermint oil, “This oil's purity is generally not as important in balancing the reaction. The wash is just one cup of pure water, eleven drops of lavender oil, twelve drops of peppermint oil, some concentrated hawthorn berry juice, and a pinch of sapphire dust. Stir and activate with a wisp of aether!” He stopped the collection of the peppermint oil by removing the flame and moving a few appartarus. “I guess I have enough to make some if you want to watch.” He smiled, his bright white teeth beaming.

“Show me your skills,” I encouraged the pink man.

I watched as he took a large glass cup and measured out the water, carefully pipetted drops of lavender, and then peppermint oil. Nothing magical had

happened. He took a pouch of powder and added a tiny pinch of the blue-white dust. "Sapphire dust," he informed me. He then rapidly stirred the mixture. He paused and dipped his finger in, and the mostly clear concoction suddenly sparkled blue and emitted a glow. The glow faded, and Decimus frowned.

"Did it not work?" I asked at his disappointment. The air smelled like a peppermint aerosol.

"No, it was a success. The ingredient harmonization was not very strong, though. The stronger the glow when the aether catalyzes the ingredients, the better the potion." He looked at his ingredients and mumbled to himself, "Probably didn't wash the leaves well enough."

I picked up the drink and sniffed it. A strong peppermint smell wafted from it. "So just take a sip, swish, and spit?" I asked reluctantly.

Decimus went to his alchemy book and read, "Peppermint wash is designed to cleanse the mouth and whiten teeth. A dose is one mouthful. Hold it inside for twenty heartbeats and spit it out. Do not swallow."

"Bottom's up." I raised the glass and took a mouthful; about a quarter of the concoction filled my mouth. I held it for a moment and felt the familiar taste of peppermint spread, saturating my taste buds. A tingling feeling spread through my gums and to my teeth. Decimus was watching me closely. He seemed to realize something and grabbed a bucket for me to spit into. I spit into the bucket and ran my tongue across my teeth. The minty feeling remained, and my teeth felt polished.

Decimus tilted his head to look in my mouth. I showed him my teeth, "Ah, great, it worked!" He exclaimed. "My first time trying to brew this potion. Your teeth are whiter, and your gums look healthier! I might have to try it myself," he mumbled softly, "After a few days, to ensure there are no side effects."

I kept running my tongue over my teeth. My mouth really felt better; it felt like I had just swished a healing potion around it. "Why is this potion not more popular?"

"It is in the capital. But the cost." He waved at his equipment, "I would charge maybe fifty silver for the two days of work involved in preparing the potion. And not all potions catalyze properly. If the aether didn't combine the lavender and peppermint, my two days of effort would have been wasted."

“Does that happen often? Failure?” I questioned.

He looked askance, “Not for me! I am quite good at monitoring the purification processes. But maybe the variant of peppermint I selected wouldn’t have harmonized with the lavender. Alchemy is very complex, legionnaire.”

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“How much to have you prepare me ten more cups?” I inquired.

Decimus frowned. “I don’t have time. This was a favor to you. Maybe after the winter when the herbs are fresh,” he offered. I sighed, took the cup with three doses remaining, and moved it to my dimensional space. Decimus frowned, realizing he wouldn’t get to try it.

“You said it has a short shelf life. Do you have a list of other things you need? I am supposed to keep you stocked,” I added, trying to plan out my day. The sky was graying from the early morning approaching. Decimus rapidly wrote a list on a torn piece of yellowing parchment, and I went to the dining room.

An unfamiliar servant directed me to the barracks on the east side of the Citadel. As I walked to the stone building, I realized that our company had been kicked out of the Citadel. Most of the company was inside the common room. Brutus chirped, seeing me, “Eryk, we thought you were caught in another clusterfuck with goblins.” I should have never taught him that word

I came and sat at his table with Felix, Firth, and Wylie. Everyone was smiling as they engaged me in conversation. Wylie asked, “How did the goblin hunt go? Blaze did not say much before he left to dig holes, and Flavius is never around.”

I pulled a jar of jam and bread toward me before answering, “It went well other than having to sleep in a barn. I think I can still smell the pigs on my clothes.” I leaned into Brutus, “Smell my breath.”

Brutus leaned away, interposing his hand to my mouth. “Is this some joke?” I grabbed his wrist, pulled it aside, and breathed into his face.

Brutus had been too slow to react. “What the...” he sniffed the air. “Is that mint? Been chewing on mint leaves? That gives you the shits, you know, Eryk.”

"No, it is a mouthwash the alchemist is working on. Fifty silver for four doses," I replied to my table.

Firth said disgusted, "Do not get that pink man sidetracked. I would much rather have a healing potion in hand when my guts are spilling out than minty breath." The table laughed and agreed with Firth.

In spite, I decided not to tell them about the importance of dental hygiene and asked, "So, how have things been on your end?"

Felix answered, "Great, now that the Duchess has been hiring the refugees to dig the holes. We just have four men out there guarding them now."

I asked, "How will she feed all these refugees during the winter? At the rate they are arriving, it does not seem sustainable."

Firth responded by slapping the table, "Exactly what I told Castile and the Duchess. Not that they listened to me. We have been patrolling the city at night to help the guard. Burglaries are starting to increase, and the citizens are blaming the refugees. Soon, things will boil over, I've seen it before."

Brutus shook his head. "He exaggerates. There have only been two thefts from homes in the last two days, no more than normal." He looked at me, "Maybe we can get you on a night patrol. I am sure a legionnaire with minty breath will pacify the angry populace."

Adrian came and joined us at the table. "Eryk, where did you sleep last night? I sent Benito to find you."

"I was in the northwest tower. We had a rough night handling the goblins. I just wanted some quiet." I said, finishing my meal.

"Northwest tower? Ah, yes, I talked to the duchess about that. She said it was fine, but there are no fireplaces. It was also stripped of furniture," Adrian informed me, chewing on his meal.

"I am fine with sleeping on the floor," I said after a little thought.

"Good, we will move all the scouts there and Maveith as well." Adrian laughed as I made an unhappy, surprised face. "Thought you would be alone?"

“Is Maveith part of the company, then? Has Konstantin returned then?” I asked.

The table got quiet, and Adrian shook his head. “Not yet. But the duchess has given the goliath permission to leave his service for Castile’s. As to Konstantin...he should have reported in by now.”

My heart raced a little in guilt. “Are we going to look for him, then?”

Adrian grimaced. “No. Other plans are being made. Scholar Favian has made progress.” I realized that Adrian’s grimace was twofold—one for Konstantin and one for the likelihood of having to enter the specter city of Caelora. “For now, you can find a bed somewhere to bring to the northwest tower and continue to help the alchemist.” His tone changed to commanding. “I do not want to hear you wandering off to look for Konstantin.”

I nodded in understanding. Adrian stood and left our table. “I could use some help carrying a bed to the northwest tower,” I asked my table. Everyone was suddenly done with breakfast and had somewhere else to be.

I found Maveith in the gardens and got him to help me carry a bed to the tower. Well, I had him carry the bed by himself, and I carried the musty-smelling mattress. I took a wooden bed from a dusty room in a wing of the Citadel. I probably should have asked, but people seemed busy, and the room had obviously not been used in some time.

Maveith was breathing heavily from the effort. “We need two more of these?” He was distressed as the heavy bed frame weighed nearly three hundred pounds and came in one piece. It was not fancy, just overbuilt.

“Three more if you want to sleep in the tower as well. Where have you been sleeping when you stay at the Citadel?” I asked while making the bed. I was not looking forward to sharing a room with Flavius.

Maveith said, “The old servant’s rooms.” He looked out the window, “This room does have a nice view.”

“We should get some heavy rope in case we need to escape out the window,” I said, looking out on the forest with Maveith.

“Why would you need to escape?” Flavius’ voice came from the stairs.

“You know, in case a dragon or some other creature was attacking the Citadel,” I replied smoothly.

Flavius studied the one bed in the room and looked across the space, maybe thirty feet across, with an archway to a circular staircase. “Dragon?” Flavius said, walking to a window. He looked down. “Maybe a rope wouldn’t be a bad idea. I will take care of it. Get me a bed?”

Maveith looked at me before agreeing, “Three more beds then.” He huffed and headed down the stairs. I followed him, and the next three beds were lighter and more manageable, but we were both coughing from the dust. After the midday meal, I finally made it into the woods with Maveith to forage for the alchemist. We returned before sunset.

The next four days proceeded with Maveith and I heading into the woods with Flavius. I rode and exercised Ginger while I searched with Maveith for ingredients. After four days, my mouth still felt clean and a little minty—the potion far exceeded my expectations.

Flavius split from us and went hunting, and we went foraging. All three of us searched for signs of Konstantin but did not find any. I used the amulet during the night, not expecting Flavius to grope me in my sleep. I also had Maveith’s bed next to mine, which was slightly of an error on my part. His loud breathing kept me awake if I tried to sleep without the amulet or an oblivion pill.

When we returned from the fourth day, there were forty soldiers and a number of wagons in the primary courtyard of the Citadel. They had blue and gold house colors. Brutus was with the gate guards, and we walked over to him. He explained, “Countess Asella Angella and First Citizen Boris Angella have arrived.” Brutus did not look too thrilled.

It had taken them a little longer to get here than expected. The countess was the Duchess’ mother, and Boris was her eldest brother. From what I had been told, the countess ruled a city near the border with the Bartiradians and thought it was a good time to visit her daughter with the war heating up. Things were about to get more interesting.

Chapter 110: Konstantin Returns

The soldiers for the countess were at attention and waiting for orders. They were all sneaking glances curiously at Maveith. Brutus looked to have been working with the Citadel gate guards. Brutus looked tired and asked, "I am done for the day. Do you mind if I spend some time with you in the alchemist tower?"

"You are welcome to. Maveith hauled up an old table and some seating a few days ago. Why don't you go steal something from the kitchen for us." I smiled knowingly at Brutus.

Brutus laughed at me. "Lareen still has the kitchen staff after you?"

I shrugged. "Well, Lareen is upset I have been avoiding her, and her anger has bled over to the kitchen staff. Last time I went for a snack, they just gave me the scraps they normally give the pigs."

Brutus laughed. "I will get us something good. I am guessing the kitchen staff will be focused on dinner for the esteemed guests."

I went to the stables to unsaddle Ginger and rub her down. As I finished with her, I told her, "Sorry, girl. No apples today." I held up a large yellow carrot. "Will this do?" Ginger sniffed it, considering the betrayal. She eventually took it from my hand, seeing that no apple would magically appear today. Apples had become hard to come by because the refugees had taken them all, clearing the small orchards.

Finished, I went up to drop off my harvest with the alchemist. Decimus' skin was just a light pink now, and he was hopeful in another two weeks, his skin would be back to normal. Decimus looked up from his work as I entered. Last night, he had fallen asleep and had blown up a boiling container. We had rushed up the stairs to find a mess, and Decimus was pulling shards of glass out of his skin. It allowed him to test his first batch of healing salve on himself. It worked, and our company would be getting the first healing paste from the alchemist soon.

Decimus smiled, still creepy even with pink skin. "Did you get it?"

"Yes," I said tiredly. I emptied my legion box from my dimensional space. Decimus eagerly sorted through the harvest. As the days cooled, some things were getting hard to find fresh in the woods. Decimus took the ginseng roots that had taken me three days to find with the help of Maveith.

The wild herb root was rare in the area. It was one of the ingredients Decimus needed for the lesser healing potion. The giant bee honey had arrived from the capital just yesterday, along with the special white leather Maveith needed to finish my manticore pouch. I knew he planned to finish it in secret and surprise me, so I pretended not to be aware it had arrived.

Decimus inspected the roots. “Amazing. This one is over thirty years old! This other one is about ten years. Great job. The peppermint wash is over there,” he waved his hands, shooing me away, focused on the root.

I went to the table and found a glass container with odd-shaped jagged holes. Decimus had a spell form that could repair items. The alchemist had tried to repair the exploded glassware but had not found all the shards yet. There were also four sealed containers of the peppermint wash on the table—about sixteen doses in total. The wash freshened breath, whitened teeth, and restored gums and teeth as a minor healing potion—dental hygiene at its finest.

By my estimation, each dose lasted three to four days and could be spaced out even further. My agreement with Decimus was he would work on the peppermint wash on the side if I helped him for a few hours at night, supervising the extraction of peppermint and lavender oils. He had too much work for the Duchess and Castile to work on my wash. Well, he was also working on a number of processes for his own work to sell eventually.

I descended the tower to find Mavith munching on a ration bar and sitting on a bench at the large oak table. He really did like those bars. A took a seat and slid him one of the peppermint containers. “This is it?” Maveith asked.

“Yeah, it should remove the yellow from your teeth and fix the toothache you mentioned,” I replied. “Don’t swallow it. Just swish it a bit and then spit it out the window.”

Maveith broke the wax seal and sniffed the wash. His nose scrunched at the strong, minty wave that hit his nose. He took a pull, taking a double dose to fill his sizable mouth, and started swishing. His eyes went wide as the wash worked. After I counted to twenty, I said, “Go spit it out.” Maveith walked to the window and spat out a mist of used wash. He looked down and quickly closed the window.

Maveith looked guilty. “A pair of guards were walking the wall below.”

I just burst into laughter as Maveith slowly smiled. I commented, "Your teeth do look look much whiter. How is the tooth?" I inquired while still letting loose my mirth at the unfortunate guards.

Maveith sucked his teeth and tested them with his tongue. He found the one that had plagued him. "It doesn't hurt. My mouth feels cold and fresh. Thank you, Eryk." He pushed the remaining half of the wash toward me.

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"Keep it. Use it again in four days. Decimus thinks the efficiency will fade in five days, so use it before then. He is slowly working out ways for better purity of ingredients, too," I said, letting him keep the remaining wash. The other three jars were secured in my dimensional space for use.

Brutus arrived up the stairs carrying a pack. Mateo was behind him, bear-hugging a small cask. Mateo had a grin on his face "Got us a cask of ale."

Brutus thumbed his direction in the Mateo. "Found this one moping about no longer having a servant to tend his needs at night and having to do his own laundry. Hope you don't mind."

Mateo put the heavy cask on the sturdy table. It was maybe ten gallons. Brutus put his own heavy pack of food on the table. Mateo looked around the room. "Nice place. Are we going to play cards or dice?"

"Checkers?" Maveith offered, hopefully. I had found the checkers board and taught Maveith to play, and now he wanted to play every night. Flavius had corrected the rules I taught Maveith. Once a piece was 'crowned,' it could move one or two spaces instead of one I was familiar with. It created some interesting strategy in the end game, as the crowned piece was unkillable on the edges.

Mateo nodded. "Sure, Maveith." Maveith gleefully went to get the board and pieces.

Brutus had walked around the room and looked out the windows. It was his first time up here. He eventually came back and unpacked his bag. He pulled two loaves, ceramic and glass jars filled with interesting jams and pickled vegetables, a whole roasted chicken, four goblets, and six plates. I was left with tapping the small cask of ale. I only had to remove a round plug on the

cask, which took me a few moments. I filled the top-heavy goblets, spilling some ale on the floor, and distributed them.

We started to eat the pre-dinner snack. As we ate, Brutus asked, "How is it living with Flavius up here?"

"Fine, we talk a little at night about his day's hunt, but he keeps to himself mostly," I noted, cleaning a greasy wing.

Brutus shrugged. "Did he go through your things, too?"

My perplexed vision had Mateo chime in as he lost the first game to Maveith. "Felix caught him going through Brutus's pack while you were getting the alchemist."

Brutus stated confidently, "He was looking for Durandus' collector. I confronted him after. Don't know why he thought I had it. Thought he might have searched your things as well."

I shrugged, unconcerned, "Maybe. Most days, my pack is left by my bed. Haven't noticed anything out of place." A lot of thoughts went through my head. Was Flavius working for Sebastian to find the collector? Was the goblin hunt a setup to catch me using the collector? Was being placed to live in the tower to bunk with him a chance to keep an eye on me.

We ate, and we all got defeated by Maveith at checkers. As the sun set, Flavius returned from his hunt. He looked over our little group, and Mateo asked, "What did you get today?"

Flavius noted indifferently, "Just a small buck. Kitchen is butchering it now." He helped himself to the cask of ale, taking Brutus' cup. "Are you two now bunking up here now?"

Mateo answered, "Wouldn't mind it. Benito snores, and Kolm's boots smell like an overripe block of cheese."

"You should have him see the alchemist. Decimus has something for that," I said, standing. "Are we going to head to the barracks for the evening meal with the company?"

As we walked to the barrack's dining hall for soldiers on the other side of the Citadel, there was a lot of activity, with servants running everywhere to host. I

asked, "A lot of work for just two people. The duchess must really want to impress her mother."

Mateo smirked. "Not what I heard. The duchess was not happy about her mother coming, but there was nothing she could do."

Brutus added, "She was even more upset by her brother coming. At least, that is what Saphron told me she overheard. She hates her brother fiercely, and he is her parent's favorite child. I doubt he is happy that his sister now has a higher rank than himself and their parents. Her father is a baron who oversees some farming villages but did not travel with the Countess because he has a mistress he prefers."

Flavius was walking behind us and overheard, "You shouldn't be spreading rumors about First Citizens. It is a good way to gain their ire." Brutus just shrugged, as gossip was the best entertainment the men got.

We reached the dining room, and the company had already served the meal. I noted that Castile, Adrian, and Delmar were not here. My small group sat with Firth and Wylie. They welcomed us as we sat.

"Any news?" Flavius asked Firth.

Firth had a habit of knowing things he shouldn't know. "Bit of a spat with the duchess and her mother. The countess wants to quarter her personal guard in the Citadel, but both barracks are occupied." He smiled. We all laughed at the table as we occupied one of the barracks, and the Citadel guard we were training occupied the other.

Firth drank and added, "The countess also brought some twenty attendants with her, and there is a major scramble in the kitchens to feed everyone. The influx of some sixty mouths into the Citadel is causing the kitchens to go into a frenzy with lack of staff."

Blaze joined us from another table. "The countess' guards are still standing in the courtyard. Poor sods." No one at the table mentioned there was plenty of room in the barracks for both Castile's company and the household guard for the countess. We had all recently been evicted from our luxury accommodations to accommodate their arrival and were not about to do them any favors.

The conversation turned to the training of the city and Citadel guards, and I only half paid attention as I ate. I was still puzzling out how much interest Flavius might have in me. After returning his coin and the goblin job, I thought we were on good terms, but now I was not certain. I was getting ready to head back up to the alchemist tower when a runner from the Citadel gate came in.

The runner was one of the young guards we were training. He had just run here and was breathing heavily. "Come quick! One of your men has returned, and he needs help!"

We all stood immediately and rushed out of the dining hall, not needing another word. We all thought that maybe the men guarding the hole diggers had come under attack, but instead, we found Konstantin at the gate, slumped on the ground inside the archway. His arm was in a filthy sling, and the right side of his face was burned, blistered, and cracked. Dried blood marred his armor and face, making him a grotesque site. His armor was completely blackened on the right side.

Konstantin was barely conscious as six men carried him back to the barracks. Someone went to get potions from the alchemist. Wylie was sent to get Castile, and we waited. Just what in the hell had happened to Konstantin?

Chapter 111: The Summoner

Konstantin's body was a mess as we brought it into the barracks. The company huddled around as he was placed on a table and his body stripped. The smell of burnt flesh and charred leather was strong among the stink of days in the woods. His leather bracers had bite marks on them, and when removed, bloody, partially scabbed-over puncture marks were underneath. Lirkin checked the forearm, "Bone is broken. Get the healer in the city if someone has not been sent already." Felix immediately took off at a run, his footfalls echoing on the stone.

Konstantin groaned, and Lirkin whispered to him, "You got back, you tough bastard. We will heal you in a day, and you can return to being your old cantankerous self." Konstantin's dry throat tried to speak. Lirkin leaned down and put his ear to the man to hear. Lirkin stood after listening and informed us what he said, "He found the summoner. It set a pair of hell hounds on him."

A lot of whispers rang through the men as no one seemed to know what a hellhound was. Castile walked purposely in at this moment with Adrian behind her. She answered the question I had. "A hellhound is an infernal dog, not from this plane of existence. It is a summoned creature that is a relentless tracker. Konstantin," Castile stood over Konstantin, taking in his abused body and getting his attention, "are the hounds who pursued you dead?"

Konstantin painfully nodded his head in the affirmative. Castile nodded. "And the summoner? Is he dead, too?"

Konstantin shook his head negatively, not being able to speak loudly. Castile grimaced. She put his hand on his shoulder. "Everyone get some rest. I will wait with Konstantin for the healer and potions." Adrian shuffled everyone away. As I walked away, I felt guilty for not going with Konstantin on his scouting mission. Maybe he would not be in such terrible shape if I had accompanied him.

I returned to the tower with Flavius and Maveith. Flavius talked as we went, "Summoners and hell hounds, bad omens. I guess we will be marching soon and hunting the summoner. Best to get some rest." When we got to our tower floor, the empty bed we had brought up here for Konstantin was apparently going to be filled soon.

I lay down in my bed, and my mind flashed to Konstantin. I recalled his return. He was in terrible shape, but he also did not have his pack or his weapons. His artifice sword was missing, and I imagined it was out there somewhere, stuck inside some fiery beast. I did not use the amulet as I settled down tonight but did take an oblivion pill to stave off nightmares I knew would haunt me. If I didn't, I would imagine myself looking just like Konstantin.

I was awakened in the morning by a familiar horse voice, "Eryk, you can sleep through anything. Get up. It is time for breakfast and some training." Konstantin's voice was raspy, but it was definitely him.

"Love you too, Konstantin. Glad you are not dead...or perhaps you are a revenant back from the dead to hound me." I said, smirking at my joke.

Maveith laughed in his deep voice, "That is a good twisting of the words, Eryk. Hound because a hellhound almost killed him."

I opened my eyes to see Konstantin standing over me, grinning. His face was gaunt, and his eyes sunken. "You look like an ogre just shit you out." His grin faded.

"I am still fit enough to teach you a thing or two in the practice yard," he rasped out with his dry voice.

"With what? I didn't see your magic blade on you yesterday," I said and immediately regretted it. Konstantin's face fell in some remembered pain, and maybe it was too soon to be needling him.

He finally said, "I preferred my life over the blade. Still might be able to reclaim it if Castile marches us to hunt the summoner."

Flavius was already dressed in his armor and at the table in the room, "So you found the elven summoner, Traeliorn Kelran?"

Konstantin moved to sit across from him. "No, I don't think so. The elf with the hellhounds appeared too young." Flavius was about to interject, but Konstantin stopped him, "I know elves age really slowly. This one was young; he was no ancient and powerful sorcerer." Flavius grunted in acceptance of his words.

I sat up in bed and looked out the window, and the sun was just turning the sky. I sighed and started dressing. I looked at Konstantin, "I can't believe they healed you up, and you are ready to go again."

"The summoner is a real threat, Eryk. Castile was doing a message sending to the Legatus Legonis office this morning. Most likely, they will order us after him," Konstantin said seriously. Flavius nodded at the table in agreement.

"So we need to get ready to fight more hellhounds? Is that how you were burned?" I inquired as I put on my armor.

Konstantin rubbed the side of his face, which had pink new skin, "Don't know about more hounds." He held up his arm, and a memory of pain flashed on his face, "Yes, one grabbed my arm, and the other breathed fire on me. If I hadn't been able to dose myself in a nearby pond, I would be dead."

Maveith boomed from across the room, interested in the story, "How did you escape?"

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Konstantin shifted in his seat at the table, "I was looking at the summoner from a good mile away. He was setting up a ritual circle. I was deciding whether to try and sneak close and get him with my bow when the two hounds I didn't see caught my scent from a cursed mile away."

Konstantin exhaled angrily, "I dropped from the tree and ran. They caught me in no time, even though I was dropping myconid spores. One grabbed my arm while the other breathed its fire on me. Drove my sword into the mouth of a breather. Had to let go due to the heat. The one biting my arm tried to go for my throat." He looked around at us, "I was half on fire at this point, and the dog I was wrestling was unscathed. It was a struggle, but I got a dagger in its neck and forced myself into a pond to cool off." He chuckled dryly.

"Then you dragged yourself back here?" Maveith said in awe.

"No, didn't quite kill the second. Swam across the pond, and it stalked me, but it was bleeding out. Giant leeches in the pond forced me out. I was at a disadvantage without my bow or sword, but the hellhound didn't attack. I forced myself to run and figured the beast was smart as it tried to exhaust me. I hoped it would bleed out from the wound on its neck. Eventually, I won the contest of wills." Konstantin did not sound smug, just exhausted at the retelling.

"We should get down to breakfast, or Benito will eat all the butter-honey buns left over from the Duchess' dinner," Flavius noted.

The four of us made our way to the barracks. I was half expecting to see the Countess' soldiers in here with us, but it was just our company. As Favius had predicted, Benito had a plate stacked three high of the dessert buns, Blaze, next to him, the same. Everyone came up to Konstantin and said they were glad he was already on his feet.

Linus brought him two plates stacked with food, "Konstantin, no complaints. I want you to finish both plates before leaving the hall. You had a lot of healing done last night from the healer and potions."

"Where is my plate?" I asked with a smirk at Linus.

"Next time you drag yourself in here half-burned with a dozen broken bones, I will get your food for you, too," Linus returned with a mock challenge.

"I hope that day never comes," I said, headed to the buffet table with Maveith. Maveith just took one of the serving trays from under the food as his plate, grinning while he did. From the look of it, the spread was mostly leftovers from last night's dinner in the Citadel, but no one seemed to mind. The Duchess still wanted to impress her mother even if she did not want her here.

While we were stuffing our faces, Castile entered on her heels with Delmar and Adrian. She looked around the room, and her face was stern and not happy. Adrian walked over to Flavius, and I heard them say, "After Castile finishes, go head out and get the four men guarding the crew laying the province border stones." Flavius nodded sharply at the order.

Castile addressed everyone present, "I sent Konstantin's report to the Legatus Legonis. He has ordered us to locate the Bartiradian summoner and end him. Master Mage Sebastian and two of his legionnaires will join us in three days on drakes." The company stirred a little at the announcement. "We will also be joined by High Mage Zyna, but she will bring no legionnaires. Sebastian will transport High Mage Zyna, and they will find us in the wilds. No Hounds will be coming to help search for him." Flavius' eyes had snapped to Castile on Sebastian's name. I couldn't see his face to read his reaction to seeing Sebastian again.

Castile continued as our company started whispering louder, "We will leave after the mid-day meal. Delmar will get a load out for your packs prepared. The summoner was last spotted fifty miles northwest of here."

"Is this normal?" I asked Konstantin, who was working on his second plate and apparently already aware of what Castile was going to say.

"Hunting an enemy mage within the Empire borders?" He asked with a cocked eyebrow trying to act like I asked a stupid question.

Flavius answered my question directly, "Usually, it would be three full mage companies hunting an enemy mage with two or three squads of Hounds in support to track the mage. High Mage Zyna is a powerful battle fire mage, but used to teach at the Mage College. I was not aware she could be called on for a hunt like this."

Konstantin added what he knew while shoveling food in his mouth, "The Hounds already lost a squad searching for the summoner. I am not surprised Cornelius is not sending help. He would only have five squads left in all the Eastern Empire, and I am sure he is being kept busy around Macha countering the Bartiradian Rangers."

Flavius exclaimed, "Just five! There should be ten in the east!"

Konstantin shrugged, "I talked to him after Macha. He lost two squads chasing down a rouge mage commander before Macha. One squad retired a few months back, and another is...not available. He has over twenty men in training," he gave me a sidelong glance, "But none are ready to put into the field."

Flavius relaxed some at the explanation, "It is one the most dangerous jobs in the Empire." Konstantin just nodded but did not tell him he used to be a Hound. "But just five squads left?" Flavius shook his head in disbelief and left. He had to make a long trek to get our men out supervising the digging of holes.

I went to the tower with Maveith while Konstantin was forced to stay behind and eat the rest of his food. I packed quickly, thinking we were going to be gone for a while. Maveith just watched me, and I tightly rolled one of the weasel pelts inside an oiled tarp I used for my tent. I asked him, "Are you not going to come?"

Maveith sat on his bunk, sighing, "I was not asked to go."

I looked at him sharply, "Maveith, do you want to come and hunt a powerful mage that can summon creatures of nightmares and legends?"

He put on a broad smile, "Yes! Traveling with you is always interesting." He began to pack his things, and I shook my head in disbelief. If I had been given a choice, I most definitely would not be going.

We arrived in the courtyard, and Delmar had bundled food for us and a few changes of socks and undergarments. Mateo quipped at seeing the houseguards of the Countess, "Never got an apology from the Countess for kicking us out of our rooms." Everyone laughed merrily.

Delmar smirked at Mateo's comment, "Why don't you carry the ration packs for the four men Flavius is retrieving." He groaned as it was almost forty

pounds. He did not end up carrying it, as Felix, Maveith, and I each took one of the four bundles.

We didn't have to wait long before Castile was outside with Adrian. Adrian arched an eyebrow at me, "Thought you would be riding your horse, Eryk."

"I can do that?" I asked, ready to bolt for the stables and saddle Ginger.

"Too late now," he smirked as he was clearly joking.

Castile added seriously, "She would just be used to carry supplies, Eryk. Leave her behind. It is safer for her." That ended any argument. We were soon walking down the road northwest along the river. We were going to meet up with Flavius and the others before following Konstantin into the Wilds to find the elusive summoner.