

Raelia walked the promenade in the King's Palace, following the mage. After being sent home by her brother from Macha, she spent two days recovering in the Rookery. She had been mucking nests and showing the newest class of Griffin Riders how to care for their saddles and tack.

Then news came of the Telhian ruthlessness.

The mages of the Telhian Empire had torn down the city's outer walls with earthquakes. It was completely unexpected and devastating. She had been worried her brother had perished in the attack, but he had managed to retreat with remnants of the army. She had not seen him in the last three weeks, but at least she knew he was okay. She heard he was preparing the defenses in the city of Tanal near the border as the Telhians had already marched on Guiracas.

Her anger at the news had made her put in a request for a new griffin, but she was denied. The Master Griffin Tamer told her she would have to spend the next two years cleaning and teaching before he would consider giving her another hatchling to raise. At first, she had been angry; the kingdom needed trained Griffin Riders, and she was trained, but then she was reminded how she had failed her mount.

She wanted to get revenge on the Telhians, as many friends and comrades had been killed. She had been

abused herself, taken captive by a legionnaire, and forced to attack one of her brother's bodyguards. She had been questioned by a number of mages at the Magus Scholarium and had her aether resistance tested five times. One mage even checked to ensure she wasn't a doppelganger, as the idea that a legionnaire could force her into a dimensional space seemed too absurd.

Maybe she could fight as a soldier or Ranger if it could not be in the skies. She had all the qualifications to be a Ranger, and many Griffin Riders came from the Ranger's ranks. She went to the Master Tamer and asked to be transferred. He looked disappointed but granted her request the next day. She was assigned to the fourteenth Ranger squad.

She was frustrated to learn the fourteenth Rangers were assigned to Magus Scholarium. The Magus Scholarium was in the capital. It was a free magic school for anyone who had the potential to be a mage. Their sprawling campus outside the capital included fifty thousand acres of woodland. The fourteenth Rangers patrolled this area. She later learned her brother had placed her there to protect her. This infuriated her, but she would do her duty and look for a chance to fight the Telhians.

Raelia's new commander was Jalon Leoyra. He was an ancient-looking human who was deceptively strong and quick. He must have been taking essences to maintain his youthful physique. Today, she was following Jalon to meet with the High Mage Traeliorn Kelran.

She watched the young mage students wandering the campus, absorbed in their little world. Children, she mused, not realizing a battle was happening just a few hundred miles to the west. They climbed one of the tallest towers in the Magus Scholarium. The circular stairs wrapped the outer wall with windows every twenty steps she noted. The view rolled from the campus to the woods she presided over. They reached one of the upper floors, and the door was open.

“Enter!” a commanding voice sounded. She followed Jalon inside. She was here to take notes and run messages if needed, not to participate. Raelia had never met the High Mage Traeliorn Kelran before, but she could feel the power oozing off him just seeing the powerful elf. He took up her concentration, and she missed the ice drake curled in the corner of the room.

The white-scaled creature yawned, and its predatory fangs had her step back. Traeliorn laughed. “Girl, Kylma is about as dangerous as a puppy. I don’t think she has hunted a day in her life.” The drake belched a cold mist toward the mage in a challenge. “Go stretch your wings, Kylma. Your disrespect toward me is embarrassing me in front of my guests.”

The glistening white-scaled drake stood and unwound its body. Kylma was much larger than she had guessed. The drake was slowly stretched and then dove out a nearby window. Traeliorn shook his head. “Failed in taming that one, but she does make a good conversationalist.”

Raelia couldn't help but voice her disbelief. "You can talk to drakes!" Jalon gave her a harsh look for breaking protocol in front of the High Mage.

The High Mage laughed. "No. But that is the point. I have had a dozen wives in my life, and all we did was get into arguments. Kylma doesn't talk back, so I never lose the argument!"

Jalon shook his head. "He has been married thrice, Raelia. You will find our High Mage is prone to exaggerate everything. Now, Traeliorn, why did you request my presence? Do you need more ingredients for your summons?"

"My apprentice just sent a communication. His two hellhound guards have been killed," the High Mage said seriously.

The author's tale has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

"Is Vaeril injured?" the old ranger asked concerned. "Do you need us to retrieve him?"

"No, it was just a single scout. But now he has no protections while he sets up the next summons. I would like to portal one of your rangers to protect for the next month," Traeliorn requested.

The old human huffed angrily. "The council does not agree with your methods, old friend. Putting your apprentice out

in the Empire to summon and unleash beasts is a danger to him and innocent people.”

The air suddenly crackled with blue sparks. Traeliorn power emanated, and he screamed at the old Ranger, “They killed my grandson in Macha! I would kill every citizen of the Empire if I could!”

The old Ranger did not back down. “How many times are you and your apprentice going to open gates to elemental planes and other dangerous lands? One of these times, the creature you summon will be too strong for you to control. You cannot hide your fatigue from me, old man! Our days of saving the world are over. We are retired! Your grandson made his own choices.”

Raelia suddenly wished she could be anywhere but here. The mage could snuff out the Ranger with a thought. The air slowly cleared, and they both calmed down. Raelia stepped forward unexpectedly. “I will go.”

Both sets of wisened eyes turned to her. Raelia stood tall. This was a chance for her to get back into the fight. Jalon said, “Your brother sent you to my care, Raelia. I will not send you to your death in the Telhian Empire.”

Raelia smirked as she was accustomed to using people’s words against them. “You just said the High Mage’s grandson made his own choice. I want to make my own choice.”

“I like this one, Jalon,” the High Mage smiled. his blue eyes twinkling in victory.

Jalon threw up his arms in disgust. He pointed at Raelia. "Burn her face into your mind. When word comes, she is dead, know it was just as good as you doing the deed yourself!"

"I am prepared to accept that. Leave her here, and I will help her prepare for her duty," the High Mage said gravely.

Raelia felt she was slightly over her head. The High Mage addressed her after Jalon left angry. "You know he is right. I have sent more young men and women to their deaths than I can count to fight the Telhians. Every one of them is burned up here," he tapped his temple.

"I am willing. Feel no guilt, High Mage," Raelia reaffirmed.

"Your primary task will be to watch Vaeril while he is sleeping." He sighed. "Let me see if I can find a few things in this mess to help you in your task." The old elf slowly went through his extremely disorganized closets.

She was given a thermal stone fire starter, a wand of aetheric missiles, three dungeon-grade healing potions, and a ring of sustenance. A fortune in artificed gear to help alleviate the summoner's guilt that he was sending her into severe danger.

Later that evening, she was waiting on Traeliorn, who was gathering materials to summon a wyvern near the Telhian capital. An old human woman came into the office unannounced. She immediately started yelling at the High Mage, "You old geezer!" She walked up to him. "You are leaving again to summon one of your beasts!"

“My third wife,” the High Mage told Raelia with a small smile. “You are in for a show.”

“You idiot,” the gray-haired woman continued. “Just let it be. Why don’t you help the rest of the High Council figure out what in the dragon’s fire the Telhians are up to south of Macha!”

“I don’t care!” He rebuffed. “If the emperor made an appearance there, then I might for a chance to snuff him out. Until then, I will show his people how inept he is at keeping them safe!”

“If you confronted the emperor, he would banish your soul to the void!” The woman barked at him. She waved a finger at him angrily. She stormed out angrily after some more back-and-forth screaming. Raelia wished she could have faded into the wall during the screaming session. The white drake returned during the argument and just ignored the two mages as it curled back into a ball and went to sleep. This seemed commonplace for it.

Raelia slept in a room below, and the next morning, the High Mage opened a portal in his office. Raelia’s mouth hung open in disbelief. “How?” It usually took a few mages together to open a portal.

The High Mage winked. “Lots of practice. Also, my apprentice has an anchor I can latch the portal to. Shall we?” He gestured to the portal. Raelia picked up the heavy pack of food and gear and entered first.

She appeared inside a cave with a young elf focused on a metal plate. The apprentice, Vaeril, was contributing his own aether to maintain the portal. His golden hair was matted with sweat, and his green eyes focused. Traeliorn walked through next, just in his mage robes. He turned and faced the portal and asked, "Well, are you coming? Or do I have to walk?" He sounded irritated, but the ice drake eventually emerged, and the portal snapped shut.

Raelia stared at the Vaeril as he panted from the effort. Traeliorn seemed unconcerned as he looked around and nodded. "Vaeril, have you moved a good distance from where your pets were killed?"

"Yes, Master. I am twenty miles from where I was discovered," he answered.

"Good, this is Raelia. She is a trained Ranger and will be your protector," Raelia waved at the apprentice. He was kind of cute, and his deep green eyes were mesmerizing. He did not seem as impressed with her.

Traeliorn continued, "I am heading north to summon another wyvern. I want you to summon some hill giants and send them," he considered for a moment, "send them in the direction of the scout that killed your hounds." The apprentice nodded happily.

"How many hill giants?" he asked as the High Mage was mounting the ice drake.

“Two. You cannot handle any more than two,” he advised and then was in the air. Raelia marveled that he did not need a saddle to ride the drake.

Vaeril looked her over and sighed, disappointed his protector was a young female elf. Raelia read his eyes, “I am a skilled Ranger and used to be a Griffin Rider.”

He cocked an eyebrow and slowly nodded appreciatively. “Good. Come, we have a few miles to walk, and I will be setting up a summoning circle while you watch my back.” The pair started walking, and Raelia started up a conversation with the young mage. It was unsurprising that they were almost the same age. Raelia thought this was going to be a good assignment. She would help get revenge on the Telhians, and maybe she would make a new friendship.

The march on the road was mostly orderly. We kept three men abreast, spaced ten feet apart, with Castile, Adrian, and Delmar leading. We passed refugees headed to Sobral every few hours. The refugees found the most interesting thing about our company was Maveith. I had Maveith on my left and Brutus on my right, so it felt like every refugee was also staring at me. It felt like it had been a long time being part of the company since I had worked in small groups and foraged for the alchemist. The voices of everyone around me blended in a comforting background noise.

I noticed we had no scouts out as Konstantin was walking next to Firth, two rows ahead. Maveith was walking and

working on sewing in the white leather lining to the manticore pouch. I didn't have the heart to tell him I didn't need it. After all, I had a dimensional space. We had marched about a dozen miles when we noted five legionnaires were sitting in the road ahead. It was Flavius and the men he had been tasked with retrieving: Pascal, Remus, Cyrus, and Soren.

Remus was the only legionnaire from Mage Gregor's company that had survived Macha. He kept to himself, and I couldn't imagine how he felt losing his mage and everyone in his company. He was also easy to identify when we had our helms off as he was the ginger in the company.

The five men were sitting on large blocks of rough-cut white marble stacked on the side of the road, and I could see a well-worn path heading into the woods. It looked like these were the province markers the men had been burying in the ground for weeks. Two buried markers on either side of the road reinforced my guess.

This must be where they started the project and delivered cut marble from the quarry. I did not see the point of all this effort to place these markers, but I guessed rich people in every world liked to remind people what was theirs.

We paused for a snack, and Blaze sat with Maveith, Brutus, and myself. "So those are the stones you have been burying in the ground? They look heavy," I patted the marble I was sitting on.

Each marble block was roughly one-foot square and three feet in length. “Those blocks weigh as much as four men. You got to laze about and walk in the woods while we did all the real work, Eryk!” Blaze said with a half smile.

Maveith thought to inform him, and maybe he was defending me a little, “Eryk has been fighting manticores, ettins, and goblins. How many creatures have you killed since arriving, Brutus?”

Brutus laughed, “No need to take things so literally, goliath. I was joking! Everyone in the company knows if there is danger on the horizon, it is best to keep your distance from Eryk as it will surely find him.”

Maveith nodded slowly, “Do not worry, Eryk. If danger finds you, I will stand beside you to face it.”

Brutus laughed, “You may not quite get humor, Maveith, but at least you are good at checkers.”

Maveith reached for his pack, “I brought the game board. Do you want to play?” We all laughed, and after Brutus lost a game of checkers, Castile had us headed into the woods.

Flavius and Konstantin took off ahead of us, and I walked to Adrian and asked, “Should Maveith and I be scouting as well?”

Adrian looked to Castile, who gave a sharp nod, “No, with Falvius back, you don’t need to. But with your new air shield, we would like to keep you close to Castile. I

typically protect her right side and Delmar her left. We want you to protect her rear.”

I nodded in understanding. “So, should I be marching with you then? At the front?”

Adrian confirmed, “When the sense of danger is in the air, yes.”

Maveith was behind me and asked in his baritone, “What do you want me to do? I told Eryk I would stand with him.”

Delmar turned his head to look at us as he walked next to Castile, “You can cover him with that monstrous bow of yours.”

Maveith nodded, happy at the answer, and continued to focus on finishing the pouch. For having such large hands, he was doing such fine detail work in the stitching. The path was well-trodden, as they had carted dozens of stones into the woods. The men behind him were joking about the effort and how the donkey cart they used was constantly getting stuck.

The stones were buried with only about twelve inches showing. The white marble tops made a clear dotted line in the landscape. As we walked deeper, Flavius and Konstantin rotated back to the company. Being closer to Castile, I could overhear their reports. They mostly reported what type of tracks they found. So far, nothing dangerous.

As evening settled, we made camp in a clearing, and two long strips of white tarp were staked into the ground, making an X. Castile watched them work and informed me, "That is for Master Mage Sebastian. He is not due for a few days, but we will put it out when we stop to rest and camp. It has a light aether signature to it, so he can find it easily when he overflies it."

"How will we fight alongside drakes?" I asked as I unpacked my bedroll and tarp.

"We won't. They will be in the air, covering us and scouting. High Mage Zyna will join us on the ground for the real fight." Castile relayed taciturnly.

I hesitated momentarily before asking, "Do I have anything to worry about?"

Castile looked at me, "Not from Zyna. She, like me, was a plebian before attending the Mage College. She completed her service quite some time ago. I think she has a manor in a coastal town somewhere."

"And from Sebastian?" I pressed.

Castile looked into the woods where Flavius was circling the camp in the opposite direction of Konstantin, "He is unpredictable. Knowing his temper, I am surprised Flavius returned to us. Keep your distance from him. I will shield you if I can." I nodded and thanked Castile before setting up my tarp tent.

This content has been misappropriated from Royal Road; report any instances of this story if found elsewhere.

Maveith had a tarp but chose to sleep under the stars since the buggy season had passed. After dinner, I lost a game of checkers to Maveith and went to sleep. I was asleep for maybe four hours before someone was kicking my boot. I was instantly awake and putting on my helm. Felix smirked, "All is fine, Eryk. Your turn for watch."

I groaned as I had forgotten that I would be part of the night watch rotation since I was no longer scouting. I was paired with Pavel, and we took the positions and huddled in our cloaks to keep the body heat trapped inside. It was cold enough tonight to see our breath form a cloud on exhaling. Pavel had a legion cloak, and I had my black manticore cloak. It did a much better job retaining warmth. I would roll it up and send it to my dimensional storage after the watch to minimize wear and tear.

Pavel was not much of a conversationalist. He was also struggling to stay awake. The only excitement all night was a normal owl swooping down and catching a rodent of some type. I slept another few hours and was up before dawn and packing. Lirkin fed the company, and we continued our trek, following Konstantin toward the last place he had seen the elven summoner.

During our afternoon break, Maveith proudly presented the manticore sack to me. He had dyed it black to match my cloak. It was large enough for me to squeeze both hands

inside—or Maveith's single hand. It looked exceptional, except I knew where it had come from.

Maveith excitedly explained, "I used the ice drake hide for its natural chilling properties. It can keep herbs you gathered potent for much longer. The manticore leather should be able to take a pounding but still last you a lifetime. I have seen warriors in my village pass one down for generations."

"It is fantastic, supple and smooth, Maveith. Your effort and care in making it will cause me to treasure it always," I studied it for a moment longer under his watchful eye, and then sent it to my dimensional space. I explained, "This way, it will not get ruined while I am fighting."

The second night in the woods, Konstantin had us be more cautious. He estimated we were about fifteen miles from where he found the summoner. Castile ordered the camp to be made and informed everyone that we would wait here until Master Mage Sebastian and High Mage Zyna arrived rather than risk an engagement without their support.

Maveith noted the weasel den was probably in this area. Delmar barked with a smile at the news, "Since we have a few hours of daylight and do not know how long we will be here, I want a trench line dug there and there," he pointed. We were on a small hill clear of trees, so at least the ground would be free of roots.

We spent six hours digging two defense trenches at right angles and staking them. We were also given assigned sleeping areas by Delmar. It almost felt like he was trying to get more rigid with the camp to show off to the two arriving mages. The regular army would construct elaborate camps every night when they marched. Small mage companies, not so much.

Everyone except me was used to digging from the last few weeks. Digging blisters were different from weapon blisters on the hands, and I voiced a vocal dissent to the work. Of course, I would heal them just enough tonight so they would not bother me. Maveith joined us but was relegated to rolling large rocks out of the ditch for us.

The company cleaned up in a stream, and I was fortunate to get the first watch this evening. It was early in the night when the familiar two bangs of warning came. The camp was roused, and Firth, who had been on the other side, informed Delmar that he had spotted one of the giant weasels.

“Beast was bigger than a horse and moved just as fast,” Firth told the awakened men and prepared company.

Everyone looked to Castile. She closed her eyes and sent out her all-seeing-eye. I knew we could see it in the dark, and so we waited. A few moments later, she spoke, “Two giant weasels are moving away from our camp.”

Maveith said, “They are smart creatures and would not attack our camp with so many men. I just suggest no one

wanders in the woods alone at night to relieve themselves.”

Adrian nodded, a thank you to Maveith, “We will double the guard.” Some men groaned as going from six to twelve meant most of us would get half as much sleep. Clouds rolled in, covering the moon and making it extremely dark for the remainder of the night, and light stones were placed out in the woods. It was a relief when the morning came.

Delmar had us finishing the defensive square after breakfast, and no one complained. We now had a square camp on top of a hill about forty feet to a side. The ditch was just three feet deep but had a stake every foot.

As we were eating lunch prepared by Lirkin, a chunky potato, and salted beef soup, Blaze pointed to the skies, “Drake!”

I looked up and saw the silhouette. I had no idea how he saw something so small. Then, I spotted two others trailing the first. They passed our camp, and I thought they missed the large white X at our center, but they soon started circling above our camp. My heart was racing at the possibility of confronting Master Mage Sebastian and him accusing me of having his brother’s collector. I caught Flavius sneaking glances at me, which did not help my comfort level.

The drakes circled for an hour, slowly descending from their heights. Castile was standing next to me and noted,

“He is scouting around our camp, but also, I think he is drawing it out to make us wait.”

“Who is on the other two drakes?” I inquired.

“Two of his legionnaires. Probably drake tamers from his estate. The Emperor rarely has Sebastian help with missions. He contributes a lot by raising the fire drakes for the Dragon Legion,” Castile stated.

Castile looked up and suddenly smirked, “If he doesn’t land soon, I think Zyna is going to throw him off.” I looked and could see the largest drake, which had one person riding a pillion. I guessed Castile was using her all-seeing eye to spy on them.

The smaller drakes landed at the bottom of our little hill. The largest drake landed in our midst. The powerful wings blew tarp tents and sleeping rolls everywhere. I could tell that Master Mage Sebastian had intended the dramatic effect. He slid out of his saddle to the ground, smiling smugly. His grand entrance made, he addressed Castile imperiously, “Mage Castile, it seems it has become a habit of mine to come and rescue you.”

The woman behind him dismounted less gracefully, and her legs were a little weak from the ride. The woman did not look like a wisened old mage. Her auburn hair was braided into a long ponytail. Her light brown eyes were lively. She appeared middle-aged, maybe in her late thirties, and was one of the tallest women I had seen in my time, nearly matching my 6’1” frame.

She ignored Sebastian and came to Castile and gave her a hug to Sebastian's consternation, "Castile, my child, it has been ages. You have never visited my estate."

Master Mage Sebastian frowned at being ignored, but if my understanding was correct, then she outranked him as a High Mage. His drake bristled, shaking itself out and mimicking its master's dissatisfaction. Castile broke the hug, "My company was never sent on assignment near your coastal town, Baroness."

If she was a baroness, then she was also a First Citizen. But I thought Castile said she grew up poor. Zyna turned to Sebastian, "You and your men should finish that patrol I interrupted by insisting you land. You said scouting the entire region before you landed was important." There was some terseness in her words.

Sebastian ground his teeth, "Yes, High Mage."

Castile and Zyna moved off to talk privately, walking outside our fortification. I slowly moved back from the giant flying lizard, now that Castile was no longer at my side. Dragons and I did not mix.

Sebastian led his drake through our barricade, destroying some of it, and down to the stream to let the drake drink before heading into the sky with his two men. A handful of men were at the water, Flavius among them. I was sure I noticed him and Flavius make eye contact for more than a moment while the drake satiated its thirst. My paranoid

self was sure it would not be long before Sebastian took a detour to question me about his brother's death.

I watched the three drakes getting water while Sebastian conferred with his two legionnaire riders. I just had a bad feeling about this whole situation. Adrian called to me, "Eryk! Castile and the High Mage wish for you to join their conversation!" I looked to see them at the bottom of the hill opposite the stream. I wondered what this was going to be about.

I had been ordered to talk with Castile and the High Mage, who seemed familiar with each other. I walked down the hill from our camp, stepping between the stakes. Castile was a head shorter than the auburn-haired High Mage. They both turned and faced me in unison. Castile introduced the mage, "This is High Mage Zyna, Mistress of Fire, Baroness of Piscatio, a small village on the northern coast."

Zyna looked me up and down and extended her hand. We formally shook wrists, and the formality confused me. She asked, "This is him? He is a big boy but looks young—and inexperienced. If he is going to watch my back, is he any good?"

Castile smirked, "As good as Delmar or Adrian. He has a decent air shield spell form as well as a dimensional space." The High Mage arched her eyebrow, reassessing her initial appraisal of me. Castile addressed me, "While Zyna is with us, you will be her personal guard." My surprised look had her explain further, "High Mage Zyna

outranks Sebastian, so as long as you are in her service, he cannot command or question you.”

I was confused but understood this was a way to protect me. Did that mean Castile trusted Zyna? I tried to sound happy at the assignment and asked the High Mage, “Should I call you Mistress, Baroness, or High Mage?”

Zyna laughed, amused with a musical voice, “Just Zyna is fine, legionnaire Eryk. I no longer teach at the Mage College or command a legionnaire company. My First Citizen status is only so the Emperor could continue to call on my skills when needed.”

“So that is why you are here? The Emperor called on you?” I asked and realized perhaps I had overstepped.

Zyna pursed her lips in anger, and I got worried, “I volunteered,” she said tersely. “The small fishing community where my estate is located was inundated with giant waves. Twenty-four of my people were killed, and most of the fishing boats were destroyed. I am here to get some revenge on the elven summoner who summoned the water elemental that caused the disaster.” Her eyes took on a blue glow of aether that tinged with red, and I could feel her aether stirring violently in her core. This little display showed me why she was considered a High Mage. The flair of volatile power disappeared as quickly as it had come.

Castile nodded to me and left me with Zyna. “What do you need me to do for you, Zyna?” I asked with as much

respect as I could weave into the words. It was definitely not because I sensed her oppressive power a few moments ago.

“We must wait for Sebastian to give us a marching direction. Show me to your tent until then,” she waved her hand up the hill at our square fortification.

I led her up the hill and showed her my tarp tent in the camp. It was very simple, with thick poles cut from branches forming three A-frames at the ends and middle. The tarp was staked over the frames, one end was open, and the other was closed. My weasel pelt was laid out on top of my legion-issued bedroll. She assessed the space, and I was worried she was either going to be sharing it with me or kicking me out. It would be a tight fit for two people, but doable.

“It has been a few years since I camped on the march. You can set up my tent next to yours,” Zyna informed me, and before I could ask where her tent was, a large backpack hit the ground with a thud.

My mind raced, and I put it together quickly, “You have a dimensional space?”

Zyna smiled, “Not a spell form like you, Eryk.” She tapped a ring on her finger, “A dungeon artificed storage ring. Works the same way as your spell form, and it is twice the size of yours,” she said with a smirk.

Maveith, who had been watching from a distance, approached, “High Mage, can I interest you in a game of checkers while Eryk sets up your tent?”

“Maveith, wouldn’t you rather help me set this up?” I indicated the large, tightly wrapped tent.

“No,” the goliath assessed my task. “I would rather play checkers with a more challenging opponent.” Brutus, Maveith’s usual opponent, huffed from a dozen feet away.

Zyna smiled at our playful interaction but then sided with the goliath, “Friend goliath, I would be honored to play a game of checkers with you.” They moved off to some logs and a makeshift stone table in the camp that the others cleared for the High Mage as she approached. The drakes took to the skies from the stream and began their search while Maveith and Zyna set up the board. Brutus came to my aid and helped with the tent.

It was a large tent, requiring a dozen eight-foot poles to be cut to assemble it. Thankfully, Brutus was familiar with the style. The final assembly gave the High Mage a roughly eight-foot cube tent out of the oiled canvas material. There was a square floor panel as well, but no bedroll. Maveith and Zyna had a lively conversation during their game nearby, and I was worried that the goliath might have retold about my prowess with the manticores.

With the tent finished, Zyna approached, nodded in thanks, and entered. She left the flap shut for privacy. Maybe she had more space in her ring and was laying out

a luxurious interior. Maveith sat with me, “She is a charming woman. She even won one of our six games.”

Konstantin and Flavius had taken down a large deer for dinner. The best cuts were for the men, while the remainder would go to the drakes. When Lirkin had dinner prepared, Castile brought a portion into Zyna’s tent and did not exit before the sun was setting.

Unauthorized usage: this tale is on Amazon without the author's consent. Report any sightings.

We were waiting for the return of the drakes. They returned just after sunset, and Sebastian landed his drake again in the middle of camp. I think he was attempting to blow over Zyna’s tent, but Brutus and I had double-staked it. The men in the camp had done the same to their own tents, expecting the childishness of the Master Mage. Not one tent was blown away this time, which seemed to make him upset.

Sebastian entered the tent unannounced, and the conversation was obviously being muted by magic. We all looked at each other, not knowing what to expect. Everyone kept their distance from his drake, which appeared tired and curled into a ball. Lirkin came and gave it a haunch of the deer, and it greedily ate it. The crunching of bones was not something I enjoyed being so close to.

It was a good hour before Sebastian emerged unhappy. He gave me a hard look before leading his drake down to

the stream where the other two drakes had already been unsaddled and fed. Adrian and Delmar were called into the tent. When they left at dark, Delmar went to bring Castile's things to the tent while Adrian gave orders.

"The Master Mage did not find any sign of the summoner. We will be marching northwest in the morning, following Konstantin. The drakes will keep watch from above." Everyone felt better knowing the three powerful drakes would be overhead, but I was not so certain.

That night, there was a commotion in the woods. The loud squealing, hissing and sounds of combat woke the entire camp, and Konstantin went down and came back to report, "The drakes killed one of the giant weasels. They are feasting on it now. It should quiet down in an hour."

Maveith seemed upset, "Waste of a good pelt. Should have skinned it first."

The following morning, we packed up camp, and I struggled to get Zyna's tent rolled tightly enough to be returned to her dimensional ring. Maveith and Brutus had to assist me. When we marched, Brutus and I were on either side of Zyna with Maveith behind us.

After a few hours of Maveith and Zyna discussing different board games, I asked, "How do you know Castile?"

Zyna smiled, "I was an instructor at the Mage College, finishing my own service to the Empire when Castile started there. Those not of royal blood tend to have a difficult time. I mentored her and helped her acclimate. I

am the reason she chose the Legion over serving Duke Octavian.”

Blaze and Wylie in front of us couldn't help but turn around in shock at the gossip but quickly focused forward. Zyna just smiled. Maveith, unaware of human decorum regarding age, asked, “If a mage is required to serve twenty years and Castile is almost done with her service. Does that make you sixty? You do not look it.” Maveith liked to puzzle things out, and this was not something he should have tried.

I reflexively stepped away from the mage, and Brutus did likewise on the other side of the High Mage. Zyna just laughed her musical laugh, “Maveith, I am eighty-three. I served twenty-six years as a mage commander and twenty-four years at the Mage College. After fifty years of service, the Emperor granted me the writ of *primus civis*, making me one of the few to be named a First Citizen without the blood of the First Legion in my veins.”

Maveith grunted, “I would not have guessed you for being older than forty.”

“Thirty, Maveith,” Konstantin said, appearing from the woods. “If you are dumb enough to guess a woman's age, always guess ten years younger than you think. She won't burn you to a crisp if you are wrong.”

I added my wisdom, “Maveith, it is best never to guess at all.”

Zyna laughed, “Maybe, but I have seen enough for two lifetimes, and someone asking my age is not going to upset me—much. And the Emperor does grant favors if you are useful enough to keep around.”

Konstantin walked next to Zyna, “High Mage, I was training your bodyguard in the finer arts of scouting. I would hate for his skills to get rusty. Do you mind?”

Zyna nodded, “Just do not wear him out, Hound.”

“I am no longer a Hound, High Mage,” Konstantin grumbled. It appeared that these two knew each other as well.

“What does Cornelius always say? Once a Hound, always a Hound?” Zyna replied.

“That old goat says a lot of things. Sometimes, I think he just likes to hear himself speak,” Konstantin grumbled.

“Come on, Eryk. I found some interesting tracks that I want to show you.”

When we got off into the woods, Konstantin showed me some bear tracks and old gnoll tracks. We worked our way on the right side of the column while Flavius was on the left. Konstantin seemed a little anxious about this quest, and I finally asked him when we stopped to take a break while the company caught up.

“You don’t appear to be your normal cheerful self, Konstantin. What has got you on edge?” I said, chewing on some jerky.

“When you are hunting mages, nothing ever goes as planned. I do feel better with Zyna here. Just hope she doesn’t burn down the woods while we are in them,” he said, sipping water. “With a summoner, you never know what type of creature they may have summoned as well. Also,” he paused, “there may be more than one summoner. I only saw the young elf, but that does not mean there are not more.”

I finished the afternoon with Konstantin, and we found another hill for the company to make camp on. Delmar wanted trenches dug again, so we stopped with a few hours of daylight. Since I had scouted for half the day, Adrian informed me I was off trench and guard duty tonight. Scouts did travel two to three times the distance of the rest of the company.

I still had to set up Zyna’s tent. Maveith helped this time. We had not staked it yet when Master Mage Sebastian landed in our midst. The tent was blown away, and he dismounted smugly. He went to Castile and Zyna with purpose, “The summoner just summoned two hill giants twenty or so miles west of your position. If you hurry, you can catch him before he relocates.”

Adrian approached, “Night hike with two hill giants in the woods is not advisable. If we are going to fight them, I would want it to be in the light of day.”

“Not your decision, legionnaire,” Sebastian barked at Adrian.

“Not yours either!” Zyna said forcibly. Sebastian narrowed his eyes at the woman who was deciding on a plan of action. Zyna finally said, “We will leave at midnight. That will give Castile’s men some time to rest and should put our encounter with the giants after sunrise.”

Sebastian was not happy and growled out, “We will rotate watch during the night on the giants.” He was holding in his anger. “The summoner will not be trackable from the air.” He mounted his drake and took to the air, blowing the camp into more of a mess.

I turned to Maveith, “Just how many frigging kinds of giants are there?”

I had asked my question about the variety of giants to be rhetorical, but Maveith answered me anyway. “The Titans come in many varieties. There are the cloud and fog giants of the Dresimere Mountains. Then, the corrupted two-headed ettins, but you are familiar with them already. The stone giants are builders but are nearly extinct as all the great Titan cities have been destroyed. The storm giants ruled all the giants before the Civil War ages ago. The hill and mountain giants are cruel warriors and the most populous of the giantkin. They are both solitary from other races and live in tribes.”

Maveith counted on his hands, trying to remember, “Ah, yes, the frost giants live in the harsh, cold north. But they keep to themselves. They do not like outsiders.”

“You forgot the fire giants,” Zyna said, having overheard our conversation. “The fire giants love battle more than anything and are always looking for a reason to engage.”

“Why haven’t the giants taken over the world?” Benito entered the conversation as he was untangling the tangled mess from the drake’s buffeting takeoff.

Zyna shrugged, “I have not studied the histories, but I think the Titans once ruled all of Desia.”

Maveith nodded, “They did. The storm giants were similar to your First Citizens. They governed all the giant races. Goliaths used to be Bloodbound to the stone giants and helped them build the world’s marvels. Tales are passed down in my tribe from before the schism and Civil War among the Titans. The giant races fought and destroyed each other all across the land. None of their great cities stand today.” I kept my mouth shut.

Maveith looked at Benito, “To answer your question, all the Titans are cursed. Not only is conceiving children extremely difficult for most of them, but it takes over fifty years for them to mature. Some of them have other permanent maladies. For instance, the hill giants have the mentality of three year olds.”

Benito quipped, “I have met some pretty smart three-year-olds.”

Adrian grunted at Benito and didn’t comment on Benito’s intelligence assessment. “Most of the giant races are hunted in Desia as well,” Adrian added. “Don’t bother

setting the tents. Just get some rest. This night march is going to be taxing, and there is a fight at the end.”

We cleaned up the camp from Sebastian’s landing and packed our backpacks. Zyna had a small tarp and laid it down a few feet from my bedroll. Zyna had no problem appearing to fall asleep, and I guess, as her temporary bodyguard, I needed to keep an eye on her while she slept in the open. I set my bedroll against a stump to use as a reclining chair.

Brutus brought me dinner. It was salted fish that had been boiled into a vegetable soup. Sometimes, you have to eat things that are unappetizing to keep your calories up. This was not one of those times. I poured my bowl of soup down a hole in the stump I was sitting on. Hopefully, whatever creature made its home down there would like it more than me.

I took out some hard salami and cheese from my dimensional space when it got dark and before the blue moon revealed itself. I ate more than I should have but doubted there was going to be a chance to eat again before the battle. I watched our camp be restless all night as it was the eve of battle. When Delmar called for the march to begin, we all moved slowly, not looking forward to facing the hill giants.

Maveith had chosen to stay on the other side of High Mage Zyna, which I greatly appreciated. The blue moon had decided to show itself, and the cloudless sky gave the woods an eerie blue light. A single glowstone was carried

by the last man, Mateo, in our line. This was so the drakes could find us from above.

Progress was slow, and Konstantin and Flavius were leading us. I only saw a drake silhouetted against the blue moon once on the march when we passed through a clearing. I felt better knowing we had three ferocious beasts overhead. Some men whispered back and forth as we made our way. High Mage Zyna then asked a question I always dreaded hearing, “Eryk, you are from Tsinga? I love their national delicacy, caramel bread.”

“It is pronounced car-mel in my small village. We only had it on special occasions as there were only a few goats from which to get milk,” I replied smoothly. I had the name of the village ready if she pressed.

“Oh, so you know how to make it then? After we finish this hunt, I may spend a few days in Sobral,” Zyna said excitedly. I was not sure if she was being genuine or if she was trying to entrap me. At least there was a recipe for the bread in one of the books in the dreamscape.

“I would like to try it, too!” Maveith said in his deep voice, overshadowing the whispering. Maveith realized his error, but he could not whisper well. But he tried talking softer, “I heard it is an amazing dessert. Melts in your mouth and is salty, savory, and sweet all at once!”

Zyna didn’t pry into my past again but tried for my other secrets. “Castile wouldn’t tell me if you had any spell forms other than your storage and air shield.” When I didn’t

respond, she tried in a motherly tone, “I have instructed hundreds of mages at the Mage College. Do you require any assistance in learning spell forms?”

I considered my response and tempered it, “No, Castile has helped with everything that is needed. My aether shaping is too terrible to learn to cast spells.”

A plume of fire in the sky appeared a few miles off. “Are they fighting in the sky?” Blaze asked no one in particular as we all stared.

Zyna replied hotly, “No, they found the hill giants and are marking them for us.”

Felix responded from behind me, “But that means we won’t be able to surprise them. He basically signaled that someone found them.”

Zyna huffed angrily, “I think that is the point—Sebastian’s way of showing his displeasure at not making the decisions. Come, Eryk, we will move to the front. The giants look to be just two miles away.”

I nodded but decided I did not want to be the bodyguard of a High Mage if they were always at the front. We moved forward, and Adrian hissed, “Pile your packs here! We are close!”

The twenty-three men of the company quickly and quietly dropped their packs. Everyone was on high alert for the sight and sound of the enemy. The blue gloom lighting from the moon made it easy to see movement, but if

something remained still, they would blend in. Castile was at the front and using her spells. Zyna put her hand on Castile's shoulder and leaned in, "Do you see them?"

Castile did not respond for a moment, then she pointed, "There, the giants are gathering rocks...they are throwing them at the drakes." A crash far away could be heard as a wayward rock landed deep in the woods. It caused all the creatures to go silent as more rocks returned to the earth.

Delmar muttered from my right, "They are not going to be able to hit anything. But then again, they are not the smartest of creatures. They will keep trying."

The narrative has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the infringement.

Zyna advised, "We will use this as a distraction. Archers behind me as I move to engage. Castile, stay back and be prepared to help if needed," Castile frowned in the moonlight but nodded. "Shield bearers, be prepared to allow the archers to retreat between you. Spearmen support the shield men if the giants charge." That was all the orders she gave as she walked confidently forward. I was on her heels and Maveith on mine.

Our armor made rasping sounds as the hard leather rubbed as we walked, but I had practiced with Konstantin and Maveith, and I was fairly silent. Konstantin appeared from behind a tree, "High Mage, there are just two of them that we can tell. Both are adult males. Before they were disturbed by the drakes, they were eating a bear carcass."

Zyna asked patiently, "What are they doing now?"

"Throwing rocks the size of a man's head into the sky," Konstantin replied, and I looked up reflexively. Over our heads, we had a thinning canopy of fall leaves, but the sky was still obscured. A flash through the leaves told me Sebastian was taunting the hill giants.

"Any signs of the summoner?" Zyna inquired.

"None," was all Konstantin said as he focused on where the giants were.

"Lead me to them then. We can kill the hill giants and see if we can find the trail of the summoner," Zyna said determinedly.

"You make it sound so easy," I muttered softly.

Konstantin tittered at me, "Oh, Eryk, you are about to see a light show. You will see why they call her a High Mage."

We followed Konstantin down a rocky stream bed that gave us some cover. We had timed our march fairly well, and the coming morning sun was teasing its arrival, graying the sky. I could see the three drakes high in the air circling. A rock was being tossed in their direction every few moments. The hill giants could barely reach them with the hundred-pound spheres. At least they were distracting the giants from our approach.

Zyna stood and marched up onto the small hill. I was unprepared for her boldness, but I stayed by her side. The

archers were already formed, seven men ready with their bows; Konstantin and Flavius had moved into their ranks. Six men with body shields behind them.

When I cleared my line of sight, I was disturbed to see the sixteen-foot hill giants. They were on an exposed rocky hillside for easy access to their ammunition. They looked overweight and childlike as they bent over and dug in the rocky ground for a fist-sized rock to throw.

One grabbed a smaller rock by mistake and flung it disgusted at the drakes. Being smaller, it was flung further and faster. By some miracle, the stone connected with the wing of a drake. A hissing scream of pain as the drake spiraled to the ground. Unfortunately, it was not Sebastian's as the largest drake remained aloft. The giants had not even noticed us as they raced to the falling drake. I felt the ground tremble as they ran.

Zyna cursed, "Hades, take him! They are rushing out of my range, and that rider is as good as dead if they reach him." She turned, "Form the archers on that hill over there. I will see if I can draw them back to us." She ignored the men and started casting small dart-sized flames at the backs of the running giants. The darts flashed across the vast distance to the target, homing in and connecting.

Dozens of darts sprayed at the giants. It seemed to be causing minor burning marks on their backs. That was the unusual thing—these giants were wearing some semblance of clothes. They looked ragged, but they were wearing some heavy-cloth or hide. One of the giants

swatted his back like he was swatting a mosquito. He howled, realizing his back was on fire.

Zyna steadily advanced on the giants, closing the distance while the archers got the higher ground. Both giants stopped and helped each other put out the flames. Zyna ordered, "Arrows!!" She stopped her own assault. I stood to her right, and Maveith towered behind us. The twang of his large bow was heard behind me. The giants were a good three hundred feet away as our seven archers fired a steady stream. Half the arrows connected with the behemoths.

The giants continued helping each other with the flames, ignoring the arrows momentarily. They soon realized they were being attacked. These giants seemed oblivious to the world and could only focus on one task at a time. Maveith had said their mental capacity was limited. I thought they would charge our position, but they just bent over and started hurling rocks at our archers.

"Curses!" Zyna spat. She started moving forward to get them in range of her magic. I moved with her, ready to use my air shield. Before we got in range, a rock hit Quentin in the torso. His body was torn apart. "Take cover!" Zyna screamed as a weave of fire formed between her hands.

I was not sure if she was talking to me or the archers. I remained at her side and was fascinated as the head of a fiery snake formed and snaked into the sky. The snake quickly grew in size, and the giants were fascinated as it twisted in the air, growing larger and larger, being fed by

Zyna's aether. This is what truly powerful magic was. I could feel its heat even fifty feet away from the massive fire snake.

The snake twisted in the air and dove at one of the giants, opening its flaming maw. The giant held up his hands in protection, but nothing could stop the magic as the snake swallowed him and slammed into the ground. A pillar of flame erupted as the giant was burned alive. His fatty body melted, and the fat-fueled the flames more. He howled only for a moment as the flame penetrated his lungs and burned them as well.

The other giant stumbled away but knew where the giant snake had come from. He slung a rock at Zyna. I was prepared and had an angled air shield in front of her. The rock deflected into the sky, destroying the shield but saving her life. "Thank you," was all Zyna said as she weaved her next spell between her hands.

A large flaming ball appeared over her head and sped toward the giant just a hundred feet away. The ball struck him and exploded. A blast of heat hit me, drying my eyes and throat and bringing the smell of burning pork to my nostrils. The explosion knocked the massive hill giant down, and his clothes were burned to his flesh. He staggered to his feet, howling in pain, and he was now clearly blinded, as his corneas had been burned out.

"Archers!" Zyna called. Konstantin was the first to start firing, followed by Maveith and the others. The giant ran blindly forward, trying to escape. The arrows had trouble

penetrating his thick clothing and fatty tissue. He stumbled and fell and stood, trying to figure a direction away from the attacks.

The archers began targeting its head, and it used its burned hands to protect its face. The problem was the archers were close, and not many were missing. The behemoth howled in pain and frustration. It almost made you feel sorry for it. Zyna, drenched in sweat from her powerful castings, formed one more spell in her hand. A much smaller version of the snake raced away from her and consumed the head of the hill giant, forcing itself into its mouth and ending its suffering and its horrid cries.

I looked on in horror as it struggled to breathe. "Do not feel sorry for it," Zyna stated, seeing my face. "Those giants eat humans, preferably raw and still alive." The body churned only for a brief moment before stilling. Zyna turned to me, appreciative but smugly, "Thank you for the shield. I had a defense ready for the rock, but I appreciate the thought."

The company joined us on the open field. Quentin had been killed, and his body was brought down, his entire right ribcage missing. Quentin had been one of Durandus' men. That meant he had been a legion volunteer and not conscripted. He had been on the road guarding our gear while we attacked the storm giant. I don't know how well he adapted to our less structured company, but it was sad to see another comrade fall.

Zyna and Castile moved off to talk while some men went to retrieve our packs, some men buried Quentin, and some worked to start preparing camp. I looked at the charred corpses and wondered if they would yield an essence.

I didn't have time to think more of it as Sebastian's large drake landed on the first body and took a massive bite out of it like it was enjoying a pig roast. It was like he was claiming it as his kill. Then Sebastian took out a collector and placed it on the body—activating it. It was a large collector similar to the shield-sized one Castile used to own. An essence formed, but I could not distinguish it from this distance.

I was a little angry that Zyna and Castile were allowing this. He let his drake feed and collected an essence from the second hill giant. He then walked to Zyna and unhappily handed her both essences. That was a relief. They exchanged some heated words, and Sebastian walked into the woods to find his downed drake and rider.

Delmar turned and announced to the company, "We make camp here till mid-day. After the mid-day meal, we march in search of the summoner. Konstantin, Flavius, and Eryk, go search for signs."

Konstantin smiled at me, "Come, Eryk. Let's go work on your tracking skills." Damn it, volunteered again.

I started to walk with Konstantin when Zyna halted me, "Eryk, good job protecting me. Castile suggested I give

you one of these as a reward.” She placed an essence in my hand, “Don’t get yourself killed,” she smiled and returned to talk with Castile, Delmar, and Adrian.

Konstantin walked beside me as we entered the woods. Flavius was already ahead of us to the left. When everyone was out of earshot, Konstantin asked, “You know I serve a Praetorian Guard?”

I cautiously replied, “I do.”

“She has tasked me with keeping an eye out for potential, and you have drawn her attention,” he said to silence. “It would mean spending a few years in the Hounds as preparation. I will tell her you declined her offer.” I did not reply. Konstantin added, “It is what I would have advised you anyway. No matter how appealing they make it sound, it is a life service. If she asks you personally, tell her I asked you and offered you ten thousand gold for ten years of service, but you still declined.”

I laughed internally, then aloud, “Ten thousand gold does not do you much good if you are dead.”

Konstantin smirked, “I keep telling people you are not as dumb as you act. Now, tracking the hill giants to where they were summoned should not be too difficult.” How did I ever act dumb?

It was easy to follow the broken branches and large footprints pressed into the earth. The two giants were summoned to the north. As we moved, Konstantin constantly reminded me to move in stealth—using bushes

and trees for cover. It caused me to move slower, and Flavius also slowed his pace so as not to get too far ahead. My training with Maveith significantly improved my ability to move stealthily. Konstantin even noted my improvement with a grunt.

The path was well-marked as we moved further and further from the company. After about five miles, Flavius came back to us to confer, "The ritual summoning circle is just ahead. I do not think the summoner is still there, but there is a cave."

Flavius had deferred to Konstantin, who gave it some thought. "I will explore the cave. You two find cover and stay close." Flavius did not argue and moved off.

The summoning circle was large, almost fifty feet across, and was charred into the flattened grass. It looked like the summoner had fed the hill giants after summoning them to contract them. The grass was stained red, with a deer head and giant elk antlers within the circle. The cave that Flavius found was just fifty yards away. I took cover behind a boulder. The woods were to my back, as well as a quiet stream. I figured a splash would alert me if something came at me from behind.

Konstantin moved along the rock face to the cave and waited for a long time, listening outside the cave before entering. After a few moments, the cave lit up from a glowstone. Konstantin waved us over, and we moved inside. The cave was only twenty feet in depth and fairly small. A fire pit was in the center, and Flavius dug in it with

his hand. He sighed, "Been out at least half a day. We should head back and let the mages know."

Konstantin shook his head. "We will find the tracks and follow them. The summoner should be exhausted after summoning those two brutes. He is vulnerable, as I killed his two hounds. We can catch and take him out if we are fast enough."

There was some tension in the air. Finally, Flavius caved, "I have a flare. I can signal Master Mage Sebastian."

"A flare?" Konstantin said with amusement evident. I sensed something between them, and maybe it had to do with Sebastian. "Use it. We will continue tracking the summoner."

We went to the clearing with the summoning circle, and Flavius fired off the flare. It was not gunpowder but some other alchemical concoction. A tail of blue fire propelled it in the air, bursting into a bright green star—without any sound. "Wait here for the drakes," Konstantin said as he waved me to follow.

When we got to the edge of the clearing, Konstantin slowed. "Why are we leaving Flavius behind?" I asked, concerned.

"We are not. We are searching for tracks leading away from here. We will circle wide and hopefully find something. Most elves have a fair amount of woodsman training, but we should come up with something," Konstantin studied the ground as we moved. He paused

near the stream. It was wide and had soft sandy soil along the edges. Even I could see the tracks, but that meant nothing, as they could have just been getting water here.

Konstantin studied the tracks for a long while before announcing, "They left through the stream. Either up or downstream. I don't know. Down is the hill giants' direction, so I am assuming upstream. You take that side, and I will take this side."

"How are you so certain?" I asked, not seeing it in the mess of tracks.

"There are two sets of fresh footprints here. The smaller one appeared to be the one getting water for the camp. The larger prints only occur once, leading to the water but never away from it." Konstantin revealed.

"I thought you said the summoner was alone?" A cold feeling washed over me. Were we walking into a trap? Maybe there were more elves out and about.

"It is a small woman. Maybe she was sleeping when I spotted him the first time. If she is also a summoner, then we need to be double quick about eliminating the threats," Konstantin said firmly.

A drake landed in the summoning circle. It was one of the legionnaires, not Sebastian. We headed over as Flavius was conversing with him. The rider gave us the update, "The other drake survived the crash, but the legionnaire broke his neck. The Master Mage is healing the drake. I will be escorting it to the estate to get another rider. We

should be back in two days. Master Mage Sebastian will be staying. I will inform the High Mage of your location.” The drake rider mounted, preparing to take to the air. His face was impassive, but I could tell he did not like this business.

If you stumble upon this narrative on Amazon, it's taken without the author's consent. Report it.

Konstantin informed him, “We are going to be following that stream,” he indicated the wide, shallow water. The rider nodded stiffly and burst into the air. I was buffeted by sand and dirt. I did not like the landing and takeoffs of these beasts. I spat out the crunchy sand mixed with my saliva and moved to the stream with Konstantin.

Konstantin took the left bank and Flavius the right bank. I was the rear guard, ordered to stay fifty yards back and not make a lot of noise. The two experienced scouts weaved along the banks, looking for where our quarry might have exited the water. About two miles later, Konstantin found the location.

We crowded around him in an expanse of rocks. “What?” asked Flavius.

Konstantin pointed to a small puddle in the center of an exposed rock. “They must have rung out their socks here. It has not rained in a few days, and the rock is exposed to the sun. It should have been completely dry.” I was glad that Flavius looked as doubtful as me. We split some sticks to lay on our path so the company could follow us.

Laying the fresh white wood face up made easy markers to indicate our direction. That ended up being my job.

We spread out on the rocky ground and searched away from the river. A triumphant Konstantin found a footprint a mile from the water. Heading off into the thick woodlands. "They are heading west," Flavius noted. "Deep into the wilds."

Konstantin grunted, "They know we are out here. They must have heard the combat or seen the drakes. Look," he pointed. "They sprint into the tree line. We have to push, or they will get too far ahead. We are maybe six hours behind them now." Konstantin was already moving, and Flavius huffed in disagreement but followed. I arranged a split stick and followed as well.

As he went, Konstantin was at a light jog, pointing out signs of passing. The elves were making mistakes now that they sensed we were getting closer. Flavius just nodded as he moved with him. Flavius grumbled that he was a good animal tracker, but tracking elves was a different game. I knew Konstantin had been a Hound, so maybe he gained his skills tracking humans there.

We moved miles into the woods, and I had trouble keeping up because I had to split sticks and lay them as we went. Running and trying to split a stick with a knife was not advised, and I was glad I could heal myself. Konstantin halted up ahead, and Flavius took cover. I crouched and approached them.

Konstantin nodded to me and pointed to blood grass, and I understood. The red sap from the root was dripping from a damaged leaf. I had harvested enough of the plants to know the sap only dripped for about fifteen minutes before hardening sufficiently to seal the damage to the leaf.

All three of us were still as we listened. I filtered out Flavius' breathing and then my own heartbeat. My heart was racing more from adrenaline than fatigue. I didn't hear any birds, which meant they were also on alert. The mage summoner and his companion had to be close. Both Konstantin and Flavius removed, strung their bows, and notched an arrow. Flavius went right, and Konstantin left. That meant I was in the middle and was going to be the bait—something I was familiar with. At least I had my air shield. With my sword drawn, I moved forward, searching with my eyes and ears.

I lost track of Flavius and Konstantin as I moved. I paused once again, seeing dripping blood grass. There was a lot of it here. I started to think they intentionally left the trail to ambush us. No, Konstantin would have thought of that. I kneeled by the dripping grass and moved the dead leaves, exposing the soil. It was definitely a male-sized footprint. I looked into the woods, scanning and listening. I flicker of movement in the trees to my right—it was Flavius about sixty yards away.

I was about to take a step and paused. Something was tickling my mind—something I had seen or done. I looked up and scanned the trees. They wouldn't have been dumb enough to climb a tree? I split my vision from the ground to

the trees. There! On a massive tree, its trunk over six feet in diameter, there was a thick branch about twenty feet off the ground. Two figures lay prone on it, covered in brown cloaks.

If only one had been, I would have overlooked it, but two brown lumps were very suspicious. A bow twang to my left made me know Konstantin was fighting something—more elves? Flavius' bow sounded as well. I looked up to see an enormous spider rapidly repelling toward me.

I slashed and rolled away, using the rebound from my strike to gain distance. The crunch on my blade told me I had removed a leg, but a second spider was also coming for me. I created an air shield over my head to prevent the attack and backed away. I had a trio of dog-sized spiders on the ground, advancing in unison now. One walked awkwardly from the missing limb.

The two brown lumps suddenly leaped off the branch to the ground, rolling as they landed. One of the spiders coiled, drawing my attention. As it leaped at me, I barely had time to establish my air shield. It crunched into the shield and fell to the ground, stunned. I lunged and stabbed its abdomen before retreating further and making sure I did not have any more visitors from above.

"They are poisonous!" Flavius yelled a warning from my right. I grunted; of course they were.

My eyes darted from the spiders to the canopy to the two elves running away. Maybe they would have stopped to

fight us if they knew we were only three. Blue ooze leaked from the spider I had stabbed, and it was struggling to move, slowly dying. A second spider leaped, but I was ready with an air shield and hacked its carapace, cracking it and taking two legs with it. My last opponent was the injured spider, which could not do its leap attack with the missing limb.

I pressed forward and stabbed it in the mandibles. One of its legs stabbed me through the thigh. I had not expected the quick attack, and the pain flared. I hacked the leg off and fell on my ass, cursing. I worked the spear-like spider leg out of my thigh, blood oozing with the removal. I applied my spell form to heal the injury and muscle while staying alert. I could hear Konstantin fighting, but it was quiet from Flavius's direction.

With my leg mostly healed, I ran to help Konstantin. He was hacking into the last of his spiders—four in total. Two had arrows in them. I declared, "I saw the elf pair. They were wearing brown cloaks. They ran when the spiders attacked."

Konstantin nodded and kicked the spider, "Summoned creatures. At least no variety of spiders I have seen before." He looked around, "Are you okay," he indicated the blood on my pants. "Is Flavius alive?"

"Just a scratch, used a salve I had purchased in the capital." I ignored his focus on my leg and looked back to where Flavius had been fighting, "It was quiet on his side, so I came to help you first," I responded.

Konstantin nodded appreciatively and retrieved his bow. We both raced to check on Flavius. Flavius was leaning against a log and breathing heavily. A pair of spider fangs was lodged in his vambraces. I counted four dead spiders around him. I had received the lucky draw with just three spiders.

Flavius looked up with glassy eyes, "Some disorientation poison. I can't stand without falling over."

Konstantin asked, "Can you hear me fine, or is it muffled?"

"Muffled," Flavius huffed.

"Most likely seasickness poison. Probably jungle canopy spiders. You should live. You will lose your hearing in a few minutes and may bleed out your ears, but you will live, and it is healable," Konstantin informed the scout.

Konstantin stood and looked in the direction of the fleeing summoners. "Ok, Eryk, it is just me and you then. Let's go." He started after them, and I hesitated for a heartbeat before joining him.

I followed Konstantin as he moved quickly through the trees. I knew he was experienced at this, but he seemed too aggressive—too excited. Why not wait for the company to catch up? I am sure Zyna could handle the summoner by herself. "There!" He whispered harshly to me. About two hundred yards ahead, the brown cloaks were moving steadily.

We were gaining ground quickly, and I guessed a mage was just not as fit as a legionnaire. Konstantin noted, "Expect them to make a stand when they realize they cannot outrun us." I nodded and focused on the pair. The shorter one was probably a woman and in superior shape. Maybe she was not a mage then. She was definitely waiting for the taller one as she appeared she could outrun him if needed as we got closer.

Both elves tossed their packs on the ground when they noticed us gaining on them. I hung back just a little, and as we reached the packs, I slowed for half a step and sent them into my dimensional space. Konstantin was in front of me and did not see me take them. Konstantin suddenly dropped to a knee and fired an arrow in a smooth motion. He missed the tall one by inches. He blamed his miss on the fletching, "Harpies tits, the fletching was loose," and resumed pursuit.

Konstantin was right about them making a stand. The cloaked figures leaped over a massive downed tree and stopped running. Konstantin did not stop running. When we were just fifty feet from the log, the elf woman stood up and launched a fireball from her hands. Konstantin swore, "Demon shit!" but there was nowhere to hide. I jumped prone and placed an air shield in front of me. Konstantin was four strides in front of me, trying to get out of the path of the flaming sphere by diving right.

The fireball crashed where he had been standing a second ago and exploded. Konstantin was thrown into the air by the blast. The fire, heat, flaming leavers, and blasted

earth washed over me, briefly making my location an oven. My lungs hurt from breathing in the hot, dry air, but other than that, I escaped unharmed as the pings of small stones stopped echoing on my armor. Konstantin was not as lucky. He was rolling on the ground thirty feet away in some pain and dazed while trying to put out flames on his exposed clothes. He had also lost his helm, and his salt and pepper hair whirled about as he rolled.

A blue bolt of light shot from the cloaked woman and struck my air shield, causing it to become visible briefly. I recognized the type of bolt from the dungeon. Castile had used a wand that cast arcane missiles like this. I added another shield as mine was about to expire. She launched two more missiles, and they splashed uselessly against the first air shield but shattered it. The mage stopped firing the arcane bolts, and I sprinted for Konstantin, ready with another air shield if needed. She fired another missile, and I thought there was no way it would hit me.

The fucking arcane arrow changed directions, and my armor got a blackened scorch mark on the back as it thudded into me and caused me a brief stumble.

Konstantin's face was burned and blistered again—first a hellhound and now a fireball. His face was an angry red, blistering, and his facial hair, which had just started growing, was gone again. He had protected his eyes, at least. I dragged him behind a tree for cover, taking two more arcane arrow strikes. One burned my armor, and the other connected with my arm, burning deeply into my bicep. The smell of my cooked flesh hit my senses, and

my mouth reflexively salivated. What a fucking Pavlovian response to have in battle!

I didn't dwell on the wrongness of it and focused on the pain, and I got both of us to cover. Konstantin had signs of a concussion. He was unable to focus his eyes and was speaking nonsense. I didn't have anything that would help him. I healed my own injury and realized I didn't have much aether left. I did have enough to use my dimensional space to kill one of the mages if I could get close enough, but that meant I wouldn't be able to use my air shield again.

"Dropped my bow," Konstantin sounded irritated and angry, but at least he was now coherent.

"Doesn't matter; the string was burned up in the heat," I said, peeking around the tree and studying the enemies. I decided to whine a little, "Why the fuck did you think it was a good idea for the two of us to go after two mages!"

Konstantin croaked out, "Thought he had to be out of aether after summoning the giants and spiders," he groaned as he moved to look around the tree as well. "If we wait long enough, the company should reach us in a few hours. Do you have any water?" It was the closest I would ever get to Konstantin begging me for something.

I realized he had probably inhaled a lot of hot air and produced a canteen from my dimensional space for him. He drank the entire canteen of cold water and tossed it away. "I can still move. I can distract them while you circle

that way,” he indicated the upturned roots of the tree they were using for cover.

“They possess a wand that shoots arcane arrows, just like the ones Castile used to have, Konstantin. You wouldn't stand a chance.” I pointed out the scorch marks on my armor to reinforce my point.

Konstantin studied the burns and nodded, thinking. Konstantin was not a person that was good with waiting. I checked for the fifth time around the trunk. “One of them is running, Konstantin.” He twisted his body and craned his neck to see.

“It is the taller one—the male summoner. We cannot let him get away,” Konstantin growled. “He is slower, so the woman is covering his retreat.” He grunted, getting to his feet in obvious pain. “I will draw her attention. Get to her as quickly as possible. I don't think I can run, wrenched my knee on landing.” He did not say more as he hobbled to the right at a light jog. We could have just waited for reinforcements, but Konstantin needed to have his win. How had the man survived for so long?

If you find this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the infringement.

He meant to bend over for his helmet as he moved, but his leg gave out on him, and he stumbled to the ground. An azure missile burned into his armor. Fuck it, I thought. I ran to the right, using the distraction he was giving me. The cloaked elf fired a blue bolt at me. I managed to get

behind the roots, and it slammed harmlessly into them. I was now at the base of the downed tree she was behind. I moved around the corner to peek. The elf woman was sprinting away.

I looked back at Konstantin, who was hobbling but he had his helmet on. The small elf was running to catch up with the summoner, and I thought it would be stupid to chase her as the other one could have set up another ambush. "Get her! I will be right behind you!" Konstantin yelled at me.

I started running and mumbling to myself, "Don't let them get away, Eryk. Gather herbs in my place, Eryk. Time to practice your fighting, Eryk. Eryk, you are the decoy for the scary monsters. Go with a prick mage and fight a storm giant. Chase after the fleeing mages by yourself, Eryk." The shorter elf was not slow, but my longer stride had me covering the ground quickly. I wanted to catch her before she reunited with the summoner. She moved from the thick-trunked forest into a sparser wooded area with evergreens. The scent of pine needles assaulted me as I sprinted and closed the distance. My adrenalin-fueled sprint was going to overtake her.

We hit a descent into a small ravine, and I used gravity to close quickly with her. Before she reached the bottom, I was swinging my blade into her back. Déjà vu occurred as the elf spun and parried my attack with a dagger. Her momentum took her into a roll as she crashed into the bottom of the ravine and skidded across the dried pine needles on her knees facing me.

I surfed the pine needles to a stop ten feet away. The elf's hood had come down as she stood to face me with a long dagger in one hand and a short parrying dagger in the other. She looked familiar as her chest heaved for oxygen—but that was impossible. I left that elf burnt and dying at the aqueduct. Her face showed surprise as her eyes got bigger and bigger—nope, it was definitely her as she recognized me to.

In elvish, she said something to the effect, Don't you taint me again with your evil magic, legionnaire. Although, that may be a cleaner version of it.

I sought for the elvish words I had been learning from the scholar, "Surrender. I will kill you—not."

Her eyes narrowed and got hard, and in accented Telhian, she said, "Your elvish is terrible. I will not surrender." She did not attack and seemed more ready to run again than fight. Then again, the last time we met, I had stored her in my dimensional space for two days.

Thankful to be speaking Telhian, I said emotionlessly, "Yeah, I only started learning your language a week ago. But you do either need to surrender, or I will have to kill you." I was already planning to rush her if she started to form a fireball. I needed to keep my aether for the summoner so I would have to kill her quickly.

Our standoff ended when a drake crashed through the pine canopy, showering us in both pine needles and broken branches. The confusion allowed Sebastian's

drake to crash into the elf girl, seizing her in his jaw, crunching her body, as her bones audibly popped. It flung her into a rock. Her body crumbled, full of oozing puncture wounds. Still mounted on his drake, Sebastian asked, "Was that the summoner?"

A little shocked, I answered. "No, Master Mage. She was just a guardian, I think. The summoner is close. Just a few minutes ahead of me in that direction," I pointed. He looked down at the elf, sneered in contempt, and took off into the sky, showering me again in more pine needles. I moved to the elf girl and was about to pull out the collector but thought better of it. Sebastian and Konstantin were too close.

The young elf's body was broken and bleeding. Her skull was probably fractured, and her torso was crushed, a few bones showing visible. Her chest was not rising or falling. She must be dead. I could store her and get her essence later when I was sure Durandus was not around. Greed overcame my judgment. I listened and didn't hear anything, so I moved the elf into my storage.

She must have been only mostly dead because my aether bottomed out with the backlash. Crap, without aether this was going to be a problem. Konstantin was up on the ridge while I was trying to decide what to do, "Eryk, I saw Sebastian's drake. Is he here?"

I pointed, "He went after the summoner." Konstantin nodded, did not descend into the ravine, and hobbled in the direction I indicated. That man was too tough for his

own good. I took a deep breath and picked up the elf's two daggers—the smaller of which appeared to have runic writing. The long dagger was also shiny steel but did not have any markings other than the smith's mark.

I looked at the scene. If Sebastian returned, he would probably wonder where the body went. There was nothing I could do about it now with no aether. I moved down to the end of the ravine and climbed out to join Konstantin.

It did not take me long to catch him, and I could see the drake in the skies circling and searching ahead of us. Konstantin's voice was labored, "Is the elf woman dead?"

"The drake crushed her body and tossed it into a boulder. I collected her weapons," I replied indicating the two short blades in my belt. He nodded, looking pleased one opponent was handled. The thick evergreens thinned to grassy hills dotted with large trees. We could now easily see the drake about a mile away circling one tree.

Konstantin grinned and sounded elated, "Looks like Sebastian has treed our prey. Let's get closer, but let the mage do his work."

We slowed to a walk and watched the drake circle a two-hundred-foot pear-shaped tree. When we got within a hundred yards, we took cover behind another tree, Konstantin pulling me aside, "Best to remain here in case Sebastian decides to burn down the tree."

Sebastian circled the tree, tormenting the summoner taking cover under it. Konstantin suddenly pulled me back

hard, pointing into the distance, "Don't move and hide yourself from that!" A creature was still far away but was already bigger than the drake that Sebastian was riding.

"Is that a dragon?" I asked numbly and in awe while pressing myself down.

"Could be a juvenile dragon, but I think it is a wyvern," Konstantin said emotionlessly. Sebastian finally noticed the massive beast, and realized he had turned from predator to prey.

The wyvern made the drake look small in comparison as they positioned themselves with the blue backdrop. Sebastian turned hard and low as he flew his drake among the scattered trees. The wyvern did not pursue but instead landed at the base of the tree where the summoner was. Konstantin and I huddled under the lower branches for cover, with a narrow window on the scene in the distance. The summoner emerged from the tree and stood before the wyvern that towered over him. Its serpentine neck got within feet of the brave summoner.

"How is that not a dragon?" I whispered with some awe and fear. Just the head of the red-burnt colored wyvern was larger than the summoner.

"I would guess that beast has a fifty-foot wing span," Konstantin said studiously. "Dragons can get much larger. Maybe we will get lucky, and the wyvern will eat the elf and leave my sword," he added with some hope. I was

hoping he would eat the Master Mage myself so I wouldn't have to worry about his pursuit of his brother's collector.

The summoner seemed to converse with the beast before it bolted back into the air after Sebastian and his drake mount. The buffeting wind knocked the summoner to the ground. When the wyvern disappeared over a hill, I asked, "What should we do? If we go after the summoner and the wyvern returns, we will be caught in the open."

Konstantin considered and grumbled, "If I had my bow, I could easily hit him from here." I had multiple bows in my dimensional space, but taking one out would reveal to Konstantin the extended size of my space. I did have spare bowstrings in my space that I had forgotten about. The strings were small, and I had recovered enough aether to take them out. I moved the bundle of bowstrings to my hand and was about to hand it to Konstantin when a shriek echoed beyond the hills.

Sebastian and his drake came speeding over the hill and targeted the elf. He barely got back under cover of the tree as the drake turned away and rose into the sky. Only seeing the drake, I asked in disbelief, "Did Sebastian defeat the wyvern?"

My question was answered when the dragonkin appeared again in pursuit of Sebastian. It was clear to see that the drake was faster and more agile than the wyvern. They both took to the skies in a display of aerial acrobatics. I had to admire Master Mage's riding skills. He would let the wyvern get near but prevent it from getting too close. The

drake even puffed a thin stream of fire at the wyvern, scorching its head slightly on one clash. This only enraged the beast to pursue the fire drake with more intensity.

I placed the bowstrings in my pocket. If I gave them to Konstantin, then he might decide to take a shot at the wyvern, and the last thing I wanted was the attention of a fifty-foot-long dragonkin. "Why doesn't the wyvern just breathe fire in retaliation?" I asked.

Konstantin had an answer, "Wyverns cannot breathe fire. Only dragons and certain drakes." We watched the show through the thin canopy of fall leaves. After ten minutes, Konstantin said, "I think he is trying to wear it out. I am guessing, but it's much larger body would tire more quickly."

Minutes passed. "Why has he not led it away from here or toward the company and mage Zyna? I am guessing High Mage Zyna can kill it easily enough," I asked while pressing to the ground. Konstantin had been worried the summoner might see us, so we had both been lying prone and still for the last few minutes.

"I can't tell you the mind of the Master Mage, Eryk," Konstantin said, watching the aerial dance. "But...it looks like he is...that stupid bastard. I think he is trying to dominate its mind."

I rolled over to my back to look at the sky instead of craning my neck. The mage would position himself behind the wyvern and then pass close by, but he was not

taunting the beast like I had thought earlier. It did look like he was trying to cast a spell...or use a spell form. Maybe Konstantin was right, and he was using mind magic on the creature.

“Will he succeed? How much longer until the company gets here?” I asked, watching the mage play cat and mouse with the massive dragon-like creature.

Konstantin watched the sky and surmised, “It would be quite the prize for him, and he wouldn’t have to give the essence to Zyna. By keeping the battle over the tree, the summoner cannot escape either. Very tactical of Sebastian.”

I decided the moment was right to hand Konstantin the bowstrings. He looked at them incredulous, “You had these the whole time?”

I brushed it off, “I just remembered I had them. They were in my dimensional space.”

“Where did you get these?” He asked, pleasantly surprised as he immediately made to string his bow.

“Been carrying them around for a while,” I said non-committedly. “Just don’t go shoot at the wyvern and draw attention to us.”

“I wouldn’t do anything so foolish. Do you have any arrows? Most of my fletchings are burnt,” he said anxiously.

“No, just the strings. Arrows do not fit in my dimensional space.” I said as he inspected his nine remaining arrows, pulling the three best out.

Konstantin started talking to himself, “One hundred and twenty paces. The wind is light from the left.” He notched his bow and studied the summoner under the tree, who was also watching the aerial combat.

The summoner did not seem to know what to do with himself; he couldn’t flee, or Sebastian could make another attack against him. The summoner walked two steps to the right to get a better view, and Konstantin launched his arrow. He missed high as the arrow whizzed over the summoner’s head by inches. Konstantin already had a second arrow notched, and evaluating how he missed, he launched the second. The summoner had only turned at the sound of the arrow. The second arrow struck into his arm, pinning it to his side. Konstantin had launched the third arrow, but the summoner had already fallen to the ground and scurried behind his tree trunk. “Fortuna’s cursed luck. If he had not turned, that arrow would have pierced his heart.”

The story has been taken without consent; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

I studied the sky to see if Konstantin’s attack had drawn the combatants’ attention. It looked like they had missed the few seconds of action and were still in their dance. The summoner was slumped against the far side of the tree. “I bet he has a healing potion,” I said.

“He still would need to pull out that arrow first, and he has no leverage to do so,” Konstantin was searching for his remaining arrows, but the fireball had damaged them all.

“Look,” I nudged Konstantin’s focus skyward. The wyvern was diving down and landed heavily a quarter mile away, well on the other side of the tree the summoner was hiding behind. “We should run...”

“I agree,” and Konstantin gained his feet and ran to the summoner. I was going to say we should run back to get the company. Instead, I had to follow Konstantin in what amounted to a suicide charge if the wyvern spotted us. I thought seriously about not joining him, but my feet took me after him for some reason.

It did not take much effort to catch up to him. As I passed him, I said, “If this gets me killed, I will haunt you till the end of time.”

I reached the summoner first, and he was struggling to remove the arrow. He jolted in surprise, and pain laced his face at my appearance. I did not hesitate to press the point of my blade into his collarbone and down into his chest. He weakly grabbed at the sword, trying to stop it as blood oozed out of his mouth because I had pierced the lung. He dropped a potion in his other hand.

He was dead before Konstantin reached us. He was breathing heavily, and I took the potion on the ground, “I think he was going to drink this once he got the arrow out.” Konstantin smiled as he broke the seal and drank the

potion. The effect was immediate as his burned skin healed, flaking away, and his knee gave an audible pop. While he was healing, I turned my sights to the wyvern.

The wyvern was on the ground, and Sebastian was still circling fifty yards overhead. The wyvern watched the drake almost hypnotically and did not look in our direction. Sebastian landed far away, and I could tell his own drake was exhausted. The wyvern appeared to be breathing heavily from the aerial pursuit. Had the Master Mage tamed the beast's mind?

It seemed to be a standoff, the mage assessing whether he had achieved success and the wyvern staring him down, waiting. Sebastian dismounted and started to walk cautiously toward the wyvern. Shit, he had really done it then. I could see him weaving spell forms between his hands as he approached, probably reinforcing whatever control he had. The wyvern studied him as he stopped about twenty yards away. It lowered its head in a show of submissiveness.

Konstantin seemed to notice what was going on for the first time. He had busy freeing the blade on the summoner's hip—Konstantin's missing runic weapon. I certainly hoped all his tenacity in the chase was not so that he could reclaim his weapon, but by the euphoric look in his eyes, I guessed that might be the reason. He gruffly said, "Looks like the mage did it. His standing in the Empire will rise if he commands that creature."

Sebastian stopped approaching the wyvern, and I could see the confusion on his face even at two hundred yards away. He stepped back as the wyvern raised its head and—smiled? Sebastian whistled for his mount and turned to run, but he was too far away now from the drake. The wyvern bounded two steps, shaking the earth and swallowing him whole. Blue arcs of defensive magic flared in its mouth, but that did not matter in the beast's powerful jaws.

Konstantin elbowed me as I was gawking, "Time to go." I was sickly enthralled with the crunching of bone. The drake charged the greater beast and was quickly slammed to the ground, trapped under its claw. It snapped at the wyvern's leg, but it was helpless. "Eryk!" Konstantin hissed, already twenty yards away. He was no longer crippled and moving with his usual speed.

I took a step back, and the wyvern turned its head. The eyes told me this creature was not some mindless beast even at this distance. I turned to run and catch up with Konstantin. I heard the shriek of the drake before its life was snuffed out and then a terrible crash. I looked behind me to find the tree that the summoner's body was under had been knocked over, and the wyvern was studying the body. I had not even extracted my blade.

"Run faster!" I heard Konstantin yell from in front of me. We were a quarter mile from the dense evergreen forest. I was running at my best speed, but visions of the wyvern came down and inhaled me in one bite played in my mind.

Was it odd that both brothers had died to their own overconfident hubris?

Somehow, Konstantin was faster than me, and I couldn't blame him for not waiting for me. Did I have enough aether to move the creature's head into my dimensional space? Maybe, but it was crowded in there. Maybe a cubic yard of space—what body part, then? The heart—no, I would be dead before it mattered. It had to be the brain before it swallowed me. That was the only out.

I looked behind me, and the dragonkin was taking flight and coming after me. I did not doubt that. I told myself not to look and just run faster. The false safety of the pine forest was just steps away. The pine trees were suddenly in a gale of wind in front of me as the wyvern landed, crashing into some branches and shaking the ground as it cut off my escape.

The ground had lurched from the landing of the multi-ton beast, helping me stop. My heart beat so loud in my mind I couldn't hear anything. The scene in front of me seemed too surreal. An arrow shattered on the back of the beast's head. "Konstantin, run!! Don't worry about me!!" I yelled at him even though I could not see him. A second arrow shattered, and the wyvern didn't even turn around. It just studied me like a mouse.

At least the creature had not just crushed me from above. "You prefer to play with your food? Well, bring it on!" I said with bravado. No more arrows came, and I hoped

Konstantin was running. I did not want him to see this. I just needed the wyvern to get a little closer.

A voice echoed in my mind, “You killed Vaeril, my apprentice?” Intuitively, I understood that it was not the wyvern but someone talking through the wyvern.

My heart thudded, “Traeliorn?” I asked, gulping. Shit, if he was inside or controlling the wyvern, would it count as joined aetheric resistance? Would I be able even to use spatial power on the creature’s brain?

The voice echoed again, angrier, “Did you kill my apprentice?” The large black eyes of the wyvern had a depth to them as they studied me.

How should I answer the powerful summoner behind the impossibly formidable creature? “Yes.” My answer was dry and factual. Even if I said no, he would not let me go. A large scaled claw stepped forward, bringing the head closer on its craning neck.

The voice echoed again, “Then legionnaire, know that it was I who sent you to your afterlife for your crime. Traeliorn Kelran, Vaeril’s teacher and friend.” The wyvern roared unnecessarily and lunged with its powerful legs, and extended its neck at me to close on me. I focused on the skull’s interior and moved a large piece to my dimensional storage. It was a strong tug-of-war with the creature’s resistance—I immediately knew it was just the creature, not the mage. The struggle hung in time, but I

succeeded in claiming the brain. Unfortunately, the momentum of the wyvern's lunge slammed into my body.

I heard my bones crack, and I was sent flying with a tumult of earth and stone as the beast collapsed into the soft earth. My only fortune was I had not been trapped under the body when it struck me. My aether was bottomed out, and I had no potions on my person. I was also in severe shock as I realized my hand didn't work and my wrist was at the wrong angle.

As the pain started to ebb back into my consciousness, my only thought was I had killed a dragon—well, something that looked like a dragon. I laughed aloud, but the act enhanced the pain throughout my body and caused me to black out.

I was cold. My body felt like I was left out in the snow naked. I was in the barn that I had arrived in this world. I was naked, and the air was freezing. My skin was goosebumped, and I felt like I was frozen solid, unable to move. I tried to force myself to move, and pain erupted through my whole body.

The barn door rattled, and my eyes focused on the light bleeding through the corners. The door suddenly burst into a thousand pieces, and a massive wyvern was perched at the entrance. My eyes shot open, and I stared at the sky. My body felt hot and cold at the same time, and I felt weaker than a mouse. I tried to move, but that was not going to work.

The pain was real but hidden behind a curtain of shock. I checked on my aether. I had been unconscious for about an hour based on my aether core recovery. I used my self-healing spell form to explore my injuries.

My heart was still pumping, and I was not bleeding anywhere on the outside. My chest cavity had blood from a lacerated spleen and liver—the most serious injuries. At least, I assumed that organ was my spleen. I healed that first. I then used as little aether as I could to work over my other damaged organs. I left the broken bones alone for now, as living through this was more important. I had essentially been hit by a bus—not a speeding bus. If I had not woken up, I would have died.

A massive breeze of foul air washed over me. I craned my neck up a little. The wyvern was twenty feet away and still breathing, its chest rising shallowly and falling. Panic and fear welled up, but as my vision focused, its eyes were wide, bloody orbs, and a steady pool of blood was coming out its nostrils. The wyvern's brain had forgotten to tell the body it was dead. Well, that part of that brain must be in my dimensional space.

I relaxed on the ground. This was actually good news. Maybe if it was still breathing, I could harvest its essence later. I still had the essence given to me by Zyna from the hill giant. I reached into my space, brought it into my hand, and immediately dropped it. That wrist was broken and was a swollen mass of blood. I focused on aligning the bones and repairing the damage. While I was at it, I

healed some cracked ribs that had been making breathing difficult. Not that I noticed.

I did not finish before I ran out of aether, but I could fish in the grass and collect the essence sphere. I had been planning to save this major essence of constitution for Ginger, but I needed it more right now. I placed it in my mouth and savored the tingly feeling spreading throughout my body. It was not going to heal me, but it should minimally help increase my body's ability to heal.

I relaxed into the grass, no longer worried I was going to die. Where was Konstantin? How much did he see? He had shot those arrows from quite a distance. It made me feel good that he had not abandoned me until the last possible moment. Once he saw the wyvern lunge at me, he probably assumed I was dead.

I waited for my aether to recover with my eyes closed, trying not to fall asleep. The breaths of the wyvern got further and further apart. When I did not hear an exhalation, followed by the foul air of its breath, I moved to get up.

Sitting up was not pleasant as I had a lot of healing yet to complete. Standing was not in the cards at the moment as I crawled to the creature's head. I had enough aether to remove the collector and use it. The head of the wyvern was larger than a horse, and memories of Sebastian being consumed and chewed like a piece of gum had me hesitate in approaching. Air exhaled from the lungs again,

very slowly, but the blood dripping from the nostrils had coagulated and was no longer flowing.

Leaning against the head, I placed the collector on top like a memorial death crown. I channeled aether into it and stepped back as the azure mist swirled from the body. The massive creature shivered like it was resisting its life force being taken from it. I watched as the collected wobbled slightly, the beast shuddering in its fight against the collector. More essence was drawn than normal—maybe because it was still alive.

An apex essence formed and rolled onto the ground. The beast's abdominal cavity slowly collapsed as it loosed its final breath. It had been holding onto life like any creature would. Now, it was dead. I picked up the unfamiliar sphere—azure blue with white swirls. A two-tone meant it was most likely an essence for a magic affinity. I used the head to help me stand and leaned against the creature while I rested.

If Konstantin or the company found me right now, I would look pretty badass. Of course, walking was going to be a chore. As aether became available, I started working on my hip joint. The socket where my femur sat in my pelvis was a mess. Thankfully, I did not need to be a doctor to figure things out. I just needed to know where the issue was and direct the healing spell form at it.

I took a tentative step. Then another. I healed some ligaments in my knee to eliminate a limp. I collected my helm nearly a hundred feet away. Then went to the dead

summoner's apprentice. It had been almost two hours since I had killed him. I tried the collector anyway, and it did not trigger. Extracting my blade from the body took a little work, and I cleaned it in the grass.

Unauthorized duplication: this narrative has been taken without consent. Report sightings.

I searched his person for another healing potion and found three different potions secured on his belt. All were labeled in elvish, so I was curious to know if they were healing potions. I sent the potions, the collector, the two blades from the elf woman, and the apex essence into my dimensional space. I pulled out a canteen and filled it with rum from my space.

I sat down next to the dead summoner and drank. It had a mellow sweetness, but I was drinking it more for the alcohol to get the numbness of being drunk. After a few swigs, I offered the summoner some, but he was uninterested. I was waiting for Castile and the others to find me. I switched to water, not wanting to get completely drunk in case I needed my faculties. I healed injuries but kept enough aether available in case Traeliorn sent another creature after me.

I removed the baron's son's sleeping roll at sunset from my space. I weaved my way into the branches of the tree the wyvern had knocked over and set up a place to sleep. I figured any creature trying to get to me would have to break the branches and wake me. The alcohol made falling asleep easy enough after an extremely stressful

day. I woke once during the night to an owl that was curiously sitting on a branch, hooting at me. I tossed a stick at it, and it flew away to leave me in peace.

I was up with the morning sun and continued my healing until I could move without pain. Zyna must have decided a fight with the wyvern was too difficult without the drakes, as they had yet to arrive. Konstantin would have told her that Sebastian and I were made into wyvern snacks. I started to backtrack from the direction we had chased the elves.

I searched the ravine to see if the company had come and searched it. There were no footprints other than mine and the drakes. The company had not come looking for me. They must have assumed I was dead. I climbed out of the ravine, found a broad stream, and cleaned myself. I had been bathed in earth and stone when the wyvern came up short of ending my life.

I remained on alert as Konstantin had taught me as I contemplated. I might be able to sneak away. If everyone thought I was dead, then it shouldn't be too hard to ditch my legionnaire armor and make my way... Where would I go? East was the Bartiradians. North and west were the orcs. South, there was a massive and dangerous mountain range. But on the other side of that range were the older kingdoms of Desia.

A deep voice intoned from behind a rock, "Eryk, is that really you?" I almost jumped in surprise but didn't. I just pretended that I had heard the goliath sneak up on me.

“You know, Maveith, you shouldn’t disturb someone when they are bathing. I thought you were a goblin coming to steal my boots.” I looked up at the goliath on the rocks twenty yards away.

He narrowed his eyes, “You did not hear me, and I would not sound like a skulking goblin if you did hear me.” I shrugged at his annoyance at being compared to a goblin.

“So, where is everyone?” I asked conversationally.

Maveith walked cautiously down to the water but stood a dozen paces away. He sat on a stone and studied me, “Konstantin told everyone that a wyvern ate Master Mage Sebastian and you as well. Zyna was not prepared to fight a wyvern the size Konstantin described. Especially without support in the air.”

“So, are they camped nearby then?” I inquired while putting on my damp clothes.

“They headed back to Sobral. Konstantin said you killed the summoner we were pursuing.” He finally seemed to believe I was not a ghost, and he relaxed and sat on a boulder.

“Why are you here then?” I asked.

Maveith’s brow furrowed, “I was going to see if there was anything left of you and return it to the earth.”

“You came to bury my body parts?” I laughed at the absurdity of it.

Maveith did not see the humor. "Mateo said you were too lucky to get killed by a dragon look-alike. He said bringing you down would have taken a real dragon. Benito even started a betting pool that you would walk out of the woods smelling like you had just taken a bath." He looked me over, "I guess he was right." I just laughed again.

"How far behind the company are we?" I asked as I finished dressing and feeling much better without dirt in every crevice of my body.

Maveith stood as well, "They left this morning, so they are maybe half a day ahead now, but Zyna had them moving at a fast pace. I marched with them until they took a break and wandered off into the woods after telling Flavius where I was going. He said he would give an excuse for my absence. I hoped to bury your remains and reach them during the night."

"Well, thank you, I guess. We should get moving then," I stood and started walking, and Maveith fell in beside me.

There was a silence for a long time before his curiosity overwhelmed him. "What happened?"

I had been waiting for the question. "You remember the female manticore?"

"You poisoned the wyvern?" Maveith said in disbelief.

"Yes, I did the same thing to the wyvern that I did to the manticore," I said truthfully. Maveith was surprised but seemed to believe me.

After a time, I asked, "Maveith, when you left Stone Mountain Island, you must have been to a lot of places in your travels. Tell me about them. Why did you finally choose to live in the woods north of Sobral."

Maveith did not want to be reminded of the reason he fled his people, but he eventually answered. "The truth was this was as far away as I could get, and living alone in the woods seemed like a suitable punishment. I spent most of my time on ships getting here but did explore some of the more interesting port cities."

I listened to Maveith talk enthusiastically about the cities he visited as we walked to sunset. We camped together in a small shallow cave. I felt relatively well rested, so I took the first watch. Neptune's Tear blue light illuminated the woods below. Tomorrow, we would catch up with the company if we push. How was I going to explain my miraculous survival to them?

In the morning, we made our way to catch up to the company. I was having some trepidation about answering questions about my miraculous survival. No one had seen the dead wyvern, and I probably should not have told Maveith I had poisoned the beast as he had trouble with the idea of lying. I also should not have healed all my injuries. Maybe if I returned like I had been put through a meat grinder, they would have thought my escape was more probable.

I paused to check the ground and read the passing of the company, "Maveith, these prints are dry near the stream. I

don't think we are going to catch them today. They are going to beat us back to Sobral. Do you want to detour to your cabin?"

Maveith contemplated before answering, "We can make the Citadel by dark. I think perhaps we should do that. Your company will want to know you are alive as soon as possible."

I thought I would be fine with Castile and the others in the company, but I was slightly worried about High Mage Zyna's reaction to seeing me alive after facing a wyvern. She was obviously much more important and had more sway as a First Citizen. I didn't argue with Maveith, and we slightly increased our pace to make the Citadel by dark. In the end, we arrived a few hours after dark. The gate guards let us through after conferring with their captain. I assumed word of my return would reach Tasevia, the Duchess' gate captain.

I went to the northwest tower to sleep in the bed there. The four beds we had hauled up here were still there, and Flavius and Konstantin occupied two. Only a dim glowstone lit the room. I backed out into the stairway and stopped Maveith from coming up the stairs. I whispered, "Maveith, I want to play a little joke on Konstantin. Can you help?"

Maveith did not look like he wanted to play along, so I added, "Just pretend you cannot see or hear me. I want Konstantin to think I am haunting him from beyond."

Maveith processed what I said, "Like an apparition?" I nodded and motioned him to be quieter as his deep voice echoed around the stone stairs.

I had Maveith go in first, and both Flavius and Konstantin stirred to see the goliath before getting up. Konstantin mumbled, "Did you find anything left, Maveith?" I moved into the archway of the stairs and just stood there.

Maveith was quiet, trying to decide what to say. He rumbled, "I did not find a dead body."

Konstantin rolled over to look at Maveith, "The wyvern ate him. I told you would find nothing." I wanted to jump up and down and draw Konstantin's attention to me but remained quiet.

Flavius said in a low tone, "Your loyalty and bravery in looking for your friend is admirable, goliath. Get some rest. The pain of loss will be temporary." That was surprisingly nice for Flavius to say. Maybe the news of Sebastian's death had loosened him up a little.

I scuffed my feet and nearly broke into a grin as Konstantin rolled over to look in the archway. His eyes slowly widened in surprise and fear. He rolled off the bed and was drawing his runic blade, "Revenant!!" He yelled.

Flavius turned and reached for his own weapon. "Maveith, arm yourself!" Flavius yelled as the stationary goliath.

Maveith turned slowly to face the door, "What? I don't see anything unusual." The grin on his face told me he was

enjoying this. On the other hand, I was doubting my joke was going over as well as I had hoped. Both experienced legionnaires looked ready to kill me. Flavius was already notching an arrow.

I put up my hands, "Don't kill me. I have had a really bad few days."

"Maveith, did you bring back an animated corpse," Konstantin rasped angrily at the goliath.

"What? I don't see a corpse. Is something wrong?" Maveith said mechanically, still enjoying the game and pretending I was not here.

"Joke is over, Maveith," I said nervously. "They might actually kill me if they think I am some undead creature."

Maveith nodded in agreement, ending the joke. "I didn't find a dead Eryk. I found a live Eryk," Maveith said triumphantly, pointing at me.

Konstantin looked incredulous at Maveith, "Impossible. Eryk or whatever you are, move to that wall." He pointed with his sword. "Flavius, go get Castile," he ordered. After I moved out of the stairway, Flavius rushed off to get Castile.

I was seeing the downside of my joke going awry. After Flavius left, Konstantin did not relax; instead, he moved to the stairs. "What happened then? I saw the wyvern lunge at you. You were as good as dead."

This was a lot harder than I thought it would be in my mind. “The Elven High Mage Traeliorn was controlling the wyvern. That was how he fooled Master Mage Sebastian into thinking he had control of the wyvern. He talked to me through the creature.”

Konstantin’s eyes narrowed some. “And how are you alive? Did you bargain with him?”

Well, at least Konstantin was not calling me a liar—a traitor, yes—liar, no. I leaned against the wall to appear relaxed. “Why don’t we wait till Castile gets here so I don’t have to explain things twice?” That would also make sure I didn’t actually change my story.

Konstantin just turned to Maveith and said, “Where did you find him?”

Maveith answered, “I was following the trail to the wyvern, and I found him bathing in a shallow stream on the way. He said I sounded like a goblin when I snuck up on him.” Maveith shook his head, still upset that I said he sounded like a goblin.

If you encounter this tale on Amazon, note that it's taken without the author's consent. Report it.

Konstantin rubbed his forehead like he was getting a headache. He still had his runic sword in his hand, ready to defend himself. During his time in the Hounds, I knew he hunted various creatures that could change shape, so I was not too surprised he was skeptical I was me. He studied me, “If it is you, Eryk, I am glad you are alive, but

things are not good. Master Mage Sebastian was a very important mage in the Empire. A favorite of the Emperor. His death is going to have consequences.”

Castile arrived in a nightshirt with her boots on a moment later. She was breathing heavily like she had run here. Her eyes went wide, “Dragon shit. It’s true.”

“Don’t get excited. I am still not sure it is actually our lost legionnaire. He might be an undead or a shapeshifter,” Konstantin said doubtfully. His voice was laced with skepticism as he added, “He has not told me how he survived.”

Castile looked me up and down, “Well, I am sure it will be an interesting story. Let me confirm he is not an undead.” Konstantin’s grip tightened on his sword as Castile closed her eyes. Flavius was in the archway for the stairs and was also ready to respond.

When Castile opened her eyes, she spoke, “Not an undead, and his aether core is familiar. I think it is legionnaire Eryk. Now, Eryk, please explain.” Her eyes danced in happiness or maybe amusement. I couldn’t tell.

Konstantin relaxed visibly, which I was glad about. “The summoner was controlling the wyvern. Not the apprentice summoner we were chasing, but Traeliorn Kelran.” Castile’s eyes rose skeptically. I added, “The mage talked to me through the wyvern.”

Castile settled into a chair, falling heavily and going into thought, “It would make sense. We learned the wyvern

was attacking a village far to the north. It suddenly stopped and flew hard south. The apprentice must have communicated with Traeliorn and asked for help.” Castile was thinking hard. She finally looked up. “What happened to the wyvern then?”

“It is dead.” I knew they would want more than that, “I poisoned it when it got close. It was so close I could touch it. I placed poison in its mouth, and it didn’t even realize it.” I looked at Konstantin, Flavius, and then Maveith to my left. Castile knew I could heal, but they did not. “I was mortally wounded as it crushed me in its death throes.” I thought about lying and saying I had healing potions, but that would lead to more questions. “I was barely able to heal myself—it took me over half a day since I have so little aether.”

Castile nodded slowly. Konstantin was exasperated, “You have a healing spell form?” I was surprised Konstantin was more angry about not knowing I had a spell form than the fact I just said I used poison.

Castile gave him a sharp look, “He can only heal himself.” A look of realization came across his face as he pieced things together from the past.

He whispered to himself, “The aqueduct...the run to the capital...”

Castile focused on me, asking hopefully, “Did you get Sebastian’s collector?”

“Did I what?” I asked, perplexed. Then I remembered that Sebastian had a collector. I had not thought about searching inside the wyvern for Sebastian’s body. “No, I did not. It was not on his body when the wyvern ate him. It must have been on his drake. The wyvern killed the drake, too. It might still be there.”

Konstantin sheathed his blade, realizing how foolish he looked holding a sword at me. “I can get there and back in three days,” he volunteered, his eyes still on me. I knew he also wanted to verify my story.

Castile considered Konstantin’s offer, and Flavius extended his services, saying, “I can go with him.” Great, there were two of them that wanted to verify my story.

“Yes. Recover Sebastian’s body for the Emperor. Get the collector if you find it. I will send a message to High Mage Zyna that the wyvern has been killed, and we are attempting to recover Sebastian’s body,” Castile said, still thinking.

“The High Mage is not in Sobral?” I questioned. I probably had too much relief in my voice and tightened up.

“No, High Mage Zyna rode hard to a portal to get back to the capital. She needs to explain and account for Master Mage Sebastian’s death,” Konstantin interjected.

“Will Octavian cause you trouble again?” I asked, concerned.

“Unlikely,” Castile said. “High Mage Zyna was in charge of the hunting party. The fault is with her. If they choose to investigate and call a Tribunal, you and Konstantin may have to go before the Truthseekers.”

Even from the grave, Sebastian was still causing me anxiety. I nodded to Castile. Konstantin started packing for his expedition. Flavius joined him. “What do you need me to do?” I asked, still feeling under the microscope. I had a feeling Konstantin and Flavius were going to go over the battle site with a fine toothcomb. I did not leave any evidence that I could remember.

Castile stood and smiled, “Rest, Eryk. I am sure the company is going to be shocked to see you at breakfast. Once Konstantin and Flavius return, we will take the company to the Ruins of Caelora.”

“Shit,” escaped my mouth before I could hold it in. “The Scholar found enough evidence the dungeon is in the city?”

Castile arched her eyebrow and smirked, “You are remarkably well informed. Yes, there is a dungeon near Caelora called the Shimmering Labyrinth. Maybe it is even inside the city. Scholar Favian is still not sure if it is viable. It was still being delved when the city fell some fifteen hundred years ago, so we assume it is still there.”

“How are we going to deal with the specters?” I said, concerned. I had a nightmare about our company being ambushed inside the city, and now it was coming true.

Castile smiled tightly, obviously not happy, "The Duchess has managed to get fifty runic arrows, three runic blades, and a kettle of souls."

I thought the Duchess was poor. That sounded like a major investment. While I was pondering this, Castile left the room. Konstantin and Flavius left in the middle of the night, saying they couldn't waste time as there was always a chance someone could loot the site. In the morning, I went to breakfast in the barracks early. Lirkin was preparing the company's breakfast, and I hid in a hallway and waited.

A lot of solemn, whispered conversations were happening at the table. When everyone was sitting at the table and eating, including Castile, Adrian, and Delmar, I walked out and sat at the table next to Benito, "Can you pass the potatoes?" I asked innocently.

"Sure thing, Eryk," Benito said, handing me the potato bowl after taking two for himself. Benito kept eating away, but silence slowly spread throughout the dining table as all eyes focused on me. Delmar and Adiran's grins told me they had already been informed of my resurrection. Benito was oblivious as he kept eating until Felix elbowed him. "What was that for?" Benito whined while rubbing his ribs.

Felix said with all seriousness, "A dead man is sitting next to you."

With all eyes on me, I took a bite of the potato, "I can assure you. The rumor of my demise has been greatly

exaggerated.” Benito fell backward off the bench as realization struck him. Normally, the company would have laughed at Benito’s misfortune, but instead, silence hung in the room as I enjoyed my potato.