

A Soldier's Life

Chapter 11: Knowledge is Power

Mateo was coming back from dinner with Felix. They were loud as they hit their own bunks, discussing some card game they were playing during the meal. "Where is the mage?" I asked.

"Still eating. She is down in the common room," Mateo said. He then advised as I rolled painfully to my feet, "Do not get too close. Mages, even pretty ones, are look, but don't touch, Eryk."

"It's cool. I just wanted to ask her some magic-related questions. You know, between mages," I said with a knowing smile as I stiffly walked out of the room, wincing with each step.

The stairs were hard, and I almost fell. Fucking Konstantin had targeted my right hip flexor to teach me how to cripple an opponent. The muscle was all knotted, and I rubbed it to get it working when I reached the stairs' bottom. The common room was mostly empty because it was late, and we had an early start. Renna was studying one of her books at a table by herself, and I sat across from her. She was young. Late teens, I would guess. She looked up at me, making eye contact, but did not speak.

"I wanted to ask some questions about the book you are reading. And here is your disc back. I got it to work, and it was as I expected," I said, sliding the artifact across the table. She put it in her satchel.

"What questions do you have?" she closed the book and gave me her attention.

"What is in the book? Does it detail the common spell forms you can make from each affinity?" I asked, knowing the title was about all twenty-one magic affinities.

"Yes, it does. Having the associated spellbook does greatly aid in the process." She pulled out a thin spellbook that I did not catch the title of, "I am trying to learn one of the more difficult spell forms for the earth affinity. It is called hardened rock. Extremely useful in construction. Also paired with the

High Mage's earth-to-stone, it makes trapping burrowing creatures easy." Renna explained.

"What about the other common spell forms? Like fire?" I asked, slowly getting to the information I wanted to know.

"It depends on your affinity strength. With my high affinity, I will probably be asked to form my fire into wave of flame or flaming meteor. Both are very difficult to learn," Renna said with a tired voice. "I will not know until I am assigned to a High Mage specializing in fire." I felt sorrow for her. Even though she was powerful, she did not control what she was learning.

"I am sure you will do it. You have the talent and affinity for it! I mean, you can fly!" I praised her. "What about healing? What are the typical spell forms for that sphere of magic?" I asked. Was I being too obvious with my interest? I needed to know, though. There was a risk of manifesting an ability much weaker than your affinity could manage, so I wanted to reach for the limit. Although, I didn't know my affinity in healing magic, other than it was over 15.

She opened the book and paged to a specific page. I looked at the writing and was frustrated. I could read it, but my brain was still very slow in translating the script. I would have to puzzle out each word one at a time and then read the sentence like a first grade. Thankfully I had someone to read for me, "There are three tiers. The lowest tier has three options listed here. Mend bone, knit flesh, and diagnose. This lowest tier is for those with affinities under 20."

She read for a while, then said, "The next range is for those with the affinity between 20 and 50. It has three possible aspirations for manifesting a spell form. A cure wounds that also affects organs and all flesh but does not do well with broken bones. A purify, which is weird. According to this, it can remove poison, disease, and even cleanse your bowels. The third one is calcify; it repairs and hardens bones. The highest tier is for affinities between 50 and 70. The first is a powerful heal. It heals everything, flesh, bone, and disease. The only other only ability is called rejuvenate. It turns back the aging clock slightly."

She looked up from her book. "Not all spell forms are listed in here." She turned over the book in her hands, "This is just what the mage college suggests as being the most useful."

I nodded, "Sometimes it is fun to wonder what it would be like if I had high affinities for other magic spheres," I explained my interest. I asked about

celestial affinity next, listening intently as she read and explained. Then I went to my true goal, the affinity for convergence.

“Convergence? That is extremely rare. Not even sure if there is anything in here.” She flipped to the correct page. “The lowest tier is just helping recover aether from the environment. At ley line nexus, the mage essentially has infinite aether. As long as they don’t burn out their aether channels.”

“Anything for higher tiers, for a stronger higher affinity?” I tried to hold back my excitement.

“Uh, let me read. Give me a moment,” She was having fun and liked our interaction. I guess I was kind of flirting with her. “The mid-tier for convergence suggested here is some type of aether sight.” That is definitely not something I had gained. She continued, “Wow, the highest tier is called assimilation. It allows the mage to maximize their benefit for consuming essences. It makes absorbed essences ten times more effective—maybe even more! Now that would be useful!”

Yes, it would, I thought. Is that why the only essence I had absorbed had been so effective? I had gained four quickness and even raised my potential in quickness by one in three weeks after consuming the essence. But the lesser essence was only supposed to give a relative effect boost of one-twentieth of a point. Did this have to do with my affinity being so high at 74?

I asked about charm affinities next but was only half paying attention to Renna when she looked it up. After she reviewed them, we went to the room to get some sleep. I lay there thinking and heard her shifting all night in the bunk below me. I had given her the lower bunk to make it easier for her but regretted it as the entire bunk shook when she moved. She probably was not comfortable sleeping without a mattress. I took my heavy blanket and passed it to her below. She hesitated before taking it and getting comfortable.

It was cool but not cold. It was pitch black, and I removed one of the horse blankets from my dimensional storage. I lay there wide awake staring at the ceiling. I needed to get more essence. Mage Castille had an essence array—the artifact shield used to extract the essence from recently killed creatures. Her legionaries were rewarded for outstanding performance, so maybe I could get some. But I also needed an ability tablet to see my growth to test it out. Shit, if I didn’t know they could track me, I might desert. For now, I was trapped for five years of service. At least as long as all my debt was paid off, I would be free after that.

I fell asleep dreaming about my two unknown affinity ratings. How high were my healing and guardian affinities? They seemed too perfect for my career as a soldier. I needed to get access to a magic affinity tablet again. I also needed to practice reading to get familiar with the different characters. Reading like a seven-year-old, deciphering each word one at a time, was frustrating.

It felt like I had just closed my eyes when a hand slapped my bed, “Wake up, you two. Breakfast will be served shortly, and Castille likes to leave at dawn.” It was Mateo who was smiling brightly at my discomfort. “You should not take Lucien’s blankets for the horses, Eryk. He does not like that.”

I gingerly climbed down from the top bunk. Moving was painful. I packed my things and stumbled down the stairs after Felix and Mateo, sending the blanket to my space when I knew I was not being looked at. Renna was slightly slower than me. The common room was crowded, and everyone was packing saddle bags and forcing down food. I went to the meal table and got a large pocket pita again filled with meat and melty cheese. I was also given another sandwich wrapped in a waxy substance. I was told it was my mid-day meal.

I drank heavily from the water barrel and filled my canteen as well. Outside, the sky was just starting to break with pink hues. I quickly saddled Ginger and was one of the first ones ready to leave. Just as the large sun appeared in the distance, we moved out. I was directed to ride behind Castille and her two lieutenants, Adrian and Delmar. Renna increased her pace to ride next to me.

I talked to Renna about magic but focused my attention on her, asking her about her life before becoming a mage. With Mage Castille being in earshot, I did not want to give any hints of my specific interests.

Renna grew up in a small village. Her father was a sheep herder, and her mother made wool yarn. She described the long process from shearing to cleaning to sorting to carding to spinning. I pretended to be enthralled with her descriptions and asked in-depth questions about the process. A few hours later, we were at the base of the mountains, where the team indicated they noticed the griffons returning with a kill.

I asked, “If they are already returning with a kill, doesn’t that mean they are feeding their young?”

It was Konstantin who answered my question from the back, “No. Too early in the season. The mated pair take turns hunting while the other guards the

clutch of eggs. Justin may be an idiot, but his pathfinder Marius is one of the best. They came early in the season. It should be another two months before they hatch.”

Castille nodded to Konstantin for the information and then addressed the company, “We are leaving the horses here.” A wave of groans came. I was also dreading the climb. “Lucien, Donte, and Benito will stay with the horses.” The horses would also have trouble in the steep climbs and make too much noise.

Donte and Benito nodded and dismounted. I was a little upset as I had been training to be a horse master, but I guess since I carried the company’s potions, I needed to be with the lead element. Mateo helped me pack my backpack for two days as we just wanted the essentials to keep the pack as light as possible. When we started the climb, I had trouble keeping up, not because I was out of shape but because I was so bruised.

Renna was in worse shape than me. She was sucking wind and slowing our ascent up the game trails. On difficult sections, she would use short bursts of her flight ability. It got everyone asking jokingly for a ride. Castille eventually had everyone end the comments as they were starting to border on lewdness.

When we reached a summit, Castille let us eat our lunch. I collapsed hard and devoured my meal. Renna sat with me, but we didn’t talk. We just ate. Orson, one of the scouts, pointed in the distance. A few miles away, a griffon was circling another peak further into the mountains. Damn, that looked so far away.

We descended into a narrow valley, and Orson found a maybe a month-old campsite. I asked him how he determined that. He showed me the fire pit, the decomposition of the shit in the woods, and the regrowth from where the adventurers cleared for space their camp.

We didn’t pause long before heading to the far side of the wooded valley. Konstantin was next to me, and I asked, “Why haven’t creatures attacked us?”

“Our party is too big. They are scattering before us. They are out there. Do not wander off alone,” he lectured me.

I nodded as the valley ended, and we started to make another ascent.

Chapter 12: Griffin

As we made our way up the next mountain, Renna paused to pee out of sight of the company. I was tasked with keeping close to her by Delmar. So I stood sentry while the embarrassed young woman did her business. When she emerged, I switched with her, and she was embarrassed with having me around the corner. I choose a different rock to hide my business behind. I decided to try experimenting with my dimensional space while I relieved myself. I tried to remove just a five-foot cylinder of the stone that I was painting in front of me. It took time for me to get the visualization, and then...

I stumbled back, dizzy, and accidentally urinating on myself a little. I looked up, and a five-foot round opening extended ten feet into the mountain. My aether was drained, though. The same thing happened when I killed the bulette. I guessed the aether investment depended on the mass of the object. Since I didn't have enough aether, it just cut off the object where it was. The edge of the round hole was extremely sharp. I also had a large stone cylinder in my dimensional space. Would it take all my aether to remove it? Or was the drain mostly from removing the object? I had no aether to test right now, so I finished, cleaned up as best I could, and joined Renna, who was bright red and avoided eye contact. Three men had waited for us, and we caught up to the main group.

As the sun set much later in the day, we set up camp on the rocky ground under an overhang to hide us from above. I had night duty guard rotation with Mateo and Felix. We had the worst shift—right in the middle of the night, breaking up our continuous sleep. We heard some rocks tumble down from far above, but nothing disturbed our camp during the night. In the morning, Mage Castille addressed us as a group.

“The nest is about three miles toward the rising sun. When we get close, be on alert. The griffons will attack when they feel they are threatened. We will handle them one at a time. I will ground them with magic, and we will attack them together. Beware of the powerful lunge on the ground. Even with their wings restrained, they will be quick.” She followed her short speech by giving the order to march. I was placed in the middle of the company with Renna for protection.

The morning was cold, and my aches and pains were subsiding as my body was adapting. Renna was quiet as we walked in silence. The forward unit

found a large game trail that appeared to head in the direction we wanted. We stayed on the trail, and the summit where the nest was located was in sight.

The company stopped at a cave, and Konstantin was talking animatedly to Castille. I am assuming he had already scouted the cave, and I moved closer to listen.

Castille queried Konstantin, "Do you think he descended?"

Konstantin shrugged, "They definitely camped at the entrance and could have gone to the griffins or into the dungeon."

Delmar swore, "What the fuck is a dungeon doing out here anyway? How is there even enough aether to feed it?"

Mage Castille did not seem irritated at all. She answered calmly, "The ley lines run deep and sometimes bled out in unusual places. The question is, where did the baron's son go?"

Adrian spat on the ground, "The dungeon would have been suicide. I could see that idiot Justin trying it. I say we return and tell his father he died in a wild dungeon." Castille arched her eyebrow at her lieutenant. He threw up his hands in defeat, "Fuck. We are all going to die."

Mage Castille spoke with command, "We will camp outside the dungeon entrance, and we will do as planned. We will kill the griffons, search the nest, and collect the eggs." She looked at her two lieutenants. "If we don't find the remains of the baron's party, I will consider entering the dungeon to look there."

Delmar nodded, and Adrian grunted unhappily. Orders were sent down the line to enter the cave. As we entered, torches were lit, and we filed in. About seventy feet into the cave, it stopped with a black oily flat surface. The area before the chamber had an abandoned campsite. Seven single-person tents, a large fire ring, and bedrolls were left inside the tents with some backpacks. Adrian swore again and said in a low grunt, "Those fuckers definitely went into the dungeon."

The tents were large and nicer than ours—so were all the bedrolls. Some legionnaires started claiming better equipment. I moved to a tent near the black wall and tossed my pack inside. Mateo was close and smirked, "You can definitely take it, Eryk, as long as the original owners don't show up. Just

realize that tent and bedroll weigh twice as much as your legionnaire-issued gear.”

Renna set up her tent next to mine and seemed kind of shy about it. My new tent was definitely big enough for two and had flaps for privacy. But maybe I was being too optimistic. As everyone settled in, I asked, “So, what do you know about that.” I pointed at the oil-slick-looking wall in front of Renna.

She paused, unpacking her gear, “Just what I read. I grew up in a small village, and my education so far has focused on learning spell forms and how to cast spells.”

Renna sat on a stone. “Dungeons are concentrated aetheric essence given sapience. The ley lines that run under the earth carry vast amounts of aether. The aether bleeds out and permeates the world. When it builds up in an area, the aether mutates creatures and creates passages and rooms. The monsters changed are very strong. But they always produce an essence when a collector is used on them. This,” she pointed to the black wall, “Is how they attract the adventurous type.”

“So the dungeons are alive?” I asked Renna. “Should we be camping so close to that? Is that the entrance?”

Adrian joined us, sitting next to Renna, “Yes, that is the entrance, Eryk. Dungeons are alive, but the creatures that enter are killed, absorbed, and then repurposed. Dungeons only appear at ley line nexus points. This one appears to be an anomaly.”

Castille joined us as well, “The lines run deep, and not all have been mapped, Adrian. There could be a nexus beneath us.”

I pulled out some food and started eating, content to just listen. Adrian focused on Castille and added, “The monsters inside are strong. Only idiots travel into the dungeons seeking a big payday.”

Castille seemed annoyed with Adrian’s reluctance to explore the dungeon. “Do not worry, Adrian. If we go in, you can remain outside and guard the camp.” That made Adrian wince as it was a backhanded reprimand.

Castille turned to me, “Dungeons are blessings and curses,” Adrian was nodding in agreement. “They can stretch for miles into the earth, always going down. Whatever being controls them, they try to entice adventurers to explore

them. All the creatures give essence, and the dungeon leaves prizes. Usually precious metals or recreating objects they have absorbed in the past.” This all sounded very familiar. Maybe not ideal video game mechanics, but the general idea was there.

I swallowed some salty jerky and cheese and asked, “What benefit does a dungeon get from drawing in adventurers? Can you kill a dungeon? Stop it from working?”

Castille answered, “Yes. Destroying the solidified aether core is possible. Usually, the adventurers guild would evaluate a dungeon’s usefulness before going to that step.” Castille stood, “When someone dies in a dungeon, the dungeon benefits but absorbs the gear and the corpse. It helps them get stronger and expand. If the dungeon is smart, it will balance the lure and guillotine. Finish your food. We have enough daylight to move on the griffin nest.”

Orders were given, and six men stayed behind. That meant mages Castille and Renna were going with seventeen legionaries. It was great to drop the heavy gear. I carried a spear and had my two short swords tied to my back. I wanted them out of the way in case I needed to run. We moved out down the game trail, and after an hour, Konstantin screamed, “On the sun, it’s diving!”

We all turned and focused upward. It was difficult to see, but something was definitely getting larger. I took cover behind a rock and angled my spear up. The griffin was big with a thirty-foot wingspan. It was targeting Mateo, and I thought he was a goner as massive talons extended out. Castille cast some wispy black lines that zipped toward the creature and wrapped its body and wings.

The creature screeched in anger as it suddenly had trouble flapping its wings. The creature crashed into the ground and slammed into someone I couldn’t identify. Orders were suddenly being shouted. “Attack!” “Blue-potion!” “Encircle it!” “Keep an eye out for the other one!” Oh, the potion request was for me! I grabbed the potion from storage and ran to the downed man. My only focus was getting the potion into his mouth. The violent sounds of combat rang nearby, but I did my job. The man’s bones started moving into the correct place.

Castille knelt next to me a minute later, and I looked up. The griffin was bloody and in its death throes. It was calling for its mate. Castille said, “Give him a second one.” She stood and ended her spell as she scanned the skies.

Someone pointed in the sky. It was the other griffin. Orders were shouted as we prepared. Everyone was much more confident now. The griffin didn't come. Instead, it landed in its nest. Soon it was flying away with two eggs clutched in its legs. Delmar cursed, "Stupid birds are smarter than they should be. There goes the mission's bonus."

Castille didn't seem concerned and just took out her device to harvest essence. She used it on the corpse, and the essence pearl that formed was much better than anything I had seen prior. Castille said, "Greater constitution essence. Delmar, this is for you," she tossed it to him. I thought that was interesting. Delmar supported Castille, and Adrian argued with her in regard to the dungeon. "There could be more eggs. Eryk. Empty your space and go check the nest. Konstantin, go with him."

It made some sense as my space was the best way to get the egg safely. Still, why me? What if the griffin returned? I would be on my own. Konstantin put his hand on my shoulder and pushed me forward. I emptied the legion's property and made my way to climb up the frigging mountain. The dead griffin was being harvested as I walked past it. The climb was not fun, and Konstantin didn't help as he made me go first. I assumed it was best for the new guy to get attacked first.

The griffins had chosen a steep peak to nest on. I was learning how to free climb on the fly. Going up was not that bad—I was more worried when I would have to go down. I reached the nest first, and there were two eggs and a lot of bones in the nest. I immediately moved one of the eggs into my storage space, leaving one egg. A few seconds later, Konstantin was up behind me, "Looks like we got lucky. Hopefully, the griffin didn't abandon a dead embryo. Can you get it into your space?" I nodded and did so.

Konstantin was examining everything in the nest. Tossing things over the edge as he sorted through everything. When he was done, he shook his head, "No human remains. A few horses but no humans. Also, they tend to tear off the clothes of humanoids before consuming the flesh. This pair has not killed any humans. Ok, I will see you back at the cave."

He swung over the edge and confidently descended the steep mountainside we had just spent hours climbing. I rested in the nest—pulling out some food and water from my dimensional space before following him down the mountain. I was much slower than Konstantin. Thankfully the other griffin never returned.

When I reached the dead griffin hours later, it was picked clean from the legion's harvesting efforts. Konstantin was waiting for me. He had probably been watching me descend for hours, so he had not completely abandoned me. "Looks like griffin steaks tonight. Come, boy, they should have at least saved us the choicest cuts for doing all the work." We made our way to the cave, and even before we got there, I smelled the unmistakable scent of BBQ.

Chapter 13

Three legionaries guarded the entrance of the cave. Inside, the men were all working to process the griffin. One man was sorting feathers, another cleaned the talons and teeth, and another cut meat into thin strips to smoke them into jerky. As I looked around, a feather pillow hit me in the face, and I caught it before it hit the floor. "He is back!" yelled my attacker. It was Lucien, the horse master. The soldiers parted to let me reach Castille and one of her lieutenants. The expectant soldiers watched as I approached. I took the pillow and placed it on the ground, and materialized the egg on top.

Cheers erupted. I felt like the hero returning from the war. Lucien was behind me and whispered, "The pillow was for you, dolt. Griffin down feathers. Already boiled and dried by Mage Castille."

Mage Castille picked up the egg and held it to her ear, listening. A moment later, she announced, "It is alive!" more cheers.

Lucien mumbled, "Would have made a good omelet, though."

Delmar snapped at him, "Expensive omelet, horse master. That egg is good for at least 2500 gold on the open market to a griffon tamer."

"Good mounts should remain on the ground," the horse master retorted.

Delmar gave him a hard stare and then said, "Agreed!" they both laughed.

Castille looked at me, "You did well, Eryk. Go see Adrian for a bonus." She waived to the corner of the cave. "Take the pillow. Another reward the men granted you," she smiled suspiciously.

I approached Adrian at a stone table with the potion racks and coin trays in front of him. He had the ledger open and looked up, "Eryk...you have a bonus

here from Mage Castille. Two large silver.” he took two large pieces of silver and handed them to me. I was a little stunned. The egg was so valuable, and I got 20 silver.

Seeing my disbelief, he smiled, “Once the griffin parts are sold, you will get another bonus.” he checked the ledger, “Probably three gold. Don’t look surprised. The empire only lets Mage Castille keep 10% of the harvest. She will give half of what she gets to the legion members. That is after she resupplies the potions. Most mages give nothing to their soldiers, so be happy. That pillow you are holding,” he pointed. “That is a griffin feather down pillow. Worth a gold on its own.”

I felt the pillow and it was soft, and the case was silky smooth. As I felt it up, Adrian chuckled, “The men voted to give you the pillow because they said you moan and groan all the time. Although they gifted it to you as a joke, I suggest you hang on to it and sell it when we reach a larger city. Quilters prize the down feathers.”

I flushed in mild embarrassment, but I would lug the three-pound pillow with me if it was worth one gold coin. That was why I guessed no one wanted it. Three pounds was a lot of weight to carry out of the mountains.

“Go get something to eat,” Adrian said, smiling ruefully. “You are going to need it. Mage Castille wants you in the dungeon party. Put the potions and these trays back into your storage.”

My thoughts jolted. Dungeon party? Why me? I walked to someone cooking skewered chunks of griffin flesh over coals. He handed me two of them, and I started eating. The meat was amazing and took my mind off the dungeon problem. It was salty-sweet and melted in my mouth. The cook smiled, “We had some Kraken salt left and some spices. It is an instant marinade.”

“Kraken salt?” I asked while devouring the meat. I hoped to get more.

He laughed, “Yeah, it is distilled from Kraken’s blood. A byproduct of alchemists. One of Mage Castille’s vanities. She breaks it out when we celebrate,” he paused and switched his tone. “Or sometimes when we are about to do something that might get some of us killed.” He looked at me seriously, “A kind of last meal.”

I reached for another skewer, and he slapped my hand, "Two each." Then he reconsidered and handed me a third skewer. I numbly walked to my tent and found Renna studying her book using some type of light stone.

Renna looked up as I sat. "Sorry to hear you are going into the dungeon in the morning. Mage Castille announced the six going before you got back."

"Just six of us?" I asked, suddenly more concerned.

"They tested the dungeon entrance. It only accepts a fixed number of people at a time. After the number has entered, the doorway prevents others," I sat next to her with my anxiety rising.

"Why are we even going in? I thought the dungeon absorbed corpses after people were killed. If the baron's son is dead, we will not find any evidence anyway. And it has been a month. He must be dead already," I grumbled while finishing my griffin meat.

Renna had a sympathetic look, "Mage Castille is strong, and she is taking her best fighters. Well, her best fighters, not including you," she giggled, trying to break my sour mood. "Delmar has been into dungeons before, and he is going. He said the dungeon has safe areas in it where the creatures will not attack you. I think the plan is to search the safe areas for the baron's son."

"So you are not coming then?" I asked.

"No. I have not learned any spells; my only spell form is flight," she replied softly.

I finished my meat, relaxed against the stone wall, and Renna moved beside me. The cold stone on my back felt good. The looming oily wall nearby put a damper on my mood. Renna's knees were touching, and I knew her closeness to me was a good sign. Maybe tonight she would visit my tent. I was not foolish enough to try and visit hers.

My fantasies were ended when Castille announced the dungeon team had four hours to rest up. A brief period of silence before I asked if Renna could read to me again. She took out the book, and I asked about affinities unrelated to me before asking about the time affinity.

Renna turned to the page, "Time...only one is listed for each range." I waited expectantly while she read. The three ranges were affinity range up to 20, 20-50,

and 50 to 70. “The easiest to learn is something called time sense. It lets you always know what time it is. That is probably useful in dungeons. Did your affinity with time gem light up on the disc?”

“No, I am just curious. I like hearing listening to your voice. What are the other two?” She blushed at my words.

“The mid-tier time suggestion is called stasis. It allows you to halt the aging of an object or person. It fades over time. Wow, that would be amazing. Too bad the time affinity is so rare. I would guess the Emperor has a mage casting this on him all the time. He has been the Emperor for what, three hundred years?” She turned to me.

“I don’t know,” I replied. I knew absolutely nothing about the Emperor.

“Yeah, I think his three hundredth birthday celebration was three or four years ago,” Renna said, thinking. “I have never seen him in person,” she softened her voice. “I am meeting his eleventh son after I form all five of my spell abilities. We are to be married.”

The air was suddenly very thick. I did not know what to say. I wanted her to read on, but I also felt I should console her. She was probably going to live in luxury, so should I feel sorry for her? I finally said, “Three hundred years old and only eleven sons? If you are so important to Emperor, why did High Mage Dacien leave you.”

She huffed, “The Emperor has seventeen sons still alive. I do not know how many have died over the years. As to High Mage Dacien, he only cares about growing his own power. We came out here to get the apex earth essence from the bulette. It is the only way he can grow his earth affinity now, with apex earth essences.” She shifted uncomfortably. “The high mage is probably one of the five most powerful mages in the empire. He can pretty much do what he wants. As long as he answers the Emperor’s call to war.” She stared off into space, “I am sure if I die, they will just find another wife for the Emperor’s son anyway.”

She had a morbid view of her plight. “How old are you anyway?” I figured an Empire year was pretty close to what I considered an Earth year from my time here.

“Nineteen this December,” she replied. She looked younger, but I took her word. There were ten months in the calendar. Martius, Aprilis, Maius, Junius,

Quintilis, Sextilis, September, October, November, and December. It was another clue as I remembered that there were originally ten months in the Roman calendar. I was pretty sure the alphabet was Latin. I thought I was transported to an alternate reality where the Roman Empire thrived in a world with magic.

I nodded at Renna and smiled, which she returned. "What else does it say about the time affinity?" I tried to return her attention to the book and killed the moment.

So reluctantly read the next passage and summarized, "The highest affinities can do something called time stop. It appears it creates a bubble of slow time around the mage, where the mage moves at normal speed. Anyone entering the bubble will be affected by the slow time. It takes a lot of aether to maintain the bubble, though." My affinity was 90 in the time affinity. Was there another suggestion that was even more powerful than these suggestions in the book?

I nodded, "I think I should get some rest." I left her, crawled into my tent, and got my new pillow underneath my bed. It smelled like the outdoors. I really did miss pillows. It did not take long to fall asleep.

It was too soon before I was woken up. It was Mateo, and he was gently shaking me, "Eryk. They are getting ready. I was told to wake you." He was being too polite, and it seemed he felt bad for my fate. He left, and I moved the pillow into my dimensional space. If there was a chance it would be my end, then I was taking the pillow with me.

The other five people entering were Mage Castille, Delmar, Konstantin, Linus, and Firth. I felt out of place in the group of experienced older legionaries. They looked determined and not at all nervous. Mage Castille addressed me, "Stay near Linus and do whatever he tells you." She walked into the black oily wall, and it seemed to stretch around her, and then she vanished, and the wall was smooth again. Everyone else moved through, leaving me standing there.

Adrian yelled, "Hurry up, legionnaire. They will think you are running away if you don't show up soon." I turned to rush into the wall, and it stretched around me. It felt like I was falling into a pool of warm jello. And then I fell face-first onto a stone floor.

"Watch out, raw recruit. The first step is always disorienting. Pick yourself up, put your pants back on," Delmar said with some humor.

I stood, and my pants were on as I checked them, so I was confused. Konstantin laughed, "Boy, he was just referring to the fact this was your first time getting fucked by a dungeon." I was not too fond of the attempt at humor.

Chapter 14: I Decided I Do Not Like Dungeons

I checked my gear. I had brought one short and one spear. My pack had just water and food. I had two knives on my waist as well. Castille was inspecting the walls with some script on them, but it was not Latin. Konstantin moved next to me, "You always enter the dungeon at walking speed. Even if you run into the entrance, it takes some getting used to." He indicated the walls, "We read the script yesterday. It says the dungeon allows seven to enter. So there might actually be someone alive in here." He continued, "We think all the monsters are insects. Spiders, centipedes, beetles, and roaches. At least that is what the ones who came before noted on the wall there."

"Thanks, Konstantin." At least someone was telling me what was going on. As Mage Castille was still studying the writing, I wondered, "What language is that?"

Konstantin harumphed, "Orc. And an old orc dialect as well. This dungeon had not been explored in a long time before that nitwit entered. And yes, the baron's son was here. The length of time this dungeon has been alone means the critters inside are going to be nasty." He spoke softly, "If it all goes to shit and you are the last one standing, run as fast as you can to the entrance," he whispered seriously.

I had a million questions, like why was Konstantin being so nice suddenly, but Mage Castille waved us forward. Konstantin and Delmar walked at the front as we descended a rough rock-hewn corridor. The corridor suddenly opened up. It looked like we were entering the outside as stars could be seen above us, and the night sky was all around us with very bright stars.

"Everyone be quiet," Delmar whispered. "We are in a massive chamber. Those are not stars. They are fire beetles. Not overly dangerous, but dungeon ecology usually means something preys on them." Suddenly a buzzing sound started, and the stars grew brighter and brighter as the beetles flapped their wings. The massive chamber began to light up, showing a rough rock-strewn floor and a ceiling covered in stalactites.

Everyone was on watch, looking for an enemy. I felt the ground tremble, and I was not the only one. Everyone's eyes were searching the ground. Castille swore, "The fire beetles were an alarm for something. It is coming. Spread out!"

I stood there dumbly while everyone else moved apart. Someone pointed, and I saw the rocky soil collapse on itself and then erupt upward thirty feet away. A massive crawfish-looking monster emerged. Someone yelled, "Ankheg!" which meant absolutely nothing to me.

I held my spear at a ready position but did not think my twig would have much effect on something so large. Castille cast her wisps of black ropes at the beast. The monstrosity turned on her and blasted a rain of glowing green water at her. The fluid washed over her, hitting an invisible shield and splashing everywhere. Konstantin was already flanking the restrained monster. The green water was steaming where it hit the ground. I guessed it must be some type of acid and noted to myself not to get in front of the creature. I got my senses and rushed to the flank of the monstrosity as well.

It is not every day you get to fight a twenty-foot-tall burrowing crawfish. Maybe it was more ant-like. It has some nasty mandibles, so getting behind the creature seemed wise to me. Everything was happening so fast. The straining beast was slowly snapping the black tendrils of smoke cast by Castille. The clang of metal on chitin rang through the air as everyone tried to penetrate the shell. I angled my spear between two plates and leaned in with my body weight. The tip of my spear entered, and the spear sunk a foot deep.

My victory was short-lived as the beast broke the black restraints, and one of the body-sized claws snapped toward me. I fell backward, letting go of my spear but keeping my head as the clawed arm snapped the air where my head had just been. Ok, I decided I definitely did not like dungeons. Someone yelled, "Second coming from behind!" What was going on? My vision was blocked as I tried to figure things out. Another voice yelled, "Watch the acid spray!"

I drew my short sword and one of my knives and rushed toward the injured one. It was oozing from a dozen puncture wounds and struggling to remain upright. I thought we needed to put it down before engaging the second. I ran up its carapace because I had the great idea of getting close to the head and stabbing it from behind—and it could not attack while I was on its back.

I realized in the back of my mind how I had been conditioned to fight even under circumstances that seemed dire. I did not fear injury, and my goal was to end the threat before I was killed. I ran up the shiny carapace, gaining confidence with each step. I needed to get my blade between the chitin plates behind the head. Just two more steps...my boot slipped on the angled, shiny shell, causing me to fall quickly to the left. My knee slammed hard into the shell, and I dropped my short sword in favor of using my two hands on the dagger to aim it at a gap in the armor. I succeeded in lodging it in the shell. This saved me from falling underneath the beast that started thrashing to get me off.

I hung on to the handle as the motion of the beast's death throws started to whip my body with it. My focus had been on this one beast, and I had not been aware enough to understand everything else that was going on around me. Now as I was being thrown about, I could see Mage Castille and two legionnaires fighting the other ankheg. One of my fellow soldiers was slumped over in obvious pain. My ride slowed as the goo that made up the ankheg's blood stopped flowing from its wounds.

I pushed off hard and landed into a roll to gain distance. My shoulder was in pain, and I had definitely strained the shoulder socket and was lucky I had not dislocated the shoulder as well. I stood and moved to help with the other ankheg. Konstantin spoke, "Stay back. It is handled. Brave, but stupid boy. The beast was finished if you just gave it time. There was no need for a killing blow," he walked past me to watch the end of the other battle.

Castille seeing I was free, yelled, "Fool! Eryk, get a healing potion to Linus!" I flashed to the injured soldier and rushed to him. It wasn't my fault. I was ordered to follow Linus' orders. In the absence of orders, I helped fight as best I could.

I knelt and pulled the potion from my space, and helped the man drink it. He had a relieved look on his face as his injury healed and the pain faded, "Got caught in a claw. Got a wee bit crushed." He coughed up some congealed blood, the potion doing its work. The second beast was now in its death throws as well. We had won, and everyone was alive. Linus was going to take some time for the potion to do its work but other than that; everyone was in one piece.

Mage Castille removed her collector shield and placed it over the ankleg. It activated smoothly, and an essence ball formed in the center. Castille announced, "Major essence of constitution." She moved to the other beast

and repeated the process, “Major essence of constitution again.” Everyone looked on as Mage Castille looked at everyone present. “Linus and Firth,” she finally said, handing the essence to the eager men.

Delmar announced, “Not much worth harvesting that wouldn’t take a long time. I say we let the dungeon reclaim them as is. It will make the respawn process quicker, but I hope to be out before then.”

Linus spoke with a rasp as his lungs were still healing, “We are not going to do that again?”

Mage Castille considered, “No. We will delve as deep as we can and then retreat. If we don’t find the person, we will call for an experienced delve team. Our team is not balanced enough for this dungeon, and we are a person short of the party limit.”

Delmar had a sour look, and Castille mollified him, “Relax, Delmar. I know you did this for a living, but we are not equipped for it and will run out of potions before long. I want someone to capture a fire beetle and everyone else to search this large chamber. I see the one exit opposite where we entered. There should be a prize in here somewhere as well for defeating the two monsters.”

Everyone spread out, and I remained in the center with Delmar and Castille. I listened to them talk. Delmar stated, “Tough first room for a dungeon, and those ankheg were stronger than the norm. I don’t see how they got past them. Maybe their party was killed, and the sole survivor just ran to the exit and will be in the next safe room.”

Castille gave him a withering look, “Delmar, those were respawns. The carapace was too shiny for them to be ancient. I have been in my fair share of dungeons too. You are smarter than that.” Delmar flushed in embarrassment.

Konstantin came with one of the fire beetles. He held it by the wings as it flared its light in defiance. She took the collector shield and used it on the beetle as it was alive. An essence formed, and the three of them were surprised. Mage Castille looked up. There were hundreds of fire beetles. “It is a minor perception essence. If only one in ten of those beetles yields one, this could be quite the harvest.”

Konstantin swayed her thoughts, “They are only on the ceiling. Got lucky catching this one. I do not think getting them down will be easy.”

She nodded reluctantly, “Ok,” she tossed Konstantin the essence. “We would need to use the collector on the live ones in order to get a chance at an essence as well. Delmar, start making preparations for the next room.”

Firth came up a short time later with a small stone chest. He had a huge grin on his face. Delmar scolded him, “Fool. It could have been trapped.”

“But it wasn’t,” he retorted. “Seven gold are inside.” Delmar eyes went up in obvious surprise.

Castille took the coins with slyness, “That is one for the Empire and one for each of us. No word leaves your lips about this.” She looked pointedly at me. I nodded.

As we rested at the passage further into the dungeon, Konstantin sat next to me, “She chose this group because she trusts us. You are an unknown, Eryk. Follow our lead, and this delve could be profitable for you.” He mulled next to me in silence, and when I did not say anything, he stood and walked away.

My impression from their surprise was that seven gold was a lot for a first room in a dungeon. An hour later, after Linus said he was good to go, we all stood and made our way to the tunnel.

It opened into another large chamber with fire beetles. Everyone swore as the beetles lit up the large room. We were at a bridge and had to cross to the other side. But there were dozens of other bridges crisscrossing the chamber. Konstantin swore, “Fuck, I hate spiders.” I looked again; those were not bridges but webs. Imagining what size spider needed to be to create those, I decided again that I did not like dungeons.

Chapter 15: First Apex Essence

Chapter 15 Announcement bonus chapter because this story is doing well on RoyalRoad

The crisscrossing bridges looked different now that I knew they were part of a spider’s network. As the chamber lit up from the low buzzing fire beetles, I didn’t see any spiders. I looked over the edge of the bridge. Below were shadows and more crisscrossing bridges, “How deep does it go?” I asked quietly.

Konstantin looked as well, “I don’t want to find out.” I think it was an attempt at humor, but it was lost due to the situation we found ourselves in.

Delmar got everyone’s attention, “We do not know what type of spiders we are facing. Most likely, their fangs will inject a paralytic poison. So do not get bit. Strike the eyes. They have two large eyes and six smaller eyes. Damaging the eyes will usually stun them momentarily.” And that was all the prep we got. My spear had broken in the ankheg, and I was gripping my short sword tightly and on high alert.

Mage Castille was scanning the ceiling and considering her options. “Eryk, give the potions to Linus. There are three cure poison potions in the racks. I want them in his hands. I believe the spiders are underneath us, under this very bridge. They are probably waiting for us to start to cross. I am going to check now.” Everyone suddenly got nervous and backed away from the edges. Mage Castille closed her eyes briefly, then said, “Five large spiders are under the bridge.” Knowing how many spiders made it worse, and the tension rose.

“What is the plan?” Delmar asked the mage, his normal claiming and confident presence not evident.

“Someone is going to sprint across the bridge. It will be a decoy to draw them up. If the person gets caught by the spiders, they will most likely just be paralyzed. We should be able to reach them before they are wrapped in webbing and hauled away,” Castille said without any emotion. I had a bad feeling. I was the least skilled fighter and probably going to be selected.

Konstantin stepped forward, “I will do it.” My heart soared in relief.

“No, it will be Eryk,” Castille ordered. I tensed, not quite believing what I had heard.

Castille then explained the attack plan, “There are five spiders and five of us. The bridge is almost forty feet wide, so drawing them all out at once is best. We will each engage one in combat as they come around to attack Eryk. When someone finishes theirs, they can help someone else.” Everyone seemed so confident I capitulated. I started stretching. My knee was very sore from the fall off of the ankheg, and my shoulder still ached from the last battle. The good news was the bridge was wide and the chamber well-lit by the hundreds of fire beetles.

I lined up in front of everyone. I realized I had been sweating profusely and took a long drink of water. Delmar and Konstantin were right behind me. I was thinking of two things. The first was that my surging adrenaline had made all my aches disappear, and the second was secrecy be damned. If I needed to use my dimensional space to kill a spider, I would not hesitate. Delmar finally instructed, "Walk until you see the first one, and then run as fast as you can."

I nodded and walked. The bridge quickly got sticky under my boots, like I was walking on dried soda in a movie theater. I surmised it was old webbing on the surface that was causing the sound. The stone bridge started vibrating...the spiders were moving underneath us, preparing. I heard a clicking sound and saw the first spider legs coming from my right. Legs as thick as my arms moved to bring the giant hairy spider into view. Spiders did not need to be this size. I ran as instructed, my heart already pumping. I heard Konstantin yell, "Got this one."

I sprinted across the bridge, maybe 250 feet, and with relief, entered the opening on the far side of the chamber. I spun quickly and took in the site. In the middle of the bridge, everyone was engaged with a spider. Had the plan worked? I counted five spiders...well, four, as Castille's spider was wrapped in black wispy chains and pulled over the edge. She then produced a wand and began to fire arrows of blue light at the spider Firth was fighting. I had not liked being the bait, but the plan had worked.

I decided to rush in and help. Delmar was engaged to the spider closest to me, and I hacked the leg with my short sword. The leg cracked like a lobster shell and was severed. The spider swung around on me and tried to lunge. Instead, Delmar got his long blade into the abdomen and jerked hard. Yellow mucus flowed out of the wound, the spider twitched in pain, and the legs curled in on themselves, dropping the spider where it was. Delmar did not wait and turned to help the others.

The battle was over in less than a minute, and I didn't even reach anyone else to help. Castille was already applying her collector shield to a spider. The quicker you did the extraction, the better chance you had at getting an essence. There were only four spiders as the Castille had tossed hers over the edge. Everyone gave an essence. Castille had extracted one apex essence of dexterity and three major essences of dexterity.

Everyone huddled around on alert, waiting for the loot to be assigned. Castille took the largest essence and put it in my hand. I was so shocked I did not see who got the other essences. It was much larger than the minor essence I had

consumed back in training. I put the ball into my mouth and felt it dissolve as goosebumps spread across my body in reaction to it. I had to keep swallowing to get the aftertaste out of my mouth and the sticky feeling in my throat.

Delmar started cracking open the abdomen of a spider. It was a gooey mess and smelled horrific from where I was. I watched in fascination as he removed a soccer ball-sized object. He looked over at me, "Spider spinneret. They are worth a good three gold each. Castille said I could have them all if I carried them out myself."

Firth had found the stone prize box again. Inside were three potions. All cure poison and no coins. They were generic cure poisons, but being dungeon made, they were quite valuable as their shelf life was generally centuries compared to alchemist potions that were only good for a few months. I was once again asked to hold all the potions in my dimensional space, the new potions included. Linus was teasing the fangs and mumbling about not bringing any empty containers for the venom. He finally reported to Castille the type of venom the spiders contained. I heard him say a generic poison, no paralytic compounds detected. When Delmar had his spinnerets, we started to move out.

I drank the rest of my canteen while everyone else moved to the far side of the bridge. I hastened my steps to catch up to them. Konstantin slapped my back, "You did well. You got lucky they did not try and block your path. She was impressed with your effort," he indicated the apex essence. "Just try to keep yourself alive long enough to make use of it."

I nodded, falling into step beside my—mentor? I was still curious why Konstantin had softened on me. Did it have to do with the griffin nest somehow? Also, I had just consumed an apex essence. They were used to increase a person's affinity. If my manifested convergence ability did let me milk essences for all they were worth, what type of benefit would I get from it? My nerves and skin were still tingly, so something was happening.

It also was not lost on me that I had been told apex essences cost fifty gold or more. And Castille had casually handed it to me like a snack. I quietly asked Konstantin, "Does she hand out apex essences often?"

He looked at me seriously, "No. That was only the ninth one she had given to a legionnaire in my eight years with her. We got lucky this dungeon has been neglected for so long. I am guessing that is why the baron's son risked it. This dungeon is probably bursting with aether, and the first few runs will yield

powerful essences. Even the respawns.” We were a good distance away from the others, and he whispered, “She is trying to buy your loyalty. Do not look surprised. She has bought the loyalty of most of us. You should be happy she thought you were worth the investment.”

Delmar, up ahead, shouted, “It is a safe room!” We all crowded into the small room that was twenty feet round. More orc writing dominated the wall, and a stream of water descended from the ceiling into the floor.

Castille tested the water and said, “Konstantin, scout ahead. Still no sign of the seventh?” Delmar was searching the room and shook his head no.

We all sat down while Konstantin headed into the next corridor. We had only two short battles, but everyone looked exhausted from the life-and-death encounters. Delmar dropped his smelly spinneret backpack next to me, “Carry it for me, and I will give you a gold coin?”

He had told me the four spinnerets were worth twelve gold, and he was just offering me one gold. I wanted to stay on his good side, though. “Payment up front,” I said cheekily. He frowned but produced the coin he had received from the ankheg. I pocketed the coin and sent the gold coin to my dimensional space with the other one. I was becoming wealthy—two gold coins and two large silver! The spinnerets were heavy, but I figured it would just be till we returned to the horses. I would be paid a gold for a days worth of heavy labor.

It was a good half hour later before Konstantin returned, and we all huddled around Castille as he reported, “The next dungeon room is another large chamber. It is down a long descending corridor,” he broke into a massive grin. “And I found the baron’s son. He is alive.”

Chapter 16: The Baron’s Son

Konstantin wore a grin as he continued. “The little boy got himself trapped on an island in the center of the chamber. There is a lake and island accessible by stepping stones. Some type of luminescent fish lights up the water, which lights up the chamber and water. The water is also home to giant aquatic centipedes. They can not reach more than five feet out of the water, according to the idiot on the island.”

Castille asked sternly, “So you talked with Justin Cicero? How is his health?”

Konstantin grinned, “He tried to order me to save him. He said he had a commander’s rank in the army and had the right to command me. He has been catching and cooking the glowing fish with his fire magic.”

Delmar asked, “How did he get trapped? What happened to his adventuring party?”

Konstantin frowned, “He lost one man to the spiders. It was his healing mage. A spider came from under the bridge and got him from behind. The water centipedes have a strong paralytic cloud attack. His two heavy fighters inhaled it, fell into the water, and drowned while they were crossing the stepping stones.”

Firth asked, “What happened to Marius, the pathfinder?”

Konstantin shook his head, “He did not say. But if the dungeon only allows seven people to enter and we number six, then it is safe to assume Marius is also dead.”

“What information do you have on the water creatures?” Castille asked.

Konstantin grunted, “The glowing fish light chamber and water, like the fire beetles did in the prior chambers. The six centipedes are all about ten feet long and easily seen moving in the water. But instead of legs, they have one hundred fins. They are really fast, and that is why I think Justin’s team was surprised when crossing.”

Mage Castille frowned, “My shadow chains do not work underwater. Will they attack along the shoreline or just when crossing the stepping stones?”

Konstantin shook his head, “There is no shoreline. The chamber opens right to the stepping stones. The island in the middle has a shoreline— about thirty feet circular.”

“What is the likely hood of getting all of us to the island with the baron’s son?” Castille asked. Konstantin was shaking his head no.

Delmar suggested, “As long as we don’t breathe in the paralytic gas can we sprint to the island?”

“No,” Konstantin said. “The stepping stones are about five feet across, and it is about five feet between the stones. If you stop on the stones, then you will likely get quickly swarmed.”

Castille heaved a sigh, “We have one instant ice potion. It will freeze all water in a fifteen-foot radius. If we can catch enough of them in the ice, we should be able to eliminate all of the water threats. It will take the dungeon at least two days to respawn them if we do not exit.”

Delamar asked, “Who is going to hop on the stones, draw them all in, and freeze them?” No one moved to volunteer. A long heavy silence ensued.

Castille finally tried to entice someone, “Two essences of their choice to the volunteer we harvest from the water creatures.” Still, no one volunteered. But I was thinking what everyone else was thinking. You can not use the essence if you are dead. Mage Castille upped the offer, “Three and whatever is in the reward chest for the room.”

Firth started to fidget. Delmar cocked his eyebrow, thinking Firth was going to cave and volunteer. “I will do it.” All eyes turned to me. “I already got some experience with the spiders being the bait, and you all will have my back,” I said confidently. Or at least I thought I sounded confident.

I slowly removed the potions from my dimensional space, and Mage Castille pulled the aqua-colored potion out. “We got this as a gift from a merchant for rescuing him from a gnoll war party. Keep the lid off, and throw it in the water when all six creatures are within range.” Delmar and Konstantin had something akin to ice spikes that they applied to their boots so they would not slip on the ice.

We all walked down the long tunnel. As we approached the end, a blue light highlighted the room. When we reached the end, it was actually quite beautiful. The water glowed a soft blue, and the stepping stones were round and dark gray, heading out to an island in the center. A young man stood on the island studying us. “You back, soldier?” He yelled excitedly. “At least you brought help. Ready to get me off this island?”

I didn’t like him from the second I heard his voice. To make matters worse, I was about risk my life for him. Konstantin walked up to me, “Don’t worry about catching them all. Get to the second stone and toss it when the first one attacks. When they emerge, hold your breath as long as you can. We will be right behind you.” He patted my back reassuringly.

I nodded but was questioning my self-preservation thought process. It was a good ten minutes of preparation with the man on the island screaming the entire time for us to hurry up. Castille told me to avoid falling into the water after I dropped the potion. She jokingly said they wouldn't have time to chip me out of the ice before I died.

I could see the snake-looking creatures in the water. The glowing fish scattered from in front of them as they swam. I took a breath and leaped to the first stepping stone. I had expected it to be stable and nearly fell when it wobbled underneath me. Ripples of water spread from the stone, calling the creatures to me. I got my feet quickly under me. The creatures raced toward me incredibly fast. Two were trailing far behind, back near the island. I waited, a short sword in one hand and the potion in the other for them to get close.

Konstantin yelled, "Get to the next platform!" I had forgotten the plan to get to the second platform when I stumbled. I needed to give everyone room to fight. I ran and leaped. The wobble of the platform had me not get a great push-off, and I came up short a little short. My bad knee slammed hard, and I heard a crack in my knee as my lower body splashed into the water. Water filled my boots as I scrambled to get on the platform. Somehow I didn't spill the potion, but the knuckles on my sword hand were smashed and bleeding as I rolled onto the floating stone.

An insectoid head appeared above water. I swung my sword as the centipede spewed a foul mist into my face. My blade cut its face rubbery face. I swung twice more, hacking away. The exertion meant I couldn't hold my breath much longer. I tossed the potion into the water, unaware if all the swimming beasts were close enough yet.

I watched in fascination as the water crystalized and the ice started spreading rapidly. Konstantin landed behind me, and I inhaled in relief as I needed the air. The foul mist had not fully dissipated, and I felt the paralytic taking hold. It was hard to move and breathe, but my fellow soldiers were around me and hacking away as the centipedes were trapped in the ice. Then my feet felt cold, but it was not the paralyzing mist. My boots and pants froze, and then I was a statue. My frozen clothes from the waist down held up my paralyzed body. I watched as five of the six centipedes were hacked to death, trapped in the ice.

The last one lunged up onto the ice, and its long body slid toward me. Delmar intercepted it and hacked into the body, stopping it. Firth walked into my line of sight. "Damn, if I knew it was going to be this easy, I would have

volunteered myself.” He tapped my forehead. “Hey, Linus, how long before he moves again?”

“About a minute, I believe,” I heard from behind me. He was correct as I felt my movement slowly return. I slowly and painfully sucked in the precious air. If I had known the paralysis would have extended to my lungs, I would not have volunteered.

I gasped and went down on one knee and tried to remove my boots, as I was now worried about frostbite. As I wrestled with the boots, the baron’s son came to us across the stones and reeked something fierce. “About time. Give me some food, and you can hand me my essences from those creatures, mage.”

I had only gotten one boot off so far but looked up to see the Mage Castille staring at the man who was in his twenties with weeks of haggard grow on his gaunt face. Delmar stepped between the mage and the baron’s son, “Over here, First Citizen Justin. We can get you some rations.” Delmar escorted Justin back up to the safe room before the confrontation with Mage Castille erupted into something.

Mage Castille stood over me as I rubbed my bare feet, trying to get the feeling back. I was still on the ice-covered second stepping stone. “Nice work Eryk.” She leaned down and placed three essences into my palm. “Three apex endurance affinities. All six were apex endurance essences. The baron’s son took the reward chest as it materialized on the island,” she said regrettably.

“He can just take the chest? He didn’t do a damn thing! What about his claim on the essences?” I asked, annoyed, starting to feel some life in my bare feet.

Castille pursed her lips, “He is a First Citizen.” My confused look had her add, “They fall under different laws.”

“As a mage, are you not a First Citizen as well?” I asked.

Castille harumphed, “No. You can only be born into first citizenship. You need to be a descendent of a member of the First Legion.”

I had more questions but did not want to show my ignorance, “So what is going to happen with Mr. Personality?” I asked Mage Castille. She huffed in a short laugh at my nickname.

“I will give him these three essences and tell him that was all we collected. He didn’t see me collect them all as he was too busy opening the chest on the island and securing whatever was in it. He will probably doubt me, so consume those quickly. You may get some indigestion as you are only supposed to take one essence a day, but if you don’t take them all now, that nitwit will confiscate them. Stay down here and take one every hour. I will see you in two hours.” Castille nodded at me, then she turned away and started walking back to the safe room.

Konstantin was the only one left at the passage heading up. He spoke, “Since the reward chest appeared in this room, there will be no other threats. When you feel up to it, walk down to the next chamber and take an accounting of it. If Justin asks, we will tell him we left you behind to scout. Do not enter the room, though, just note what you see from the passageway so you have something to tell Justin if he asks. The dungeon’s ecology will prevent the creatures from leaving their designated room.”

“Couldn’t we just kill the monsters from the passageway then?” I asked, trying to find a loophole.

Konstantin shook his head in disappointment, “I thought you were smarter than that, Eryk.” Instead of elaborating, he turned and left. I was left barefoot and alone on the floating stone with three essences in my hand.

I looked around and put the first essence into my mouth, thinking about what he meant. Then it struck me. The ankhegs were underground. The spiders were under the bridge. And the centipede fish were in the water and only came close after I leaped onto the first stone. All of the monsters had only attacked after we entered the room. I surmised dungeons protected their creations from making killing them too easy.

I confirmed I was alone. I sent my wet, cold socks to my dimensional storage and brought out dry socks. I put on the icy, frost-covered boots. I had a lot of time, so I decided to check out the island in the center of the chamber. I hopped to it and almost collapsed every time I landed. My knee was in serious pain, and I think I cracked the patella. On the island, I found the mess the baron’s son left—piles of shit, fish bones, dirty clothes. The smell was horrendous. I looked at the far side of the cavern. I still had a lot of time before I needed to return to the safe room. I knew curiosity killed the cat, but it couldn’t hurt to take a peak. As Konstantin said, I just needed to remain in the passageway.

Chapter 17: Sisyphus' Rock

I reached the far side of the chamber on the floating stepping stones. I wished I still had the healing potions in my dimensional space. I would have gladly taken some punishment for using one. But I had not been asked to store them after the fight. My knee was swelling, and I hobbled into the tunnel and looked back at the stones. Maybe this was not a great idea. I winced at the thought of hopping back across the stones. Perhaps I would hobble down to the next room and come back.

I had a strong limp as my right knee got so stiff it was difficult to bend. As the light faded behind me, a new light at the end of the tunnel appeared in front of me. I was close, maybe 60 feet from the next room. I continued to the opening into the next chamber. Standing in the passage, I looked into the room. It was a smooth conical stone dome. Lines of greenish light, like veins, lit up the dome. The lines seemed to pulse in a rhythm. I stuck my head inside to look at the wall around the door. Huh, the lines were made by fist-sized snails trailing a glowing goo behind them. These were the first non-insects I had seen in the dungeon. I didn't know what it implied.

The floor of the domed room was flat and consisted of brown dirt with some mounds near the center. I guessed they hid whatever creature guarded the room. The curious thing was I did not see an exit around the room anywhere. Was this the final room in this dungeon? Maybe the snails were the monster? Would they all fly together to giant snail...ok that was a stupid thought. The first chamber had burrowers, so this chamber probably had burrowers, and the mounds in the center hid the creature.

I stared for forty minutes and then took out my second apex essence and ate it. Castille had said to wait at least an hour between. Shit. Castille was not joking about indigestion. I started making short belching sounds accompanied by an attack of mini hiccups. My stomach roiled, and I broke out into a cold sweat, and I sat down against the wall and then lay down till the feeling passed. I kept an eye on the room, waiting for my stomach and pulse rate to return to normal. I was definitely going to save that last apex essence for much later. I pulled out some water and drank heavily before putting it back in my storage.

I stayed seated until, and in my estimation, it was getting close to the end of the two hours Castille gave me. I decided it was time to go. Besides the snails

making slow progress along the dome, I observed no movement in the chamber. Taking one last look at the room, I wondered if maybe there was a doorway to the right or left that I couldn't quite see. I decided to take a quick check. That way, I could say I scouted the next room if the baron's son questioned me. I leaned in further, on alert, ready to run, remembering the ankheg had spit acid. I didn't see anything and cautiously got a little further in. I looked up, searching the wall of the dome. Nothing. I moved to go the half step back and felt for the passageway. What...it was a solid wall.

My heart started racing as I felt the wall. I had barely entered the room—if even at all. Maybe it was invisible...some type of illusion. I slid left a few feet and then right on the wall feeling the wall for the passage. I felt a tremor under my feet and swore. Why didn't anyone fucking tell me a dungeon could lock you in a room? Now, I was going to die to whatever horrendous insect swarm came after me. I drew my short sword, pulled a shield from my dimensional space, and turned to face whatever spawn crawled from under the earth.

The ground in the center of the chamber was rippling, and a body of a massive black scorpion erupted. The stinger swayed fifteen feet in the air, and each of its two claws was as big as a person. I waited with a racing heart. I could win by sending part of its body to my dimensional cube as I had done with the bulette if it was just one Schwarzenegger-sized scorpion. Nothing else came, and I started moving along the wall. The scorpion located me and turned to follow my movements. It seemed cautious.

Maybe it was stunned that only one person had come to challenge it. It tested its claws with reverberating snaps in the air. The hovering stinger did a hypnotic dance in the air as its eight legs brought it slowly forward. I prepared my dimensional space...fuck! I still had the stone pillar stored in there! New plan. Drop a big rock on a big bug. I increased my pace along the wall, and it finally charged me.

I did my best to time the stone. The edge of the stone materialized at the end of my sword arm from the storage, extending ten feet forward, looming over the confused bug. The stone hung in the air for a moment before falling. One of the claws extended and reached for me. I rolled away, but it was not necessary. The cylinder crushed the body of the scorpion, and internal fluids splattered in every direction. I was covered in metallic-smelling bug juice.

I focused on my aether and swore. The mass of pulling the object had drained all my aether in one go. I scanned the room, thinking my bad luck would have a second scorpion show up. The stinger started to fall like a felled tree toward

me. I tumbled out of the way as it pierced the ground...It would have missed me by a few feet but better safe than sorry. The slimy fluids covering me were now coated with dirt from my roll. I spit something fowl from my mouth.

I slowly walked around the chamber and found a shoebox-sized stone chest in the center of the room. I breathed, relieved. Konstantin had said if the reward chest appeared then all threats had been handled. I put down my shield to inspect the box.

The box was similar to the others we found when defeating the previous monsters. I moved cautiously past the scorpion, wishing I had an essence collector to use on it. I was about to open the chest when I remembered someone mentioned traps. I used my sword tip instead to flip the lip open.

Huh, twenty shiny gold coins and what looked like a pendant. A silvery chain was connected to a hexagonal brass coin. The coin has an array of fine lines and small blue gems embedded at intersections on both sides. It was similar to the patterns that made up the discs on the translation amulet I had during training but much finer and more intricate work.

I picked up the obvious magic item. It felt light in my hand, more like the density of plastic than metal. I thought about wearing it and channeling aether into it, but since I did not know what it did, I decided to store it away with the gold coins.

I walked to the dead scorpion and wondered what kind of essence the beast would have yielded. I touched the carapace, thinking I could possibly pull the essence to myself with my ability. I focused and tried for a few minutes before giving up. I couldn't feel anything happening and felt silly for trying. I thought better at leaving the empty chest and stone cylinder. If they came down here to check this room, I figured to erase as much evidence as possible. Although the giant crushed scorpion still oozing fluids was a dead giveaway.

Unfortunately, my aether didn't recover enough to put anything in my space. I buried the chest as that was the best I could do. I hobbled back to the water chamber. Hoping across the stones this time was not fun, and I fell on each landing as my knee would not bend properly. When I got to the far side, I quickly stripped and began to wash my clothes and armor in the water.

All the tales of glory in combat never mentioned the after-battle cleanup. Cleaning up the mess after a fight was never pretty, and this was the second time for me, the messy bulette being the first. The glowing fish seemed

attracted to the gore being washed into the crystal-clear water. They were not carnivorous and just seemed like fat trout with glowing scales. I wondered how they might taste and wished I had a fishing rod.

I was in my undergarments with everything laid out to dry when Konstantin came down the tunnel to check on me. "It has been four hours, Eryk. Are you down here bathing?" Humor laced his voice. "Castille was getting worried. And I have some bad news." He was staring at my swollen and red knee and knelt to inspect it.

"Well, don't keep me in suspense. Is the cave the home of a dragon?" I asked while I started putting on my wet clothes.

"No, much worse. Castille is sending you to escort Justin Cicero back to his father," Konstantin admitted. "She is giving him the griffin egg, and you are to store it in your space so it gets there safely. She is doing it so she can get the leech away from her company. Report to the Legion headquarters when you reach Varvao. They will tell you where to find our company."

"How far is Varvao?" I asked, concerned.

"Three hundred and fifty miles. Give or take. But there is good news. Your little mage friend is going with you," Konstantin chuckled.

"Renna is coming with me? Is that a good thing with the First Citizen being with me?" I asked, thinking of her safety.

"Most likely, he will not touch her. Rumor is she is promised to one of the Emperor's sons," but he didn't sound confident. He pointed at my knee, "Let Linus know, and he will give you a potion to heal up."

I had finished dressing and was working on my armor. "Why are you being so nice to me, Konstantin? You do not have the best reputation among the others."

Konstantin spat into the water. "I am tired of seeing young men like you die. I can not tell why I thought you were different and deserved my mentoring. Maybe one of the gods is pushing me to keep you alive. I do not know. Just accept it." He turned and walked up the passage.

I packed my things up and hobbled up the passage. When I reached the safe room, there was no one there. I hobbled all the way back to the entrance to the dungeon and passed through at a walk this time.

Delmar yelled, "About time, Eryk. Get some food and pack up your gear. We will be heading out shortly." I looked around the chamber, and the tents were all rolled up. Justin was arguing with mage Castille, and I decided I did not need to become involved. I got some food and went to eat it next to Renna. Renna saw me coming and had a sad face.

"Sorry, Eryk. Your fancy new tent is over there, but you are going to be carrying it for him." Renna shook her head. Well, at least I had my old tarp tent. Now I got to be a pack mule. At least I had wormed out of carrying the spinnerets. Maybe I would have to return the gold coin.

"It is what it is," I said to Renna. Linus came to me and handed me a healing potion. Konstantin must have already talked with him. I sat on the ground next to Renna and drank the potion. It was like a warm feeling spreading through my body and numbing me. The heat increased around my knee. I could feel the aether of the potion working and the swelling going down. It was a few minutes, and I could bend my knee easily again. I had had magical healing before by mages. This was different as the mage's healing was focused, while this potion was more like a swarm covering my body and then focusing on the injury.

I chatted with Renna for a while, telling her about the dungeon. Mage Castille finally approached with Justin Cicero, Firth, and Wylie. Castille said, "When we get back to the horses, you three will escort First Citizen Cicero and Mage Renna to the city." I had a lot of questions, but Castille spun and left clearly not in a good mood.

Justin held out the griffin egg, "Put this in your space, legionnaire." After I put the egg in my space, he just walked away. I could see the other members of the company eyeing us. Justin had seized the prize, and the malice was palpable. I would have to ask more about how the First Citizens fit into the Empire I now served. What was the First Legion?

Wylie and Firth, approached me. The older soldier, Firth, spoke, "Looks like we will be babysitting you again. At least you get to ride. Benito will have to ride pillion with someone when we leave until we get to a farm to get him a new mount." Soon we were all headed out of the mountains and back to the horses.

Chapter 18: Getting Answers

As we walked through the mountains to reach the horses, my pack weight had doubled. The good news was the healing potion had done more than just heal my knee. All my aches, pains, and scabs were gone. Delmar told me a simple healing potion I had taken cost about five gold and could heal soft tissue injuries and mend bones. A full healing potion, ran about fifty gold but could bring someone back from the brink of death and align and repair broken bones. Our company had eight simple healing potions and nine full healing potions.

He was knowledgeable on the subject and said potion's ingredients only cost about 20% of their value, but the alchemists needed to be exceptionally skilled. That was why magic porters were in such high demand since the valuable potions wouldn't expire in my dimensional space. Doing the math, a single full healing potion was worth what I would make in ten years as a soldier!

I nervously asked if I would be charged for the simple healing potion. Adrian laughed, "Only if you drink one without permission." I relaxed slightly, and he continued, "Castille does everything she can to keep us alive. A lot of mage company commanders have a healing spell. Castille does not, so she spends quite a sum on potions. We may take all the shit missions, but we also get more in return." It was definitely something for me to think about.

The First Citizen was carrying nothing but his sword and belt pouch. Firth and Wylie shared the load with me, but Justin Cicero still had four times as much gear as a normal legionnaire. The other men were weighed down with griffin meat, so we were not the only ones suffering. I stayed close to Firth as we traveled to ask questions.

I asked Firth, "So what is First Citizen?"

He turned back to see the man walking in the midst of the company with a cockiness that irritated everyone around him. Firth said quietly, "They can trace their lineage back to the First Legion. The First Legion was some four thousand men that arrived from another world and carved out the Telhian Empire. Only about three hundred survived the Founding Wars, but their descendants are the only ones who can own land in the Empire. They control all the seventeen provinces of the Empire with an iron fist."

He checked on Justin Cicero again before continuing, "Even being a descendent of a member of the First Legion does not grant you the right to be considered a First Citizen. There is a substantial tithe required to the Emperor. Some of the nobles only elevate the inheriting son to the status of a First Citizen. Others, like the Cicero's have enough coin to elevate their entire brood." He looked at Justin and said quietly, "They even do so knowing their child is an idiot."

I processed Firth's words. It made sense with the blended terminology of Rome and Medieval Europe if travelers came from all eras. Was the direction one way? Maybe there was a way back to Earth. "Did any of the First Legion ever return back to their own world?"

"Dragon's piss, Eryk. What do I look like a scholastic? I have no idea what happened some two millennia ago," Firth rasped with good humor.

Later in the hike, I asked, "Have there been other arrivals from other worlds?"

Firth shrugged, "Is your homeland so small you don't have myths about them? They appear and are brought before the Emperor and are never heard from again. I do not think there has been one in the Telhian Empire in three hundred years. But you should talk to a mage or scholastic, not me." I nodded and figured three hundred years someone brought the idea of noble ranks; barons, dukes, ect. Maybe even earlier than three hundred years, as Firth's grasp on Telhian history was pretty weak.

I was silent for a long time. On a long slow climb, I inquired, "Why can a First Citizen command so much power? He just took the griffin egg from Mage Castille. He didn't do anything to help get it. And the essences from the dungeon as well." I asked, hoping to clear some things up.

He laughed, "That is because the First Citizens can requisition anything they want. As long as we are not fighting or in danger, that is." He looked back, checking on Justin again, "Don't worry. Mage Castille will log what he took from us at the Legion office. Justin will at least have to pay fair market value to the Legion for what he took from us. We may even see a small bonus if they are feeling generous," he winked.

"What about the dungeon room chest from the water room?" I asked, remembering the contents had been part of my deal for being the bait and freezing the monsters.

Firth pursed his lips, "We never saw what was in the prize chest. We can not make false claims under the spell of a Truthseeker, and as a First Citizen, he does not need to submit to a Truthseeker, so he got away with that one. I am sure Castille will make it up to you when we reunite with the company." He leaned in close, "Castille and the company are going to race to Vartadria to register the new dungeon. We just have to make sure Justin Cicero takes at least seven days to reach Varvao."

This was a lot of subterfuge going on. "What do we get for registering a new dungeon?" I asked quietly.

"The company should receive a five thousand gold reward from the Adventurers Guild once it is confirmed," he grinned madly. "It falls outside of Legion business, so we should see the whole reward. If Mage Castille keeps to her regular pattern, then half the reward will be divided amongst the twenty-six of us after replenishing our potions." He patted me back while cracking a wide grin.

Firth ensured no one could hear him before adding, "I heard Justin order Mage Castille not to report the dungeon, but she is going to do it anyway. She is extremely angry about this whole situation. We save his fucking life, and he has the gall to take our prizes. This Justin Cicero is one of the worst First Citizens I have ever dealt with. Most at least have common sense and courtesy."

"If I did get the gold, could I buy my way out of the Legion? Gain my freedom?" I asked while we waited for the others at the bottom of a steep descent. I figured 2,500 gold was almost 100 gold for each man in the company.

"No, you are locked in for your five-year contract. With your ability, they may pull some tricks to keep you locked in, so be careful. I have seen it before. The best thing to do is not draw attention to yourself," Firth admitted.

"How long have you been in the Legion of the Lion?" I asked as we started walking with the group again.

"Sixteen years next November. Don't look surprised. It gives my wife and five children a steady stream of coin. And I get to use the brothels across the Empire without getting hassled," he said good-naturedly.

I didn't understand what would make someone enroll over and over again to risk their life. Was it the adrenaline rush? The path got easier as we began our final descent and could see the horses. Renna joined us as the trail was now wide enough for more people. She told us of her flying excursions around her village and how they had found and conscripted her. She talked a lot about flying and what it was like. The freedom to go in any direction—to do what you wanted. I could tell she felt constrained in her current position.

The horses and legionaries were all there when we arrived. They had fought off a half dozen wolves one night, and one of the horses had to be put down, making us two mounts short. Castille talked briefly with Justin before heading off Northeast, two men riding pillion. Justin came to our small group, irate and swearing. He ordered, "We make for Formica to resupply. Then we will make the best speed to Varvao."

Firth and Wylie took their time getting their mounts ready and did not speed up, no matter how much Justin swore at them. It was only a ten-mile ride to Formica, but we did not get there till evening. I followed Firth's lead and dragged my feet as much as possible. We stayed in the same room with Renna that night, and in the morning, we took time purchasing supplies, eating breakfast, and saddling the mounts.

Justin was not stupid enough to travel alone through the lands, and I was also keeping his griffin egg safe in my dimensional space. Maybe when we reached one of the major roads in two hundred miles, he would take the egg and sprint, but Firth planned to take him on an arcing route, avoiding the main road as long as possible. On the first day, we made only twenty miles of the three hundred, and I was sure Justin was now suspicious of our intentions.

He approached me after dinner that evening, "Legionnaire. I want you and me to ride on alone. My father's birthday is soon, and I want to make sure I make it in time." I went to piss after and consumed my last apex endurance essence. Thankfully, no indigestion.

Firth had schooled me in response, "Sorry, but I have been ordered to protect the Mage Renna. I can not leave her." Her face turned red as I stated it. He definitely knew we were stalling. We had a 300-mile trip, while Castille needed to go nearly 500 miles through more dangerous and rough terrain. Wylie was sure she would find an outlying farm to get horses for the men without.

On our second day of riding, Wylie scouted out some roving swamp rats he wanted to avoid, so we took a four-hour detour. This was how each day

proceeded. We rode cautiously in roughly the right direction but avoided all possible conflict and spent an hour in the evening to find a defensible position. Thankfully it was early in the season, and most of the more dangerous monsters had not migrated with their prey north, according to Firth. During the days, I did get a lot of experience with my horsemanship skills.

Camp life did suck on the journey as the night watch was divided between Firth, Wylie, and myself. Some nights Renna would sit and talk with me quietly. Justin complained something fierce every evening about our slow progress.

On the fourth day, we ended up fleeing a troglodyte war party of five. Firth made sure we galloped in the wrong direction. On the fifth night, we were attacked by lesser shadows and had to get the fire burning bright for the entire night to keep them away. On the sixth day, we circled wide of a diseased trent. A trent was a massive living tree, and this one had no leaves and visible rot. It took us eight days to reach the walls of Varvao, fleeing every possible creature. Justin appeared to be a coward, unwilling to fight any monsters. Since he was a First Citizen, we would have been forced to defend him if he did fight, but he was willing to flee every time.

Renna paused at the gates before leaning into me and whispering, "I hope our paths cross again. Remain safe in your travels." She then rode to reunite with High Mage Dacian.

Justin's parting words were not as pleasant, "Give me the fucking griffin egg so I can take a portal to Olheus." I gave him the egg, and he stormed off, leaving us the mount he had borrowed and all his gear.

"Are we done with him?" I asked Firth.

Firth shook his head, "For now. I doubt he will be too happy after he finds out that Castille beat him to report the dungeon. But I already suspect he knows."

"How much power does a baron's son have beyond being a First Citizen?" I asked as we rode through the gates ourselves. Firth was leading us to the Legion office and barracks.

"Well, there are seventeen provinces and sixteen Dukes to run all the provinces besides the Emperor's personal province. Each Duke has a Count in charge of each city and five to ten Barons that manage regions of their province. I am guessing there are maybe one hundred barons in all of the

Telhian Empire. Some are more powerful than others. Baron Cicero supplies all the horses to the standing army and the Legion. That is nearly two thousand new riding mounts and an additional one thousand war mounts yearly,” Firth explained.

Wylie added, “A lot of us knew Justin’s pathfinder, Marius. He used to be in the Legion and was a good man. I think part of all this was Castille getting some payback for us for his death.” Firth was nodding in agreement.

“It would have been easier just to leave him in the dungeon,” I said seriously.

“Mage Castille doesn’t like to fail. She sees everything to the end. You will learn that soon enough,” Firth replied.

“So what do we do?” I asked.

“We report in, and there should be a message from Castille on where we are to go to meet up with them,” Firth said as he dismounted in front of the Legion office in the city.

Chapter 19: Self Assessment

The Legion office was more of a tavern than a formal building. A dozen men in legionnaire armor ate at the tables. Another dozen men and women in civilian clothing were eating food and drinking. I could tell most were legion by their well-muscled bodies in the more comfortable clothing. This city was much larger than any city I had been to date, so the two dozen legionaries inside should not have been a surprise.

I followed my mates to the bar, and Firth ordered four ales and paid for them. He handed us each one and took two for himself as we went and sat at a table. We got a few looks, but no one talked to us. I asked Firth, “So what do we do now?”

“After we finish these,” he held up his two mugs, “I will go shower, hit the local brothel, and then I will check for messages from Castille.”

He sipped on his ale, and I was a bit speechless. It seemed like we should have checked for messages first. I asked, “Can I head out and check out the city?”

Wylie said, “No problem. Be back here in four hours. You might want to shower first. You do not realize how much you reek. You smell like shit, horses, and sweat.” He pointed down a hallway, “Showers are that way. They will wash your clothes and treat your leather armor.”

Firth said seriously, “Don’t run off, Eryk. It will not take long for the Legion Hounds to track you down. The punishment is always a public death.” With that wonderful news, Firth was off to the showers. I followed slowly and stripped in front of a boy who put all my things in a box with the number forty-four on it.

He bowed, “Your items will be ready in two hours, legionnaire. You didn’t take your coin pouch,” he pointed at it. It was empty, but I unclipped it anyway and carried it with me. I guessed he did not want anyone questioning missing coins. There was a cold shower to scrub the dirt off to start, then a hot soaking pool, and then you finished with a scented oil rub. I didn’t spend much time in the hot soak even though it felt good because I was anxious to get into the city. I also found it odd to sit in a pool with half a dozen other naked men. They were all familiar with each other and in a deep conversation about methods to fight a hill giant.

After the soak, I dried, and there were three scented oils to choose from—lavender, honeysuckle, and coconut. I went with the honeysuckle. I had not seen Firth, so he must have raced through to baths to get to the brothel. My clothes were not ready, and I only had access to a linen robe while I waited.

I went into a closet, pulled out my simple clothes from my space, filled my coin pouch with my gold and silver, and went out the back door. I walked to the streets, and after two questions, I was headed toward the trade district. My pouch bulged under my pants, and I always kept my hand near it, mindful of thieves.

The city reminded me of something akin to an open market with rows of tents selling everything under the sun. What I really wanted was an essence collector or a stat assessment tablet. I asked and was directed to a small elaborate fountain in a cul de sac. The cul de sac didn’t have tents but actual shops, magic shops. The security was higher, and maybe a dozen city guards milled around the fountain. I had only seen sporadic pairs of city guards in the general market, so the fourteen here showed how important the cul de sac was.

I entered the bookstore first. A few patrons were browsing the shelves, and a middle-aged woman with a distracting mole on her chin asked me, "Can I help you?"

It was hard not to focus on the hairy mole, but I met her dull-brown eyes and asked, "I am looking for a book to teach my niece to read. She just started and needs something intermediate." She beamed at me, thinking I was helping a young girl.

"I have a few things, although you might want to try one of the general stands in the market as well," she said as she motioned me to follow.

She pulled out three books she thought were reasonably straightforward to teach a person to read. I negotiated the price to ten silver from thirteen as all the books were old and worn. One book was the history of the Telhian Empire for kids. The second was children's stories of brave men and women of the Adventurer's Guild fighting the orc hordes. The third book was an actual dictionary. I just needed to practice my reading of Latin. I thanked the woman and moved back to the fountain. I would have purchased a book on magic, but that would have cost too much gold.

I tried asking one of the guards if anyone sold essence collectors. He curtly responded, "You can only buy them from the Empire shops. Their sale is highly regulated." I apologized as I backed away, not realizing a collector was that difficult to obtain. I suppose if you could use one on a live person to collect essence, then the restrictions made sense.

I considered getting my dungeon amulet appraised, but I might draw attention to myself if it was exceptionally valuable. Instead, I was able to find a tablet reader to rent in private. I could go into a room, activate the tablet myself, and see how much I had developed. I was more interested in getting my magic affinities assessed.

Tablet readers were apparently expensive to purchase and even to just rent. I paid an entire gold to access a stat and magic affinity tablet. I did both so as to not be too suspicious. My physical, mental, and magical stat reading went incredibly well.

Physical	Mental	Magical	
Strength (+2/+0)	48/79	Intellect (+3/+0)	31/54
Power (+2/+0)	45/82	Reasoning (+4/+0)	46/59
Quickness (+3/+0)	32/49	Perception (+2/+0)	54/60
		Aether Pool (+2/+0)	14/22
		Channeling (+4/+0)	14/55
		Aether Shaping (+2/+0)	8/8

Dexterity (+5/+3)	35/59	Insight (+3/+0)	34/49	Aether Tolerance (+1/+0)	22/50
Endurance (+10/+8)	66/95	Resilience (+1/+0)	46/71	Aether Resistance (+1/+0)	5/19
Constitution (+4/+0)	41/65	Empathy (+1/+0)	11/21	Prime Aether Affinity	Space
Coordination (+2/+0)	40/61	Fortitude (+4/+0)	50/89	Minor Aether Affinity	Time

I remembered my last reading over six weeks ago. Since then, I have consumed a major essence for Dexterity and three apex essences for Endurance. Although my magical values had improved, my aether went from 12 to 14, and channeling went from 11 to 14. My aether shaping had maxed out. This was why I would never be able to cast spells, according to Damian. In order to write spell forms with my aether, I would need at least 30 in my aether shaping statistic. I could tell how poor my ability to control my aether was now that it had been some time. I just did not have the potential to be a true mage.

On a more positive note, my physical stats greatly improved. Strength (+2), Power (+2), Quickness (+3), Dexterity (+5), Endurance (+10), Constitution (+4), Coordination (+2). I think my potential for endurance also increased from 87 to 95. That confirmed in my mind that my spell form for the convergence affinity was locked into maximizing what benefits I received from consuming an essence. It should have taken dozens of apex essences to raise my endurance potential by just one point. It still felt like my gains were maybe too much since I was not training twelve hours a day as I had been at legionarie training. Was I missing something?

Did my time in the dungeon play a role? I was told the closer my ratings got to my potential, the harder it would be to increase them. I had been pushing my body harder but for much shorter amounts of time.

A knock at the door said my time was almost up. I set up the magic affinity tablet for the rare magics first and channeled my aether. The tablet displayed everything I had expected.

Rare Magics	
Space	98
Time	90
Displacement	61
Materialism	9
Worlds	88
Void	22
Convergence	74

There was no change to any of my affinities that I remembered. I quickly burned the numbers into my memory.

I reset and switched the tablet to elemental affinities and channeled my aether into the tablet.

Elemental Magics (Common)

Fire	0
Air	0
Water	0
Earth	0
Lightning (Energy)	8
Spirit (Healing)	19
Nature (Plant)	0

My heart dropped a little. My healing affinity was just 19. I should be able to learn a spell form to help with my healing, but it would not be exceptional. Still, any healing spell form would be greatly welcomed. The knock at the door came again, and I rushed to the last reading, the uncommon magics.

Unaffiliated Magics (Uncommon)

Charm (Mind)	5
Illusion	0
Clairvoyance	0
Protection (Guardian)	30
Necromancy	0
Celestial	0
Abyssal	0

I reset the tablet and stood. Nothing earth-shattering, but I still had my massive affinities in the rare magics. I wished I had a book to figure out what possible spell forms I could get for my protection affinity. I also knew there were apex essences out there that could increase my magic affinities. Renna had said High Mage Dacian was questing for the apex earth affinity essence. I wondered if my convergence ability to maximize essence also extended to magic affinities. It had to. Could my convergence spell form maximizing gains from essence force my potentials past 100? From what Damian had told me, 100 was the limit for humans.

The door opened, and the proctor motioned me out of the room. Another person had paid and was waiting. I thanked him and walked out into the street. I spent a silver coin at various food carts as I walked the magical market in the cul de sac. I still had twenty gold from the dungeon chest, but I

was not sure if I should spend it. My knowledge was just too lacking. I would probably overpay or get something I did not need.

It was also close to four hours, so I decided to return to the Legion Hall. I figured I would have more time tomorrow to browse the markets. When I entered the hall, it was evening, the number of Legionaries had tripled, and the tables were full. Wylie waved me over to a table with Firth and someone I did not recognize—a blonde man in leather armor.

Firth spoke, “We were just about to scour the city for you, Eryk. This is Prefect Bacchus. He runs the message dispatch. He just gave us our orders.”

Wylie interrupted with an angry spat, “We are being sent to the Western Front. The City of Macha. Fucking Justin Cicero must have pulled some strings to fuck over Castille.” Prefect Bacchus eyebrows went up in surprise. The Captain looked like he had a rod shoved up his ass.

I asked, “What does this mean? The western front is the Kingdom of Bartiradia, right?” I had looked at some maps but was no expert.

Prefect Bacchus turned the sheet in his hands, “It is fifteen hundred miles from here. The borders are constantly shifting. Mage Castille has been asked to reinforce the city, not fight on the battlefield.”

Firth leaned back in his chair, annoyed, “We heard that before. Pegasus Campaign, Defense of Amatalhos, Emperor’s Diplomacy Mission to the Heptarchy. They always say this mission is a chance to relax, just like taking eggs from a hen. Then that fucking hen has five-inch claws and a five-foot tongue that can strangle you.”

“True story,” Wylie interrupted but then laughed to himself and took a long pull of his ale.

Prefect Bacchus stood and nodded to the three of us, obviously uncomfortable with the informality. He said, “The portal will be open to Macha just after the mid-day bell. Do not miss the opening.”

After he left, Firth swore, “Fucking rich sons of the favored,” referring to Bacchus. “That ass has never seen and will never see battle in his entire enlistment and will make ten times the coin what we do.”

After spouting off some more obscenities, Firth calmed down, but I had a weird feeling it was more of an act than being truly angry with Prefect Bacchus. Personally, I did not see the difference between risking our lives against monsters or another Kingdom. I wisely kept my mouth closed. Firth looked at me and said, "No horses on the front. We are not calvary. Before you get to the bunks tonight, get our gear from the horses, Eryk. Wylie, complete three packs of provisions for us before you lay down."

Firth took a long pull, "I am going to kick the rumor mill tonight and see if anything useful falls out. He looked around the room, stood, and made his way to join a table of intoxicated legionaries still in armor."

I went to get a meal and ate it at the counter. I was still a bit famished. The barkeep slid me another ale, and he asked, "You are with Castille's company?"

I nodded while stripping a chicken leg with my teeth. He seemed to consider, "Is Linus still with them?" I nodded again as Linus was our medic. He smiled, "He saved my life. Give him this when you see him. Tell him Nolan is still alive and kicking." He produced a bottle of amber liquid from under the bar. I took the bottle and nodded in understanding.

After the meal, I went to the bath and found bin forty-four. My clothes and gear were clean. I carried it to the stables and found our packs neatly arranged on shelves. I pulled an apple I had brought with me and walked to Ginger, my horse. "Sorry, lady, this is the end of the line for us. We had some really good times. You are a good horse." I rubbed her down one last time.

I spent the next two hours going through the bags and packing our gear into three backpacks. When no one was around, I moved the books, luxury tent, and bedroll into my dimensional space. Each of the three backpacks weighed about sixty pounds when I finished. I lugged them inside to the common room, and a drunk and conversing Firth told me to bring them to bunk room seven.

The bunk room was empty and had four beds, all floor-level. I dropped a pack on each bed and took the fourth open one for myself. The mattress was canvas stuffed with some type of soft straw and smelled like sweat from the last user. I almost preferred sleeping on the ground.

I still fell asleep in short order. Wylie woke me when he entered and tossed three heavy packages on the ground, rolling a pack to the floor and then quickly falling asleep. Firth didn't show up till much later in the evening, clearly

drunk. He slept next to the backpack I had prepared rather than tossing it on the floor. I rolled over and tried to get back to sleep.

Chapter 20: Displacement Mage

I slept heavily even with the noises my roommates made in the night. Wylie woke us in the morning. Firth told us not to leave the Legion office building. I went to the baths and soaked in the hot tub for an hour as I was the only one there. I had come to get my clothes washed for free and changed into my Legion gear. The box I was given this time was numbered thirty-six and was much smaller. After my long soak, I waited for my clean clothes to be returned.

When I took the box, I paused as this wooden box was a perfect size. It closely matched what I had revealed to be the size of the dimensional space. I moved the box into my space, appropriating it for the greater good. From now on, I would no longer have to guess if I was exceeding my storage limitations—at least, what I told everyone it was. I would use the box for Legion business. I did not know how I did not think of this earlier. Rather proud of myself, I went to the common room. Wylie gave me a hard time about spending two hours in the baths. On the table, we all repacked our gear. We were trying to squeeze in the food Wylie procured.

“Eryk, we are going to the war front. You always want to make sure you take as much food as possible,” Firth advised.

“As much good food as possible,” Wylie added.

“A legionnaire marches on his stomach, Eryk. We are going to be working in the army camps, and their food is terrible. Hoard what non-perishables you can, when you can. If you can squeeze any spices into your little magic space, do it now. They are worth their weight in gold in a siege,” Firth said.

“Siege? What are you talking about?” I asked, suddenly unsteady.

“The rumors last night are the Kingdom plans to push deep into Empire lands and surround Macha. The Emperor is going to allow it to draw as many enemies into the land surrounding the city as possible before wiping them out with a secret attack. At least, that is what I garnered from the twenty men I drank with last night. Then again, we are practically on the other side of the

Empire, and what these drunkards know might be dragon shit,” Firth said calmly.

After our packs were set, Wylie led me to the Legion goods warehouse. It was completely different than last time when I took what I wanted without supervision. Now Wylie filled out a requisition sheet. He waited for it to be reviewed and then answered a dozen questions about why he needed pepper flakes, garlic powder, onion powder, dried oregano, dried rosemary, and paprika. Wylie eventually received large glass containers filled with spices. I asked about Kraken salt, and Wylie laughed, “These spices are a gold or two each. Kraken salt in one of these containers, maybe 100 gold. Alchemists make it, and you can not find it in a Legion supply room.”

The attendant who was putting the large glass jars with our spices on the counter added, “Kraken salt is about a gold an ounce, quite literally worth its weight in gold. The last Kraken to be slain was some four years ago.”

Wylie quipped, “I know. I was there. Can you squeeze all these into your space? Our cook will be happy to get them, and you will be a taste bud hero. Since they come in the glass containers, we can not pack them.” I was able to fit all six containers in the crate in my dimensional storage. We added small leather bags of sea salt until the crate was filled, and I told Wylie I could not store any more.

As we walked to find Firth, I asked, “So, are there not any supplies out in the city of Macha?”

“Luxury goods are rare on the front. The problem is the time it takes to reach the city. There is only one Displacement Mage in each city, as the affinity is quite rare and the spell is difficult to learn. They have limits on how much they can transport. Also, once the siege begins, the enemy will set up an array around the city, preventing the use of the portals,” Wylie said conversationally.

Firth waved us over, and we put on the packs, each one weighing over seventy pounds now. That did not include our leather armor and blades. I had two short swords and two short curved blades. I was not carrying a spear but planned to add a few in my dimensional space. We followed Firth to the street and toward the upper city. Firth said, “If you see Vincent Cicero, keep your mouth shut.” Firth was talking to Wylie and not me, but I got the message.

The clothing of the people started to get more and more opulent as we followed Firth the portal. The square where the portal was had a full company

of legionaries guarding it. That told me it was too important to leave to city guards or the army. It was a large stone archway situated on light gray stone. The gray stone had black runic markings on it. The archway itself was a plain black stone.

In front of the portal were a number of people loaded down with gear. Most looked like merchants, but there were a few soldiers. Firth went to one of the legionaries guarding the portal and handed him our orders. The man inspected them carefully and then waved us forward. Firth said, "When the portal is activated, move quickly into it. It is like a dungeon gate in that you will be slightly disoriented after you pass through. Try not to fall on your face this time," He grinned at me.

We did not have to wait long. I was talking to a merchant from the Kingdom of Nausis, far to the south, when a loud bell chimed twice, and everyone faced the portal. There were maybe forty of us in total. A mage in bright yellow robes went to a small monolith under the guard of a pair of legionaries.

Firth chuckled at my intense focus, "Never seen a portal opening before? You must be from a backwater kingdom."

The mage placed both hands on the pillar, and the air started buzzing with electricity. I watched as the black stone around the portal started to glow blue, and the runes underneath us matched the blue light. The archway shimmered into an image that looked blurry or like a heat haze. Two bells sounded, and everyone moved forward. I was pulled with everyone else and walked into the arch.

It was the same as walking into and out of a dungeon. On the other side, the air was heavy with moisture, and the buildings were much more drab, favoring a grayish wood. I did not have time to study the buildings as Firth was already walking toward a tall citadel made of blue-gray stone. I followed him, and dozens of soldiers from the regular army were inside the bailey. Some were drilling, and some were resting. They did not look war-weary to me as I followed Firth into the fortified building.

He turned left into the first room, and I noticed the first legionaries I had seen to date. I recognized Orson, Mateo, and Felix. I went and sat with them, dropping my pack. "Eryk, you survived the First Citizen!" Felix said with a smile.

“Did everyone in the company make your trip safely?” I asked, sitting on a bench.

Orson chuckled, “Donte lost a finger to giant snapper, and Flans broke his leg falling off his horse when we battled some centaurs. Other than that, it was an easy ride.”

Mateo choked, “Easy ride!? Fifteen hours a day at a steady pace? I can barely walk.” I snickered a little remembering how much grief I had taken from the men with my own soreness. They even gave me an expensive pillow as a joke.

“So, what is the news on this mission posting?” Wylie asked.

Orson looked perturbed, “Three legion companies are in the citadel. We are to rotate foot patrols northeast and southeast. The soldiers will cover the road due east toward the Empire, where any skirmishes are likely to happen. There is mostly woods northeast, but there have been a number of sprites causing mischief. The route southeast is boggy. Just giant frogs but a few days ago, a bullywug was spotted.”

“What is...” I started to say.

Orson, one of the company scouts, answered before I finished asking my question, “Sprites are small faires that can go invisible. Bullwugs are frog men. Both are a pain in the arse in their natural habitat.”

“So, what direction are we patrolling?” I asked.

“Southeast,” Delmar said, joining the group. “Mateo, Eryk will be bunking with you. Show him where.”

Mateo gingerly stood and indicated I should pick up my pack. I started following him but noticed Lirkin, the company cook. I paused to unload the glass jars of spices and leather bags of salt from my dimensional storage, “Damn it, boy!” he started, “Your talents are wasted carrying around those life-saving potions. Whenever you want a double portion, just ask!” He said jokingly as he checked the jars.

I would have to thank Wylie for this boon. I still had the bottle of amber liquid for Linus but had not seen him yet. It was also in my dimensional space.

We walked out into the city, and it was mostly soldiers. A lot of the shop fronts looked abandoned. Mateo answered, "This city has been handed back and forth for the past three hundred years. The regular people have an instinct when it is about to happen again."

Mateo went into a store that was clearly a bakery. A large, cold oven dominated half the back wall. Mateo explained, "Not enough room in the Legion Hall in the citadel for everyone. At least not if you want to sleep peacefully." He pointed up the stairs, "Three rooms up there, each has two beds. Felix and I have one room. Konstantin is in one room, and the third is currently empty, but the beds are children sized." He left me, and I climbed the stairs and found the kid's room.

The beds were small, but I pushed them together, and if I slept diagonally, I would fit. I dropped my gear with a loud thud and got to work moving the beds. Konstantin appeared in the doorway, "If you are going to make all that noise, then you have the energy to practice. Grab your two blades. There is a small yard in the back."

Great. My plans for a nap were crushed; instead, I was about to get a sound beating under the guise of training again for apparently waking up Konstantin.