

## A Soldier's Life

### Chapter 21: Obstruction in the Road

Konstantin was easier on me than I expected. We focused on the two-weapon style to take on two opponents at once—two human opponents. Konstantin noted he only fought with two blades against a single opponent or monster. You needed to be ambidextrous and also be able to control the blades independently. It was not easy, but Konstantin thought I had the capacity to learn. We focused on using the off hand-weapon as the parrying and defensive weapon.

When we finished, I was covered in dirt and sweat and greedily drinking from a waterskin. He told me, “If things play out as expected, the Bartiradians will invade in force and attempt to capture this city. They are mostly human, but you can expect elves and dwarves to be in their number. The elves are agile gits, and the dwarves hit like a horse.” He took a long pull of a waterskin. “And do not be swayed by the beauty of their women. I almost lost my head staring into the mesmerizing eyes of one once.”

“Damn, I didn’t know you preferred dwarven women,” I joked with the older scout.

Konstantin backhanded my chest with his canteen softly, but the practiced motion caused a gout of water to splash into my face, “The elves, boy. The elves. But I did have a dwarf once. The women are as hairy down below as above.” He stood and walked away.

I walked through the city of Macha, but there was not much left. Most of the shops were abandoned and mostly empty. The regular army left the boarded shops alone but openly walked into the open shops looking for abandoned goods to appropriate. I made it to the gates and walked out in the humid air. One of the soldiers at the gates looked at my legion leather armor and then ignored me.

The land around the walls had dozens of small houses, most with overturned fields of quickly harvested crops, probably too early in the season. The road east toward the enemy looked to be concrete and well-maintained. I gazed down the road at nothing before returning to get some sleep in the sticky hot air.

The two small beds I pushed together smelled like ammonia. I closed the door and pulled out a heavy blanket to lay across the mattresses and my griffin feather pillow. The sun was setting but did not take the humidity with it. I could not get comfortable, so I lit the lamp in the room and pulled out the book on the history of the legion.

It took a lot of work to re-wire my brain to read the Latin words. At least I used the spoken language daily and had a decent grasp of vocabulary. I spent the entire night, till sunrise, working on the text. I managed about twenty pages.

I learned that the First Legion had arrived from another world—I assumed Earth, about two thousand years ago. The book talked about the heroes of the First Legion who conquered the lands and made them safe. They were apt fighters and powerful mages. That last part did not make sense until I translated what their powers were. The members of the legion had strong affinities with space, time, convergence, and displacement!

This meant I was not magically gifted or some prodigy as I thought. Instead, whatever forces brought me here affected me in the same way. A knock sounded loudly at the door, “Wake up and gear up. We need to be at the gate in half an hour for the patrol.” It was Konstantin, and he moved to the next door to wake the others. I moved the pillow and book to my storage but just left the heavy blanket on the bed. I had sweat a puddle during the night and wouldn’t mind leaving the damp blanket out, hopefully to dry. I hung it near the window.

I gathered my gear and strapped on a pair of short swords. I thought about requisitioning a spear from the army but decided against wanting to carry it on patrol. Mateo and Felix walked with me to the gate as Konstantin had already gone ahead. The legion was assembled minus Adrian, Castille, Lucien, and Kolm. Kolm was our pseudo-blacksmith. They were working to secure supplies in the city for our company, and the rumor was they were trying to secure better sleeping accommodations. Personally, that was the first time I had slept in privacy since I had arrived in the world, and I did not mind staying there.

Delmar stood in front of the remaining number of us, “We have a twenty-mile loop to do today, men. Make sure your canteens are full. The insects are bad the further we travel along the wetland, so even though it is hot, I suggest you use neck and head wraps. We will encounter horse-sized frogs. The biggest danger is if they grapple you with their tongue and pull you under the water. If

a comrade is grabbed,” he looked over the men, “attack the tongue—they will be more likely to release the victim. Then focus your attack on the body.”

Everyone nodded and moved their daggers on their belts for easier access. Delmar seemed to think before adding, “A bullywug was seen a few days back. If we spot one, we will form up and retreat back to the city. They travel in large hunting groups and may have nested deep in the bog.”

Konstantin handed me a clean wrap and showed me how to wrap it to protect my neck and head. He did the same for two others in the company that did not have one.

We started walking, and our two scouts, Orson and Konstantin, moved forward. Firth walked next to me. After twenty minutes on the road, we all spread out in twos and threes. Firth talked to me, “It is true. The army is amassing at the border and will push to Macha in a few day’s time. We are going to be stuck in a fucking siege.”

Firth was not at all happy. “So Justin screwed us over?” I asked.

He harrumphed, “Nope, one of Castille’s other enemies in the Adventurer’s Guild, I think. They are probably hoping she dies out here in the attack, and they can pocket the finder’s fee for the dungeon.”

“How many enemies does mage Castille have?” I asked as I sucked on my canteen. It was already half empty, and we had not been gone for three hours. I think I was going to have to try and pull water into it from the barrels in my storage when we stopped for a rest.

Firth laughed, “About five that I know about. Probably that number again of ones I do not know about. Most are not enemies, just people who really do not like her.” Firth adjusted his small pack, “Mage Castille was at the top of her class at the Mage War College. That didn’t sit well with the sons and daughters of the First Citizens there. It all snowballed after that. I joined her about three years after she was assigned a company of legionaries.” He looked back at the people walking, “About half of us are still here. Castille has done right by us.”

He leaned in and whispered, “I have received over two hundred essences from her in my service.” I guessed that was impressive for a soldier, and it was a massive fortune when you added up the value. I could see how Castille bought the loyalty of her men.

Three hours later, we stopped to rest at a series of boulders along the roadside. The road looked like it had been made by pouring tons of rocky soil and packing it down. There was now a swamp or bog to our right and left. I wet my scarf from my canteen and rewrapped it around my neck and head. It must have been too hot for the insects to come out today, as I had not seen any, but the wrap helped with the heat.

Delmar sat on the rock next to me, "You should not waste your water like that, Eryk. If we get in a fight, that water will be like the elixir of gods after it is over." I nodded at his wisdom. I moved into the shadow of a boulder. I focused on the water in my space and the canteen in my hand. I needed to stick my finger into the canteen but grinned madly as it filled. Not only did it fill, but it was also cold water!

No one saw me, and I took three long pulls to get the canteen to half empty in case someone asked for a drink from it. We continued our patrol and came to a T-intersection. I read the signs. The city of Oliscalmape was down one road, which was part of the Telhian Empire. The direction we were headed was to the city of Guiracas, in the Kingdom of Bartiradia. I figured out the numbers and distance...it was 98 miles to the enemy city, so there was not much to worried about just yet. Oliscalmape was 75 miles away.

I was slightly disappointed we had not seen any giant frogs yet. I just wanted to see what they looked like up close. Delmar had us resume, and we started circling back to Macha down a different road. After mid-day, Konstantin and Olson came down the road jogging. They reported to Delmar, who looked down the road and then back the way we came. He called everyone together, and the scouts kept a lookout.

"The scouts find an obstacle in front of us. An ogre is about half a mile down the road hunting the giant frogs." He looked over everyone who had started to tighten armor straps and pulled weapons. "It may have moved off by the time we get there, but if not, we will form a shield wall and fire at it with range." Five men with bows nodded and cycled to the back of the formation.

"Ogres are not bright but hit with deadly force. Eryk, stay in the middle of the formation and be prepared to treat wounded with Linus." Delmar pulled his shield off his back and moved to the front with five others with large shields. It was like magic how the company suddenly marched in step with each other and formed a square as we approached the encounter.

The ogre was still there and saw us approach. It had two large corpses of frogs it had been feeding on in the road. The wind had shifted and was blowing right at us. It smelled like bile mixed with the shittiest-smelling fart ever. The ogre stood, and my jaw fell. It was easily over ten feet tall and had to weigh more than a horse. Its yellow-brown skin was covered in patches of hair and dirt.

Someone said, "Fuck me."

Another person quipped, "You do not want that thing ramming you." He was indicating the ogre's penis, as the monster had no clothes. I had not noticed it yet because the height of the brute was so imposing.

Weirdly I was not afraid at all. The dungeon had beaten the fear out of me. We also had over twenty men to just one ogre. The ogre reached into one of its kills, pulled out an organ, and shoved it into a massive maw. That was a maw—not a mouth. The gore as it chewed splattered everywhere. Then with bloody teeth, it roared red spittle into the air.

Wylie was to my right and muttered, "I hope he was not calling friends."

Delmar gave the hand signal, and we walked forward as a unit to engage.

## Chapter 22: Other Worlders

Delmar advanced at a steady pace while the ogre finished his scream. My thought was the ogre was either challenging us or trying to scare us away from his kill. The ogre grabbed a massive rusty sword from the ground. "Fuck, he has a weapon, and it is not a club," someone noted the obvious.

Linus, the medic, asked for a healing potion in preparation, and I grabbed one and handed it to him. Delmar called out, "Scrap the shield wall. I will distract it and gets its back to you. Cut the Achilles or hamstring tendon!" Delmar went into a jog and easily deflected the ogre's overhead swing into the dirt. As he did so, he tried to move behind the beast as arrows peppered its chest from the front. Now that we were only 50 feet away, the smell had gotten insanely irritating, so much so that my eyes watered. I was in the center of our formation and the second line of attack if the men in front were injured or killed.

Delmar had cut the ogre's thigh and gotten behind it. The ogre spun on Delmar, putting its back to us. The forward line rushed forward, and a series of arrows impacted the ogre's back, but I could see they barely penetrated. The ogre roared and swung wildly at Delmar. A spear pierced the hamstring of the ogre, and both calf muscles had multiple cuts, but it had a thick hide and steel-like hamstring.

The ogre was bleeding freely. The ogre suddenly charged Delmar, who nimbly sidestepped the ogre but was caught off guard when the ogre flung the massive sword into his chest as he passed. The weight of the blade crashed into Delmar, throwing him off the road and into swampy waters. The men abandoned the cautious attack and threw themselves at the ogre before the ogre could get to the downed Delmar. A dozen men swarmed the ogre. I saw one man, Mateo, jump on the back and stab the ogre in the shoulder blades with a long dagger.

Surprisingly, the ogre agilely reached back, grabbed Mateo's arm, scrapped him off, and threw him thirty feet into the bog. That was the last surge of the ogre's strength as it dropped to its knees. Spears and blades rang down, focusing on the ogre's head, and it whimpered like a child and tried futilely to block the heavy rain of strikes on its head. It collapsed, but I was already running into the bog to check on Mateo. Linus was seeing to Delmar already giving him the healing potion.

Mateo was groaning when I reached him. "Anything broken?" I asked, kneeling in the dark soupy water.

Mateo sat up, and I smelled a wall of stench. It was like the ogre had skunked him. "No...well, maybe a rib. The shoulder is a bit messed up but not a broken bone." He stood, and I backed away, holding my nose after I made sure he could walk. He smiled victoriously, "The landing was pretty soft..." he started sniffing the air and then looked at his armor. The mud that had coated the ogre's back was now pasted across his leather armor, pants and face. "Ah, shit."

I said, "Exactly! Stay downwind of everyone." I moved away to see how Linus was doing with Delmar. Linus had Delmar on his feet. The potion bottle was empty, and Delmar had blood on his face. "Do you need a second potion?"

Delmar smiled, blood-outlined teeth, "Would be a waste of a potion. I am good to get back and see a healer. Sword just clipped me. I can walk." Linus was with him, and I was a little upset as my boots were now waterlogged from

checking on Mateo. The conversation turned to the dead ogre and frogs. It would have given a nice strength essence if we had a collector.

The ogre had a few harvestable parts. The teeth only sold for a few dozen silver, not worth the effort as we would not have an alchemist to sell them to in Macha. Ogre fat could be made into good insect-repellent candles, and we joked that we already had Mateo for that. The stomach could be made into an excellent and durable sack with a good tanner. No one was in the mood to cut it out, so we left the ogre unmolested in its death pose. The frogs were useless besides the meat, and no one was going to trust the meat after the ogre had torn into them.

The walk back took longer as Mateo and Delmar were moving slightly slower. We encountered three giant frogs through the stretch. We killed one with arrows, and the other two fled after receiving some injuries. We were not equipped to chase them into the bog.

I was missing Ginger, my horse. The walking had not been too bad until my boots got filled with muddy swamp water. I had dumped the water out, but Delmar had us moving again, and I did not have time to sneak away and change to dry socks. After seven miles, I could feel the calluses on my feet peeling off.

When we got back to the city, there was no fanfare for our return. Delmar dismissed us and went to report to Castille. We returned to our makeshift sleeping arrangements at the abandoned bakery. I peeled off my boots and socks, taking a fair amount of skin with them. The flesh was raw and bleeding. I was sitting on my bed, and Konstantin walked by. "Eryk, next time that happens, wring your socks out. Better yet, bring extra socks and switch your socks with a dry pair." He inspected my feet, "I will have Felix bring you a meal. We are only on the walls tomorrow from sunrise to sunset, no patrol."

"Is the regular army doing the patrol?" I asked, rubbing my feet with the horse salve from my pack.

"No, another legion unit is handling it. We go out the day after, swamp patrol again," he sounded happy about it. "Tell you what, Eryk, no training tonight." He laughed as he left at the annoyed look on my face. I thought about drinking one of the healing potions I carried for the company but just sighed and lay on my bed after stripping down to my underwear. The humidity was still making me sweat, so I drank cold water from my canteen.

I wished I could take a shower, but after a twenty-mile patrol, half in muddy soaked boots, I was just exhausted. I pulled the history book out of my space and started reading again. Felix arrived with my food and asked about the book, but I had already prepared an answer. I told him I found it in the children's room.

The food he handed me was simple, small boiled potatoes and ham steak. The portion was very generous. Felix sat and ate with me, "Mateo is on the roof. He took a shower and still stinks a fair bit, so he is not sleeping in the room with me. Linus is getting him something to clean his armor. Most likely, he going to get out of wall watch tomorrow because no one wants to smell him," Felix was chuckling.

After he finished his meal, I turned on the oil lamp and continued reading. After the First Legion arrived and carved out its Empire, the First Legion continued to expand its borders. The expansion slowed as the legionaries did not pass down the powerful mastery of their magic affinities to their children. Still, many legionaries were long-lived and set up their families to control the Empire and protect its people. The children's book started to go into the propaganda of all the good the Legion did with their knowledge and magic. Roads, aqueducts, improved non-magic construction methods, and structured law. I passed out reading late into the night, unable to spend two consecutive nights without sleep.

Konstantin woke us again by banging on the doors. He took a lot of pleasure in the loud morning call. We got large cheese loaves filled with thick beef gravy. It was like a massive Hot Pocket. I learned that as legionaries, we received better and larger portions of food than the regular army. Felix told me not to gloat about it, or it would likely result in a brawl. Besides, he joked that we were outnumbered seven thousand to one hundred in the city. It wouldn't be a fair fight for the regulars.

The wall duty watch had a purpose. Adrain explained that this was the one-hundred-yard stretch we would be expected to defend if the city was attacked. The stretch of wall was from the gate tower to an archer tower. The soldiers got to do their watch up in the towers, shielded from the sun, while we sat on the wall in the heat. There were just twenty-one of us for the wall duty. A lot of our legion members were being tasked to help elsewhere in the city. Since we did not have any skills of note, we got to sit on the wall. We split it into three shifts of seven, with Delmar, Adrian, or Konstantin serving as commanding officer for each shift.



I took the first shift to get the rest of the day off. I planned to try and finish the book this afternoon and get some sleep, but Konstantin found me as I left the wall, “Eryk, you are with me. We are going on a patrol. Do not worry, it is short.”

I followed him outside the gates, and he said, “We are going to walk the perimeter of the wall. It will give you some familiarity with the city.” As we walked the wall, Konstantin talked about likely attack routes against the walls. The strongest defensive points and the weakest. If I had not been so exhausted, I would have asked questions, but as it was, my energy level only permitted me to listen.

It took two hours to walk the outer city wall, and I was slightly fearful we were going to follow it with dual-sword practice. Instead, we went to the same cart where we got our breakfast, and Konstantin left with his late lunch in hand. It was a large loaf again but stuffed with diced sausage and vegetables this time. I wondered if Konstantin took everyone on a personal walk of the city.

I had the afternoon to read to finish the book. The end of the History of the First Legion was slightly chilling and gave me pause ever to reveal myself as a traveler from Earth. A few members of the First Legion had lived for almost a thousand years. Whenever a stranger arrived from another world, they were brought to the Emperor for a reward. The storybook I read was maybe a hundred years old, and most of the story read akin to a myth rather than actual history. In my time here, I had not heard anyone mention the practice of finding and hauling travelers before the Emperor for judgment.

It made sense, though. Travelers, if they had the same massive affinities that I had, then they would be a danger to the rule of the Emperor. Had I managed to slip through the cracks? I went to get dinner at the cart before the sunset. I found Linus and handed him his bottle of brandy from Nolan. “Nolan is still alive?” I nodded, and he popped the bottle, and sniffed. “Want to have a drink with me?”

“Definitely!” I followed him into a tailor’s shop where he was staying. We started drinking in the common room. His bed was in the back. We quickly whittled the bottle down, and I kept enough of my faculties about me to ask Linus about travelers.

He scoffed, “Don’t think there has been a recorded person from the First Legion’s world in two hundred years. Then again, it is a massive planet! Where did you say you were from?”

“Duchy of Tsingia. Came up with a lumber trade caravan. Did some stupid shit, and bam! I am a legionnaire!” I barked out, laughing. My research had told me the Duchy was a small human kingdom 1500 miles to the south. All I really knew was where it was on a map and that its primary export was lumber.

“True that!” He toasted. “I was working as an animal physician. Killed the Baron’s prized bull—complete accident. And bam, ten years in the Legion to pay him back!”

I stumbled back to my room. I was half afraid Mateo would have taken my bed, but thankfully it was empty, and I collapsed hard. I had learned a little. Linus was a commoner and did not know if you had to report other worlders to Magistrates. He assumed yes but had not heard of a reward for doing so.

I was woken too soon by a pounding on my door that echoed in my head. Great, my first hangover since arriving was not a small one. “Move it, Eryk,” Konstantin yelled through the door, “Entire company is on patrol today.” I pulled the feathered pillow over my head for a moment to drown him out, and then I sent it to my dimensional space and started moving.

## Chapter 23

My mouth was dry and cotton-like, and my head pounded. You would think in a world of magic and alchemy; they could make alcohol that did not have a hangover. This was by far the worst hangover I ever had as well. Give me two six-packs instead of half a bottle of brandy any day. I managed to get ready and get to the gate in time.

Castille was dressed in legion garb instead of mage garb at the gate for the patrol. Her leather chest piece was shaped to her curves, and she even carried a short saber. I was hurting too much, and the sun was too bright to ask anyone questions why. I located Linus, and he seemed perfectly fine and greeted me with an annoying smile, “Mornin Eryk. Take this, crush the stem, and suck out the syrup. You will feel better shortly.”

It looked like a dandelion, but the stem was as thick as my finger. I did as advised and crushed and then sucked. The taste reminded me of aloe and cinnamon. Linus was right. The pressure on my head faded first, and then my

eyesight normalized. The dryness in my mouth remained, and it added a bitter, sticky aftertaste, but that was a small price for regaining functionality.

I learned the flower was called Morning Glory and was grown by skilled nature mages because it required aether to thrive. A single stem cost six large silver but had multiple doses. It just needed to be consumed shortly after picking. I would be adding a few to my dimensional space in the future as the stasis effect should keep them viable.

As we formed up, there were only two missing people for the patrol, Mateo and Delmar. The ogre had injured both, and I had not seen either of them at the wall yesterday. Castille led us out of the gates, and I ended up walking next to Firth. He complained about the lack of quality in the brothels in the city. He looked to be in his early 40s, and I wondered if he was actually upset with brothels as he claimed or just liked to hear himself talk.

We walked in pairs, spaced about ten feet apart. My feet had healed enough to not cause an issue. I had pulled two spare sets of socks out of my dimensional storage for the patrol just in case I needed them.

As we proceeded, the road and surroundings gave me Deja Vu from the previous patrol. Castille was at the front with Adrian, her lieutenant at her side. I was too far back to hear what they talked about, and I tuned out Firth as we walked.

It was the same as yesterday—no encounters until we reached the spot where we had killed the ogre two days ago. The body had been pulled into the swamp, and insects the size of my fist swarmed over the corpse. Mage Castille pulled out a scroll and used it to cast a flame spell to burn the insects and the body. The ogre fat caught, and a blue-black smoke started to get thicker and thicker into the air.

The smoke smelled terrible, so our short column rushed past to continue our patrol. Firth commented, “No large predators or scavengers in the area. Otherwise, the corpse would have been gone by now.”

I joked, “Maybe they couldn’t stand the smell either.” Firth laughed and then went into a long story about how some of his brothel partners smelled. The only thing his story did was reinforce my reluctance to partake in the brothels.

A large frog hopped into the road, and Castille bound it with her shadow chains. It was quickly killed with spears and rolled off the road after Castille

failed to get an essence from it. This patrol was so much easier with a mage with us. "Why didn't Castille come with us on the first patrol?" I asked Firth.

Firth commented, "She was probably in a meeting with the other two Legion company commander mages. Mages operate outside the normal army command, only Legion officers can command them, and none are currently in the city. I actually think she requested for us to patrol the southern road. Rumor is the local baron's advisor thinks the bullywug spotted recently was part of a dungeon release."

"Dungeon release?" I questioned.

"It sometimes happens, fairly uncommon. It only happens when the dungeon ecology is so screwed up that the dungeon has to release some of its monsters. It is probably just the fancy of the baron's advisor, though. Delmar thinks the bullywug was either a solo hunter or an exile, not a dungeon release. If there was an unbalanced dungeon out here the Emperor would send the Praetorian to destroy it. Either way, we are trying to find a frog man in a swamp full of giant frogs," he laughed.

"Praetorian?" I asked. I had heard them mentioned before, but I just thought they were the Emperor's personal guard.

"You really do not know much about the Empire. The Praetorians are the Emperor's elite mages and warriors." He paused and added, "And assassins." I realized it was another piece of the Roman culture as the Praetorian Guard was considered the Royal guard in my remembered history. This Praetorian had evolved into something else in a world of magic.

"Are the Praetorian First Citizens?" I asked after walking for a while, staring in thought at ominous dark clouds over the swamp.

Firth paused and said a little too harshly, "No, they are not. They are usually selected from the Lion Legion, from what I know. No First Citizens serve in the Lion Legion," Firth said. Lightning flashed from the dark clouds deep into the swamp. Castille had the column stop while she studied the odd lightning in the distance.

I overheard conversations from the others. Castille was trying to determine if the storm was natural or magical in nature. We waited for minutes, and two giant frogs came bounding toward us from the direction of the storm. They were fleeing and did not look to be attacking us. We formed up into shielded

groups to face them. One unit speared and hacked one of the frogs to pieces. The other frog passed over the road in a large leap and kept going, clearly afraid.

Castille announced, “Mark the road with the direction of the storm! Then we will make haste back to Macha.” The men went to work cutting rotting trees to stand into the road. It was just two poles, but they would line up in the direction of the heart of the storm. As we worked, we had to deal with sporadic life from the swamp, a half dozen frogs, and one massive snake thirty-foot-long snake.

The frogs went down quickly, but the snake had tough scales, and Castille’s shadow chains could not hold it. When the snake broke her chains, it swallowed Donte. Castille took out her wand and targeted the missiles on the head while we all hacked at the body. After it was killed, it was a rush to cut Donte out. He came out sputtering, swearing, and spitting—and then vomiting. Castille looked at the storm and talked with Adrian as she readied her essence collector for the snake.

Adiran yelled, “Skin it! Fangs are not poisonous, and we are taking those as well. You have thirty minutes to finish if you want a bonus!”

Seven men stood guard as the rest of us attacked the snake. The hide was almost two inches thick, and I asked no one in particular, “What is this good for anyway?”

“Mostly saddles,” Wylie responded, covered in blood. “I come from a family of leather workers, and this will make some durable and fancy saddles. We will cut it into strips the width and length of a person. Each strip should fetch two or three gold—but maybe not in Macha with all the skilled craftsman having fled.”

We all worked hard, and each of us had a strip of flesh to carry back. We rolled them up and attached them to our backpacks. I guessed the weight was around 40 pounds, so the awkward bundle was not going to be fun to carry. I flashed back to carrying the spider spinnerets in the dungeon. Adrian took the fangs and no snakeskin.

“Cut open the rest of the digestive tract,” Castille ordered before we left. She wanted to see what the snake had been eating. The storm appeared to be getting larger, but we worked fast and found three partially digested giant frogs and one humanoid. According to Konstantin, the humanoid was a

bullywug, not that I could tell, as the flesh was mostly gone from digestion. That was all we found, and Castille, Konstantin, and Adrian examined the bullywug in detail.

At least the train of fleeing animals had finally stopped. They finally ordered a quick march back to the city. When we marched, it was like a game of telephone, getting the words from our leaders at the front. The rumor passed down the column that the bullywug was not from a dungeon, looked like a runt, and had probably been exiled from its clan. The larger rumor was that Castille thought the storm cloud was not natural.

The seven miles to the city were not pleasant for any of us. The snakeskin's added weight and awkward weight distribution made it get painful on our backs. When we reached the gates, Castille reported to the guard captain for a few minutes. Before we were allowed to enter, three carts guarded by ten mounted men left the gates down the road. Konstantin was standing next to me, "They will take the rest of the skin and probably as much flesh as they can for the siege. Pity, we will not see a copper of it."

We got a lot of looks from the remaining citizens and regular soldiers as we followed Castille to the tanners on the far side of the slums. The smell of the tannery told me why it was placed all the way over here. Adrian talked to the grizzled tanner. Castille was already leaving, heading back to her residence in the city. According to Firth, she only came to show her face to the tanner to get a better deal for us. Mages were respected—and feared. Still, Adiran did not seem happy with the final result.

We were ordered to stack the bundles of snakeskin outside the tanner and were free to go. I found out we would all be getting 55 silver each for hauling the forty pounds of skin seven miles. I thought it was a good deal for the amount of work involved—my back would heal in a day or two. Wylie said it was terrible since a saddle made from the skin would sell for over twenty gold to a noble.

A few of the legionaries were headed to the upper city to use the baths there. They cost an outrageous silver coin, but we were all filthy, and the water was cleaner than the baths in the lower city. The four of us, Wylie, Donte, Felix, and I, decided a silver coin after our small windfall was worth it. We would celebrate surviving another day.

## Chapter 24: Book Shopping

We returned to our assigned residence to drop our gear and armor before heading to the baths. I found Mateo in my bed sleeping. The smell from the ogre was faint but still hung in the room. He rolled over drowsy, "Sorry, Eryk, I was sleeping on the roof, and it was just too bloody hot today. I will be out by evening as I have night watch at the north gate."

I sniffed the air again, "No, problem. You can keep the room." I grabbed my backpack and loose gear. The heavy blanket I left on the bed, considering it lost to the scent of ogre. I went to the bakery's first floor, pushed two tables together, and unloaded my gear. There was an old woman across the street that had advertised doing laundry for soldiers for a copper. I found some clean light linen pants and a shirt abandoned by the baker, stripped down, and changed. Felix was already coming back down the stairs, ready for the baths.

Felix laughed, "Mateo slept in your bed while we were gone? Just too cruel."

"I will just set up to sleep on these tables tonight. Adrian thinks we will be moved soon to a villa of the local baron who fled," I said, relaying the rumor I had overheard.

"It's true," Delmar said, walking into the bakery. "The baron's advisor is preparing it for us to move into. Probably making sure he is taking everything valuable out to say later it was stolen." He turned to me, "Eryk, I have this for you from Castille. It is to make up for your loss in the dungeon." He handed me a pouch, and I took it, expecting it to be heavy with coin. It was light, and inside was an essence. Delmar smiled, "The gargantuan constrictor essence. An apex essence of constitution."

He patted me on my shoulder, and Felix muttered, "Lucky bastard." I pulled the golf ball-sized essence and let it dissolve in my mouth while I put together my dirty clothes in a bundle to carry across the street. I could feel a now familiar run of aether surging through my body, enhancing my body. I shuddered from the cold electricity for a moment and gathered myself. The feeling was becoming euphoric and dopamine-inducing, knowing I was getting stronger. With Felix, I went and visited the washerwoman and talked for a few minutes. She was old and frail and lived with her daughter, who had four pre-teen kids. The father was killed a few years back. The woman offered to wash a set of clothing for a single copper.

Maybe it was because I felt bad for her situation, but I paid five copper for two sets of dirty clothes I had but asked they be washed twice and in clean water. She eagerly accepted, and the kids went to draw the fresh water. Felix said as we went to get Wylie and Donte down the street at their accommodations, "That woman will be forcing her daughter on you when you go to pick those clothes up."

I jested, "Sorry you didn't think to do it?"

"They will wash my clothes at the bath with scented soap," he indicated his sweat and gore-stained clothes. He pointed over his shoulder at the old woman, "If that family isn't fleeing, then they have nowhere to go. Or maybe the old woman can't handle the trip." He paused, "You did a good thing. I will let the others know to give her some work."

We met up and walked to the upper city, which was even more abandoned than the lower city. Most of the abandoned buildings were boarded up. The bathhouse was open and fed from an aqueduct. The attendants inside were all young women and not delighted to see my companion's clothes. These were the washerwomen who would take our clothes. They collected our silver coins, and then we stripped in front of them to give them our clothes. I tried not to show any shyness as I handed my linens to one of the young women. She handed me back an abrasive sponge and a cube of soap.

"See any you like?" Donte chided no one in particular.

"The brothel is down the street, you dolt," Delmar said, walking in with Adrian and Konstantin. "If you cause trouble here, Castille will mount your arse on a spear."

We all moved into the showers to scrub as the three new arrivals were attended to. The showers were just a light stream of cold water, but I took the opportunity to use the abrasive and soap, thoroughly cleaning myself and ignoring the others. My body had transformed in the months I had been here. I was lean and muscular. I briefly wondered what it would have been like in my past life if my body had looked like this. Once clean, we moved to sit in the heated baths. Wylie jumped in, causing a splash and waves followed by curses from the men already in the recessed pool.

Not many nobles remained in the city, and from the look of our company, I guessed they were mostly soldiers or other legionaries. Once the water settled with the curses at Wylie, conversation resumed. I closed my eyes and



just enjoyed the heated water. Our commanders and Konstantin joined the pool, and the conversation turned to Legion business.

We were moving into an estate near the baron's orchards and personal gardens inside the north walls. If the baron ran the city, then where the hell was he? I asked that question, and Delmar replied, "Normally, a count runs a city, but the last count was assassinated, and the Emperor appointed no new count. Baron Hephestus is just a temporary appointee. He is currently with the Emperor's army about four hundred miles from here. Ready and waiting to come to the rescue of his besieged city." Mockery laced his voice.

Firth, who was also here from our company, asked, "What is with the storm we saw?"

Konstantin answered, "Probably nothing good. It was definitely not natural. Castille and the other company commanders are deciding if they want to investigate. Has to be over ten miles of travel through the swamp—no road."

Wylie barked, "I hope she doesn't volunteer us. Swamp water is not good for my skin." He got a few chuckles, and a few men not from our company left the hot pool.

Konstantin stood and cracked his back, "Eryk, I will see you in the yard in a hour for practice. Best not to get too rusty."

My jaw would not work as he left, and everyone laughed, so maybe Konstantin was joking. Soon Adrian and Delmar started giving orders to everyone for either weapon practice tonight or to help with preparations for the move to the villa. I asked about my practice with the spear as I was supposed to be training in both. Delmar noted Konstantin was proficient in the spear as well. Great.

I exited the bath and went to the next chamber to find middle-aged women rubbing oil on the men. There was nothing sensual about it as the men did their own front and the women did their backs. I stood by a basin, started, and finished before a woman could do my back. I found my clean clothes and sandals and left.

I took a wrong turn and found myself in the trader's district of the upper city. Half the shops were empty, but a few still had life. Surprisingly a bookstore was still open as the sun was just setting. I wandered in, and the man reading a book looked up.

“I am surprised you are still here with the enemy likely to attack the city,” I said conversationally.

He inspected me, “Guessing you are a soldier by the square shoulders. It is all the same to me, Telhians or Bartiradians. It would cost too much to pack up and move and I am getting too old for it. Are you here to look or purchase, young man?”

“Do you have a book on spell forms, on how to learn them?” I asked.

“I do. Which affinity are you looking for?” He stood thinking I might be a customer.

“Healing if you have it. How much would it cost?” I asked, hopeful.

He looked me up and down and sighed, “Normally ten gold, but under the current circumstances,” he mused, “I will go as low as five gold. Not a copper lower,” he smiled, but he did not look like he thought I was capable of the coin.

“Do you have the protection affinity as well?” I asked, reaching into my pouch and getting the coins from my dimensional space.

“Eleven gold for that book. It is an uncommon affinity, and the copies are harder to come by,” he noted as he went to the shelves and found both books. “These both are basic low-affinity spell forms for these affinities. They are old, and there are other versions for different manifestations, but this is all I have currently.”

I looked both books over. They were both old and worn. They detailed a few basic spell forms for the affinity but did not seem to have the spell forms suitable for any affinity over forty. As he noted, they were just the basic spell forms. Renna’s book was much more detailed and covered all the affinities but did not have notes for the learning spell forms, just descriptors for choosing a spell form. Her book probably referenced textbooks for learning the specific spell forms.

The book was designed to learn without actually using an actual spell. It simplified the process significantly compared to learning from a spell, but the advantage of learning from a spell was minimal chance of making a mistake. I had Damian to guide me when I learned my dimensional pocket ability from the actual spell, but I would be on my own for this. Hopefully, I had learned enough from my time with him.

I confirmed the healing affinity first. It had three basic options, self-healing, body cleansing, and boundless endurance. I nodded and put it on the counter. The protection affinity book also had three spell forms detailed. Protection from the elements, wind barrier, and aetheric armor. I put the book on the counter.

“I will take them both,” I said, producing the sixteen gold.

Surprised, His eyes went up, “And he doesn’t even haggle. Your accent gives you away as a foreigner, but I suggest you save some coin next time and play the game of the merchant.” He took my coin anyway. I had just five gold coins remaining. I could not purchase rare affinity books if the uncommon book was already eleven gold. I had already spent what amounted to a fortune that my Legion mates knew I did not have.

I left the shop and turned into the first shop that sold food. The books went into my space, and I purchased two large meat pies in fired clay dishes for an entire silver. I should have gone to the company kitchen or bought food in the lower city as it would have been much cheaper, but I was in a good mood.

I awkwardly carried the warm pies all the way back to the bakery I was staying in. When I got closer, I found Mateo heading to his night shift at the gate, and he helped himself to one of the pies. They were family-sized, and I probably could not have eaten two anyway, even if my stomach was telling me I could.

I got to the bakery, and the old woman called me over to take my clean clothes. They were all clean and just damp. My guilt at their family’s predicament had me handing them the other meat pie. It made me feel good, and as predicted by Felix, the woman wanted to introduce her daughter to me. I escaped by going to get my dinner at the inn serving the Legion food down the street. I was famished, after all.

## **Chapter 25: Choices**

I returned to the bakery after I had my fill of cold chicken and spiced apples for dinner. Konstantin was waiting impatiently in the yard. I realized it had been over two hours since he had left the bath before me. I joked, “I thought you had been joking since we had just had a bath.”

“Joking? You are the least skilled combatant in the company Eryk. Maybe the entire Legion. If you want to live through a battle, you need to focus. You have chosen the most difficult path for a primary. Dual wielding requires ambidexterity—and the ability to split your thought process. Defend with one weapon while attacking with the other. And then surprising your opponent by switching which weapon is doing which,” he lectured harshly.

He tossed my two training short swords. “We will continue to work with two short blades until you have gained competency. Then, we will work with a blade and a parrying dagger. From there, we will work with you on strengthening your ability to split your mind and independently wield any bladed weapon in either hand.”

Even though I had been late and he was upset with me, Konstantin was surprisingly patient as we practiced. In the middle of practice, I disarmed my right sword, forcing me to fight with just one sword in my left. I was left-handed and decided to make light of the situation by quoting *The Princess Bride*. “I have something to tell you, I am not left-handed!” I switched my sword to my right and launched an attack I thought would surprise him. He used both blades to lock my sword down and away and elbowed me in the chin. I bit my tongue and tasted blood.

“What are you talking about, you dolt? You are definitely left-handed. But we are working on correcting it,” Konstantin snickered as I spit blood.

“That would have worked better or at least been funny if you had seen the—play,” I continued to spit blood to find out the damage to my tongue.

“If you had not been talking, you would not have bitten your tongue when I struck your jaw,” he commented while going for water. “Only gouge your opponent if you know you are better than them. For now, assume everyone is better than you.”

We worked on my ambidexterity. Konstantin admitted he only dual-wielded weapons when facing a monster or a single opponent. When faced with multiple weapon-wielding opponents, he preferred a small shield. However, he did not carry a shield when he scouted for the company due to its added weight.

Sweating and exhausted, Konstantin moved on to the spear. I was just using a staff as Konstantin had me review the basics and make slight corrections. I thought he would have made an excellent instructor at the legion training

camp, but I was not going to stoke his ego right now. It was time to learn what I could from him.

I was filthy and exhausted when he released me. He definitely worked me into the dark because I had been late. I spent some time setting up my bed on the tables, more than a little peeved of having my room skunked out by Mateo. I went and grabbed the oil lamp in the room and also confirmed the ogre scent lingered. I thought about sleeping in the other room with Felix, but he snored, and even exhausted, I wanted to study anyway. If anyone caught me with the spell form book, I would profess to finding the book in the bakery.

I had learned spell forms in two different ways so far. The first was the natural way my body innately made it. This happened when I utilized my convergence affinity to squeeze as much out of my first dexterity essence. From my understanding, I grew my attributes substantially from every essence I consumed. Minor and major essences were not supposed to affect potential, but for me, with my spell form, they did. It would be a huge boon as long as I could consume more essences in the future.

The second time I learned a spell form was from the spell book for dimensional storage. The spellbook was very similar to a spell form, just more complex than it needed to be. I also had Damian guide me on the process. Damian mentioned what a true wizard was able to do.

When a mage cast a true spell, they constructed the temporary spell forms in the air with their aether control and manipulation. Each spell required between three and six layers, and then you activated the spell construct with more aether. Damian had told me it was extremely difficult to learn to cast true spells, and few people had the intellect, dexterity, and perception to cast them. Even the translation amulet I had worn was actually six spell runic discs stacked on one another. I could not imagine creating all of those constructs with my mind.

The two books I purchased supposedly simplified spell forms to make learning and imprinting easier. The easiest way to describe the process was tattooing the spell form permanently on my aether core—each affinity could only take one tattoo, and the size of the tattoo was relative to the magnitude of my affinity. There was just not enough space for affinities under ten to imprint a spell form easily. It was possible, but the effect was usually minor.

I reviewed the protection affinity options in the first book. The three spell forms in the book were protection from the elements, aetheric armor, and wind

barrier. I started to examine the descriptions of each to see if one was good enough to choose as my spell form. I realized there were more options beyond these. That was because the healing book I purchased and Renna's book had different options.

Protection from the elements was the simplest of the three. It kept the air around your body at a comfortable 70 degrees. Well, it did not say 70 degrees specifically. It just said comfortable, like a dry spring morning, so I filled in the blanks. The description included walking on a glacier or in a desert in complete comfort. The spell even drew a tiny one aether per hour, well, for me that was a lot.

The next spell form was aetheric armor, and it required you to have an affinity over 25 due to the complexity of the spell form if you wished to learn it. This spell form created an invisible skin on the mage that absorbed hits, draining the aether at a rate of two per strike. At least, roughly two per strike. My translation was a bit fuzzy when it came to the math.

The last one sounded useful as I read it. Wind barrier actually hardened the air in a disc shape. It only cost a single aether to cast, and the barrier dissipated if it was strongly deformed. But it could still stop an arrow before breaking. The issue was the barrier took about two heartbeats to form (two seconds) and was fixed in place. It would lose cohesion after about ten seconds as well.

So, should I try to learn one of these as my one spell form for protection affinity? I wish I knew what all my other options were. Aetheric armor sounded useful as a soldier. Life-saving even. The protection from the elements was a great utility spell for a soldier and possibly life-saving. It had cool notes like keeping the rain off you as you walked and drying your clothes if you did get wet. Wind barrier had some cool notes that you could cast multiple wind barriers and make steps to climb walls as long as you didn't run out of aether.

Felix came down to use the privy on the first floor, "Crap, Eryk, get some sleep and stop reading about the First Legion." He did his business, and I switched the books in case he checked on his way back up. He went back upstairs, never checking what I was actually reading.

I decided if I had to choose one of these, it would be aetheric armor. I wanted to see if another mid-tier protection spell form was better for me before committing. From my experience, it would take me four to six weeks to learn

it, and I was not sure if I would have the time or privacy to do so. I switched to books to look at the healing affinity spell forms.

This book offered three; self-healing, body cleansing, and boundless endurance. These were different from Renna's book. Boundless endurance was the easiest to learn. The spell form utilized fat stores in the body to quickly replenish the muscles. This would be a terrible choice for me. Not only did I have little body fat now, but I had also consumed three apex essences of endurance. The body cleanse was very tempting. It removed foreign objects from the castor, including poisons, disease, and cleaning your bowels. This was basically a chance to never get sick. I remembered you needed to have symbiotic bacteria in your gut for healthy digestion. The text did not address if these bacteria were unaffected by the spell effect. The problem was that the spell form suggested having at least an affinity 35 in healing to learn it. My affinity was only 19.

The last choice, self-healing, suggested a minimum affinity of 20. The healing was limited to the mage and could not affect others. Damian's healing ability could heal other people but only soft tissue. But it looked like this version could heal soft tissue and bone. It was exactly what I wanted for my healing affinity. Maybe it was selfish to not seek an ability capable of healing others, but I didn't care. The extent of the healing determined how much aether was needed.

Mateo stumbled into the bakery, back from his watch, and I swore at my idiocy. It was almost morning, and I had spent the entire night translating and reading. I was caught in the excitement of possibilities. Mateo ignored me and climbed the stairs. I put the book away and got comfortable for my thirty-minute nap. Konstantin came stomping down the stairs with Felix and woke me. I rolled to a standing position and started to dress. Konstantin said, "Breakfast first and then to the wall. You have the first shift and the rest of the day off."

Breakfast was cold rice and beans with a sweet got sauce. It was the same food as the regular army as our kitchen was being moved to the estate this morning. Although the other men in my company complained, I joked the food was not too bad. It had nice contrasting textures, the rice was a little gooey, and the beans a little crunchy, but at least the thick sweet sauce covered it up.

When we reached the wall, Konstantin was in charge on the wall for the eight of us. I was shocked to find two of our company's archers, Pavel and Regis, were holding a competition. They had set up three dummies out away from

the wall. Each of us would get twelve shots. The loser of each round would have to go and retrieve the arrows. Konstantin was the best archer among us but was not participating. Was there any weapon Konstantin was not good with?

The contest started with a lesson on the short bow, how to properly string the bow, and care for the composite short bow made from glued layers of horn, wood, and sinew. Pavel showed us what made a good bow and how to inspect arrows for damage and then gave us a ten-minute lesson on shooting. Everything was too well rehearsed for this to be an impromptu session.

I guessed right when Konstantin announced, "There are seven of you, and we have six extra bows in the Legion. The six of you with the best shot will carry a bow while stationed on the wall; the remaining man will be the runner for arrows." This was not a great incentive, so he added, "And the best shot today will be given a pouch of the seasoned griffin jerky."

I had not sampled it but heard it was excellent, and by everyone's sudden focus, the game was on. Each round, we would shoot ten arrows each. And there were going to be twelve rounds total. An arrow in a straw dummy was one point. An arrow in its centerline was two points. The centerline was a red stripe painted from head to groin.

The dummies were fifty yards out and spaced about ten feet apart. Felix went first, earning seven points. Pavel was second, earning eleven points. Whether or not it was fair to have the archer participate in the contest was not up for debate. I was third. My first shot hit the dummy in the center of the head, and everyone whopped in praise. Then I missed my next nine shots. I gripped that I was left-handed and forced to use a right-handed bow but did not receive any sympathy as twenty minutes later, I was trudging out in the sun to collect eighty four arrows.

As the second round began, I noticed Konstantin and Regis giving advice. This was not some light-hearted competition. They were finding the most proficient members of the company to be archers on the wall. My turn came, and I scored five points, still the worst among everyone. My draw fingers were also slightly numb, and I wished I had one of the special gloves the archers were using.

I improved in the next rounds, scoring 6, 6, 8, 7, 8, 7, 7, 9, 10, 8, and 8 points. Only when I scored ten points points by getting two arrows on the centerline did I mercifully not have to go and retrieve the arrows as I tied with someone



else and was given a reprieve. We then spent time as a group inspecting each arrow for damage before packing them for the next watch. They were going to have the same competition to find the most competent archers. I was not selected to be one of the bowmen, but Pascal won, and he shared his griffin jerky.

I headed back to the bakery. My clothes were soaked with sweat and dust from all the work I did collecting 924 arrows. Granted, most were in the dummies, but my hands were raw and full of splinters from pulling them out of the straw. My left shoulder blade ached from pulling the short bow one hundred and forty-four times, and the calluses on my fingertips were peeling off from new blisters forming underneath. Maybe it was a good thing I was not selected to be an archer for the wall.

Mateo had been to the baths in the morning and was coated in perfume. We still joked we could smell ogre ass on him, but we decided to let him come with us for a drink with some of the other men in the company. Konstantin said we would be moving into the villa late tonight, so it was going to be an early dinner in the tavern rather than eat the army food. I gave the old woman five coppers and my two dirty clothes on my way to meet the others. I was dressed in clean linens. I only wore a belt with a dagger and my coin purse. In my purse were twenty-seven copper and three silver. More than enough to enough the evening. If the pattern held, tomorrow would be a long march to patrol the swamps.

As we headed to the tavern, my companions were Firth, Mateo, Felix, Wylie, and Kolm.

## **Chapter 26: Firth's Idea of Dessert**

The mid-afternoon sun was blocked by ranging clouds as we walked. The plan was to escape the humidity in the tavern, which was a massive stone cellar. Firth had heard of it from a local. Probably one of his women at the brothel. It was in the lower city. The streets were fairly lean of people as we walked. More and more fled west every day, squeezing the city of regular people.

Wylie asked, "Any news on the reward for reporting the new dungeon?"

The older Firth, always informed, “Nope. They probably hoped we would all die out here so they don’t have to pay out.”

Mateo interjected, “It is the Adventurer’s Guild that pays. It will take them a week to travel there. A week to explore it. A week to return. And then ten months to review their notes before they pay out.” That got a lot of chuckles, but I was unsure if it was directed at the Adventurer’s Guild or bureaucracy in general.

Felix sounded appalled, “So we are not going to see the gold for a year then?”

Firth told him directly, “Just worry about staying alive. When it gets paid out, Adrian said each man is looking at between 50 to 80 gold. It will happen, just be patient.”

Kolm, our company pseudo-blacksmith, said, “I am going to get some enchanted boots so my damn feet never hurt again.” This started everyone on their wish list for what they would buy. Surprisingly, Firth said he was going to send it all back to his family and not spend it in a brothel. It would set them up for life and get the kids a good education.

Wylie asked, “What about you, Eryk? What are you going to do with your peasant fortune?”

I hesitated, then said, “I think I will get on the road and head back to my own country after my term is done and spend it there.”

Firth smirked, “The Telhians are not so bad. A little more racist than most Kingdoms, but you are human.” He paused and pretended to look at me seriously, “You are human, Eryk? Did anyone check?” He said in mock seriousness.

Felix, “I don’t know. His cock looked a little large in showers last night. Maybe he is half-orc.”

Wylie joined in on the fun banter, defending me, “It only looked large because you compared it to your own, Felix. It was completely normal.”

The good-natured jarring went back and forth until we arrived and descended stone steps into a large basement under what appeared to be a lumbar warehouse. The large room was well-lit, with dozens of tables and many men sitting...not many women I could see. The servers were middle-aged women

moving among the tables serving city guards, locals, and a few men of the army. Firth pointed at an empty table, and we headed over as he said, "I was told to order the house stew with goat's milk bread. They have a soft ale and thick stout ale for options."

As we sat, one of the servers took our order. The house stew was a massive bowl of vegetables and various meats. It was enough to feed a family of four. As I ate, I figured the stew was just whatever they had left over from the previous day's meal in the kitchen. I got the pale ale and was not a fan. It was extremely bitter. The goat milk bread had a thick crust and dense texture, but it soaked up the stew juices and became amazing on the taste buds. I ordered a second serving with the stout, somehow finding a way to pack it all in. The stout was heavy but not as bitter. My two stews, two loaves, and two ales ran me 14 copper. I tipped four copper coins. Tipping was not a normal practice, but it was understood and appreciated by the middle-aged woman serving us. When we finished the meal, the cards came out.

I just observed while the others played. It seemed almost like UNO. The first player to get all the cards out of his hand, won. The cards were marked with Roman numerals, which was strange since the magic tablets used Arabic base ten numbers. The numbers were only written slightly differently, and I had already gotten accustomed to them. Wylie and Felix were trash-talkers the entire game. I thought a lot of effort was invested in a game with no coin at stake.

I guessed the cool, dry underground stone room was maybe half full, 120 patrons or so. It was just after mid-day, so maybe it got busier at night. A woman in skimpy clothing came out and set up on a small stage. She had a large harp and strummed it before singing. She had a beautiful voice, and I focused on her for the entire song with my eyes closed. The words were not Latin but flowed marvelously together. When she stopped, I asked, "What language was that?"

"Probably elvish. I wasn't paying too close of attention," Firth said, his eyes and focus across the room. Then, there was a loud crash a few tables away, drawing everyone's attention. A local had spilled his ale on an army regular. The curses started flying freely. And then fists.

I asked, "Are we leaving?"

Firth chuckled, "No. We will wait for the city guard to ask for our help and then join in the fun."

I didn't understand until the fight started spreading, and a man in a city guard uniform came to our table, "If you are Legion, then we could stand for some help." He didn't wait for an answer as he waded in.

Firth laughed and said, "This was what she said would be dessert. Come on. Focus on the regulars." I think that meant the regular army. Soon, half the room was in a brawl. I followed my friends and got an elbow to the stomach to start. I promptly showed him what I had eaten for lunch. As he backed up, covered in vomit, I grabbed the man's hair and drove his forehead into my knee. My knee hurt, but the adrenaline was flowing, and I had just lost most of a very good meal so I was a bit angry.

I stayed toward the rear, cleaning up the perimeter as I watched my company wade through the other men. It was like they were adults doling out discipline to children. Firth, who looked to be in his forties, was doing the most damage. He would incapacitate a man with two quick jabs before spinning the dazed man over to the town guards. I had learned a lot in legion training but was rusty with my hand-to-hand skills. It took me a few strikes to my body before I got angry and let loose, the instincts drilled into me from months of training.

When it was over, I had a bloody lip and some bruises on my body, Wylie had a swollen black eye, and Mateo got a knife stabbed in his shoulder. It was a small knife for cutting fruit. We had not really won as we were more like the enforcers during the fight. By my estimate, fifty town guards hauled away about thirty regular soldiers and ten locals. Firth was talking to a guard captain while complimentary ale was brought to the rest of us. I needed to wash the acid vomit taste from my mouth, so it was appreciated.

Watching Firth talk and remembering how he fought, I asked, "Does this happen a lot when Firth takes you out?"

Felix commented, "More often than not. But he is always expecting it and gives us a heads up before it starts."

I thought about Firth. He spent a lot of time away from the company in larger cities, supposedly visiting the brothels, and maybe he was. But he was always the most well-informed legionnaire, just as much as Castille, Adrian, and Delmar. But he didn't talk with them like Konstantin did, so where was his information coming from? He was also older than Adrian and Delmar, so why was he not one of Castille's lieutenants? He was just as good of a fighter as them.

It all seemed very fishy to me. I thought about asking him but instead planned to ask Konstantin. I trusted him enough to see if he knew anything, and Konstantin was probably the most observant man in our company. I drank the entire mug in a long pull and stood, "I am going to check the shops. Try to find some good deals in the 'city is about to be attacked clearance section.'" Mateo got the joke first and laughed as I waved goodbye and left.

Instead of going directly back to the bakery, I went to the upper city to the bookstore. I wanted to see if there were other books on spell forms for the protection affinity. The owner was happy to see me but only helped marginally. There were other books, but he did not have any of them for protection. He did have a higher affinity healing book, but that would not help me anyway. I was happy with the self-healing spell form and was not even sure I could learn it. My affinity was 19, and the minimum suggested was 20. I would still try. I was going to leave, but he stopped me, "I don't have the other spell form books, but I do have a spell reference book. It describes the lower affinity spells for protection."

"I can not afford to purchase it, but can I look at it for a few minutes?" I asked hopefully. He considered and nodded. I think any spell could be imprinted as a spell form on a core. They created the books on spell forms for the most useful spells to make imprinting them for people with high enough affinities as easy as possible. I took the spell list book, sat in a chair, and carefully paged through. It had a fancy script, making it hard for me to read. At least it had an index.

There were two branches, the protection branch and the guardian branch. The protection spells focused on the self, while the guardian focused on others. I ignored the guardian side of the index. I quickly found the arcane armor spell. The spells were listed in the rank of difficulty, so all the spells above in the index should be available to me with a 30 affinity.

Protection from Scrying

Immunity to Non-magical flames

Faithful Spectral Hound

Ward of Concealment

Ward Against Undead

I went to the ward of concealment first, but it was not for a person. It concealed an object in an invisible field. The ward against undead was stationary too. Used to prevent the undead from entering doorways. Spectral hound sounded promising, but it was more of a guard dog while you slept and couldn't attack. Protection from flames, I discounted immediately. The last one was a possibility. Protection from scrying would prevent people from tracking me. I could leave the legion before my five years, and they would not be able to find me. Two problems with the choice. I had no spell forms to guide me to imprint the spell, and it would probably take a long time to get the spell forms and learn them. I would probably be better off just finishing my five-year term.

I thanked the owner of the bookstore with a ten silver tip. I went to the same meat pie shop and got two pies again. When I picked up my clothes, I gave one of the pies to the old woman's family. I also explained that I was relocating to the upper city and would not require her services again. She was disappointed and said I was a nice young man and hoped I lived a long and fulfilling life. I thanked her for her blessing and went to find Konstantin.

He was not in the room he was using on the second floor. As I came down the stairs, Olson, the other scout, entered, "Have you seen Konstantin?" he asked.

"No, I just checked his room. I do not know where he went," I replied.

Olson grunted, "Well, pack up your gear. Konstantin and I are to track everyone down and get everyone up the estate. Dinner will be ready there in two hours. Castille wants to address everyone, then. The directions are simple. Just follow the main thoroughfare to the castle. Then keep the outer wall to your right. You will pass through a guard checkpoint into the inner courtyard orchards. The estate is on the far side of the trees. If you get lost, just ask for directions to the orchards from the city guard."

"Head there now?" I asked.

"Yes, Eryk. If you get there first, you might be able to get one of the few private rooms," he said, a little irritated he had not found the other scout.

I started packing as quickly as possible. I moved the still-hot meat pie into my storage when he left. Private room? Hell yeah. I could talk to Konstantin later.

## Chapter 27: I Call Dibbs

As I made my way down the main thoroughfare lugging a sixty-pound pack, I decided to take a quick stop in the Legion Hall. The other two companies and half of our company were stationed here. I wanted to see about requisitioning some gear, mainly a new spear. After training with a stick last night, I was anxious to get a real spear back in my hands.

I noticed Linus in the common room, and he waved me over, "Eryk, how are you doing? Heard about your little scuffle when Mateo came in to get his wound looked at." A three-inch knife had stabbed Mateo in the shoulder in the fight.

"How is he doing?" I asked.

"Fine, we closed it up. Has Castille talked to you yet?" Linus asked, his face slightly creased in concern.

"No, I was headed up to the estate to pick a bed. Olson said we were moving up there, and dinner was in two hours," I slowly said, thinking that maybe something was wrong.

Linus' eyes went wide, "Bastard! He said he would tell me first. There are only three private rooms after Castille, Delmar, and Adrian take the larger rooms." He was about to leave but paused, "Castille will tell you tonight, I am sure. But I heard you are going out with Mage Durandus' company tomorrow. They do not have a porter. I was sorting potions you were going to be taking with you a few minutes ago."

"Why?" I ask, confused.

"I will let Castille explain it. It should just be for the day," he had a guilty look as he rushed off to pack his gear.

I went to the armory and was told I could grab what I needed, and it would be recorded in the log as I left. I walked by the unstrung bows and paused. There were a dozen, and a few of them were worn and had blood stains on them. Would they really let me check out a short bow? I had learned a little this morning, could pick the best of the bunch, and knew each was worth a good amount of gold from Regis.

I strung one of the thicker ones, tested the draw weight, and nodded. I could feel my sore muscles, but it was a good pull weight for me. I unstrung it and grabbed four spare bow strings from a box and a quiver with seventeen arrows. Quivers, I learned we were either small or large, 17 or 34 arrows full. The small quiver was for mobility, and the large was for extended battles. But Regis mentioned when they pack the quivers; they put the better arrows in the small quivers. The arrow lengths were the same since the Legion only used short bows. I would have checked each arrow, but I didn't have time. I was racing against Linus for a private room.

At the rack of spears, I quickly selected two regular spears. The pilum were the throwing spears used by the regular army. The pilum was only for piercing. A regular spear had a more durable shaft and a spearhead that could pierce and slash and was shaped like a leaf. I would have to come back for a shield tomorrow. It only took a moment for me to check out, and they didn't even comment on the bow. He even helped me bundle everything together with twine to make it easier to carry.

Loaded down with all the gear, I made my way to the upper city. I thought more than a few times about putting the heavy gear into my storage space rather than carrying it, but I suffered through it in case I was spotted. I think I beat Linus out of the Legion Hall, but I rushed down the street toward the orchards since I couldn't be sure. I probably looked a fool, but I would hopefully be a fool in my own room.

The main road ran about a mile before meeting up with the inner city wall. I kept this wall to my right and soon found the gate, trees easily seen beyond. The city guards here had special tabards on. When I approached with my gear, they did not even question me as I passed. I turned and asked, "Am I the first one?" I realized I probably sounded like a little kid hoping to be the first in line for ice cream.

The older guard nodded with a grin, "Castille's company by the armor? We were told you were coming. Yes, you are the first one through this gate. There is another gate toward the Count's castle, though." I was surprised they were so friendly, and I would have been polite and chatted, but I could see Linus fast walking toward us with his own massive pack. I turned and walked the stone paths across the orchard.

I noticed the trees were not apples but peaches or maybe nectarines. I was not going to pause to find out. The path led straight to the estate. The estate was a stone two-story building. It was not huge and surrounded by flowering



trees. If I remember correctly, I think it was a guest house for visiting dignitaries. I made it to the large door and barged inside. I paused to find Delmar in the foyer. I was sweating and burdened. He cocked an eyebrow questionably.

“I was told there were a few private rooms?” I explained, “It is first come, first choice, correct?”

He chuckled, “Yes, the ballroom that way had fifteen beds dragged in. Most of the servant rooms on this floor have three beds but...” he caused for dramatic effect. The maid’s room off the kitchen has one bed and...” he did not finish as I moved toward the kitchen to the right. I could smell the food being prepared and moved through the doors. The door was narrow, and I struggled, probably comically, with my weapons and gear. I must have looked the fool. I burst into the kitchen to find a shocked Lirkin, our company cook, working by himself.

“Eryk? I take it you are not here to help. I think what you are looking for in the hallway there,” he said with a knowing smirk, pointing with his knife.

I went to the hallway, dropping my pack so I could fit in the passage. I found a narrow stair to the left going up and a door to the right. I opened the door, and it was a closet-sized room. A bed took the entire left side, and a small desk and armoire to the right. Maybe three feet were between the bed and desk, but I had a large window shaded by a massive tree on the tiny wall. I tested the mattress, and it was the most comfortable mattress I had felt in all my time in this new world.

I got all my gear inside and collapsed into the mattress. I sighed as it formed around my body. A floral fragrance wafted up from the mattress, probably the perfume the maid had used. The room was not nearly as humid as outside, and I would keep the window and door shut during the heat of the day. I started to unpack my things, claiming the small space for my own.

The armoire was full of woman’s dresses and a change of bed sheets. The dresses were all identical and probably her uniform as a maid. The bottom was full of woman’s small clothes. I guessed whoever she was; she was not important enough to be given time to pack her things. I found her perfume and personal possessions in the desk drawers. Besides using a puff of perfume to check the scent, I stored everything of hers respectfully away in the bottom of the armoire.

I learned my weapons against the closed armoire; two short swords, two spears, the bow, and quiver. I would use the desk and bed, and that would be it. I put my heavy pack on the small desk and planned to use the bed until dinner was ready. Instead, Lirkin called, "If you don't mind, I would appreciate your help Eryk."

I sighed and went to the kitchen after removing my armor. I heard Linus talking with Delmar and then heard him rushing up the stairs. I was glad I was not the only one acting childlike. Then again, these would most likely be our sleeping assignments for the next few weeks.

I was actually helping Lirkin prep for breakfast. He had dinner under control. Roasted lamb with an apricot-cinnamon glaze. A couscous with diced tomatoes and roasted garlic on the side. My mouth was watering as I peeled potatoes and then kneaded dough for him. I was happy to see all the jars of spices I had liberated from Varvao were in the kitchen.

The best part of helping prepare the food was sampling it. I soon heard others entering and Delmar directing them. Lirkin noted, "The larder is down those stairs there," he pointed. "It wasn't completely stripped, and if you want to cool off, it is very cool and dry down there. Just don't be getting drunk from the casks of ale and wine," he smiled knowingly.

I finished the last potato. I still had to rinse the skins next, and then it would be marinated with vegetables and spices for a portable lunch tomorrow. The potatoes would be diced and fried with eggs and peppers for breakfast. I asked, "Lirkin, why didn't you take the room off the kitchen?"

He grinned madly, "I took a child's room on the second floor. The bed is like a cloud." I admit that made me jealous. My bed was soft, but it was for a servant. The good thing was I was isolated from the company and would have privacy to study and quiet to sleep.

Adrian came in an hour later and called for dinner, and we brought it out to the men in a fancy dining room. Everyone was crammed at the table, made to seat 12. I got jeered because I got the maid's room, and I was covered in flour. As plates were filled and people ate, I noticed Castille was the only one not here. When we finished eating, a cask of weak ale was brought out, and large mugs were filled. Then Castille made her appearance with everyone satiated and happy.

“I hope everyone is settled in and happy with your inn accommodations,” she said to cheers. She smirked, “Well if the other companies want to hog the Legion Hall, they can have it! We will live in luxury on the hill!” More cheers.

She got serious, “The Dungeon discovery is confirmed.” Silence and then cheers. Every name of my role has been submitted. You can collect your share at the Adventurer’s Hall in the capital under a Truthseeker.” Mild cheers. She broke into a massive grin, “Everyone is due 75 gold and 68 silver.” The place got extremely loud at the pronouncement.

“Now to business. Tomorrow will be our last patrol south. We will eventually switch to work with the city guard on overnight patrols. During the day, we will keep our rotation on our section of the wall,” she paused to let it sink in.

“Our new accommodations also will require us to patrol the orchards at night. We will rotate which four men stay here and which sixteen go to the city to help the city guard every night,” she explained. The math meant six people got the night off. Well, probably four because I doubted Adrian and Delmar would do patrol work, but maybe I was wrong. Not so much cheering.

Delmar stepped forward. “Since you will all be well rested, we will pick up our standard conditioning and weapon training.” This got a chorus of boos. “I will post the times in the foyer!” He yelled over the cacophony of heckling. “Dismissed!”

Castille caught me, “Eryk, you are with me for a moment.”

Castille took me into a study where all the books had been stripped off the shelves. She smiled weakly, “You have done well so far under strenuous circumstances. I have an assignment for you. Mage Durandus’ company will explore the storm tomorrow, and I am loaning you out to him. He does not have a porter, and we have pooled potions for him to take.”

This sounded terrible. Trudging through the swamp infested with giant frogs...what is we got surprised by one of those massive snakes. I asked weakly, “What is the storm?”

Castille frowned, “We do not know. It has not dissipated and could be a number of things. An aether geyser from a ley line. A summoning. A new dungeon forming. A powerful being playing with magic. Whatever it is, we need to ensure it is not dangerous to the Empire.”

I just nodded and was told to be at the Legion Hall at first light.

## Chapter 28: The Storm in the Distance

I took an oil lamp back to my room in a haze of thought. I was being passed off to another company like a traded commodity. That storm was also miles into the swamp with no easy access. It would not be a one-day trip unless the mage had some magic to make it so.

I was happy to find my room locked from the inside. The window did not have a lock, so I jammed a dagger in the seam and leaned my weapons against it just in case before pulling the blinds. I stripped to my underclothes and lay on the soft mattress with a groan of satisfaction. I placed the lamp on the small shelf over the bed. I pulled out my griffin pillow and my one clean blanket. I got comfortable and then took out the spell form book for healing. All nice and comfortable, I started to study.

The spell forms were to help guide the process. The true process was about intent and what I wanted the permanent presentation of my affinity to be. The critical factor was not to manifest the wrong spell form. Once it was done, it could not be undone, and I would have to live with it. I studied the book intently, losing track of time.

I woke in a start. Delmar was banging on my door, saying I needed to get moving. I had studied well into the night and had not gotten a lot of sleep. I sent everything to my space and unlocked the door. An impatient Delmar was waiting, "Come on, Eryk, I am to be your escort to the Legion Hall." He looked around, "Did you not pack last night?"

"I was told it was just a day trip," I said defensively, even though I knew it was not.

"Dragon's balls," he pushed into the small room and started packing for me. He set up my pack with the necessities and said, "Get three days of hard rations at the Legion Hall. Make sure they are all wrapped and sealed in wax leaf. The last thing you want is to get sick out there in the swamp. Take two canteens, one large and one small." He held up my small all-metal canteen. "Use this small one to boil your water for five minutes before drinking or have Durandus purify your water. Otherwise, your arse will be spewing for days."

He looked at my array of weapons, and I looked guilty when he noticed the bow.

He inspected the bow, and I offered weakly, "Thought I would have time to practice. This bow has a left-handed grip, so I thought it might help my aim." That was actually true, but most bows could be used by either hand. I found this one had grooves for a lefty. Maybe it was the custom, or the last owner had altered it.

"Konstantin said you were a terrible shot. You had trouble hitting stationary targets and would be hard-pressed to hit a moving one. It is a nice bow, but leave it behind. Your strings will probably get too wet to use it anyway. Leave your two short swords as well. They will weigh you down, especially if you have to swim." He handed me my leather chest piece, "Leave the rest of your armor here." He finished packing and gave me the now much lighter pack. He had completed everything in five minutes. I had a bed roll, one spare set of clothes wrapped in my oiled legionnaire cloak, my tarp for a tent, three pairs of socks, the two canteens, and flint and tinder.

As we walked in the dark to the Legion Hall, Delmar talked, "Durandus likes order. He expects his men to march in time and maintain silence on the move. Do your best not to anger him."

"What type of magic does he wield? And why was he sent here?" I asked, preparing mentally.

"Excellent questions. Durandus was once a soldier in the army. Under duress in combat, he developed a powerful air magic spell form that shielded him inside a bubble, making him invincible for a time. After that, he was assessed and sent to the Mage College. He came out a powerful water and air mage and was given the command of a company. He is here because he made an enemy of a duke. That usually happens when you tell a First Citizen no." Delmar did not elaborate and just walked.

We made it before first light, and in the common room, a number of legionaries were in full gear with half packs, waiting. Delmar dragged me to the larder and ordered, "Six ration bars sealed in wax leaf, three bags of dried fruit and nuts, and that sausage." He pointed at a large link. The civilian behind the counter sensed the urgency and got everything together.

Everything was on the counter, and Delmar helped me pack it. "The sausage is your breakfast, the bags of fruit and nuts; eat between meals to keep your

energy up. And Eryk, try and come back alive. Getting a good porter replaced takes months,” he joked, smiling and clapping me on my shoulder.

I went out to the common room and found Durandus’ four lieutenants getting everyone assembled for the march. Delmar had not been kidding when he said we would march in ranks and silence. I realized how spoiled I had been in Castille’s company. Our company was more like a family, and this seemed like a formal job, but maybe the other men would lighten up when we took a break. Durandus approached me, and I studied him and him me.

He was tall, maybe 6’2”, and he had immaculate clothes and a meticulously trimmed beard and stash. That was only notable because all of his men were clean-shaven. It made me self-conscious about the face nest that I trimmed infrequently with a knife. “Store these,” he tapped four racks of potions. I quickly looked at them. Ten lesser healing, ten cleanse poison, ten greater healing and ten stamina recovery. It was a fortune’s worth of potions, and they all had expiration dates on their wax seals. I now knew this meant they were made by an alchemist and not from a dungeon. Dungeon potions never expired.

I moved the potions into my storage, and everyone moved outside. I guess they had been waiting on me. As we started moving, I munched on the sausage. The first thing I noticed was this company had forty men. I thought a mage detachment from the Legion of the Lion had around twenty-three to start. To me, this seemed like a large company. I inspected the composition; ten archers, ten men with full-body shields, ten men with round shields and swords, and ten men with spears. Everyone carried a short blade. I was made to walk at the rear of the formation so I didn’t mess with their practiced organization.

Durandus walked in the front and set the pace. I was kind of the tail of the formation and wondered why Durandus didn’t send out any scouts. That became obvious three hours into our march. The mage ordered the shield wall forward and the spear men at the ready. A single giant frog was two hundred yards down the road. It moved into the road and look intently at us approaching. Durandus ordered a flight of spears, and as they struck, he fired a bolt of lightning at the frog. Two swordsmen with shields went forward to confirm it was dead. The encounter took less than five seconds. As we marched past, the spearmen collected their weapons. The frog was left smoldering on the side of the road. I deduced the mage had some type of scrying or far-sight spell or spell form.

I was impressed with the coordination and speed of the company. Where our company was filled with experienced individuals that worked well as a team, Durandus' company was a fighting unit. Durandus knew healing spells, so I suspected the men were not skittish about getting injured. We reached the two poles in the ground that lined up the storm's location. They were not needed as the dark clouds and occasional lightning remained. I checked the alignment anyway, and it looked like it had not moved in the two days since I had been here.

We were allowed to rest, and I gratefully sat and pulled up my ration. The wax leaf was wrapped around the block. The block's exterior was a dry baked cracker which covering a dried mixture of fruit, meat, and grains. It took a lot of water to wash down the dry dense ration. I remembered the meat pie in my storage, it should still be warm, but I would save it. I also ate a bag of the trail mix since Durandus was still studying the swamp and the storm in the distance. No one talked to me as I ate, and they just whispered amongst themselves so as not to disturb the mage.

I felt on an island. I was just the extra guy they needed to carry their luggage. Suddenly, Durandus came to a decision. He was leaving the six men at the road to guard gear. The rest of the men would be heading into the swamp. I waited, smirking a little as Delmar had already cut my gear down to the minimum needed.

We started our trek with four spearmen leading the company through the waters. The water was not deep where Durandus directed the men to walk, and I asked him, "Can you see how deep the water is with magic?"

I had forgotten to keep quiet, but he replied, "Yes, I have a water sense and sense life ability. We will not be surprised and will take the easiest route." I almost asked if his life sense ability worked on undead, but with his stern and somewhat condescending tone, I ended the conversation without asking.

The swamp water was lukewarm, and I thought it odd that I didn't see any fish or smaller frogs. Just an endless wave of insects. But I found the insects left me alone if I was within fifteen feet of the mage, so I made an effort to stay close to him. Even wading through the water in armor, the men attempted to maintain their disciplined formation. I also figured out that Durandus' company was selected for this mission because his spell skill set was the best for the environment. I just hoped he realized water conducted lightning and didn't fry all of us by mistake.

It was slow progress, and after hours of trudging, we were maybe halfway. The evening sky was coming behind us, and the dark storm was in front. Being closer, I was certain the storm clouds were expelling rain as well as the occasional lightning strike. The roar of thunder was still muted but progressively louder the closer we came. At least the storm appeared to have scared away all the monsters, as we had not seen a single one.

We climbed onto a small island maybe fifty feet across, and the mage-ordered defenses set for the night. At least I could just sit in the middle of the island and eat. Durandus studied the storm near me, and I asked, "Do you know what it is yet?"

He looked at me, "Unfortunately, I do. A storm giant is raising a mountain from the swamp. Probably to form a lair."

## Chapter 29: Making a Friend

I paused as Mage Durandus was still gazing at the storm. I asked tentatively, "So we are done? We scouted. Found the reason for the storm. Are we going to head back now that we know what is causing it?"

He did not respond for a long moment. Then Mage Durandus said slowly, "No. I think we will investigate further. There appears to be only one giant." He turned and left, moving to his tent, which his men had erected for him. He was definitely not a conversationalist.

I was left there wondering, what is a storm giant? It did not sound good. A giant that could call lightning and raise a mountain in a swamp did not sound like someone I wanted to meet. I went and set up my tent in the middle of the island. One of the shieldmen was doing the same, "Leonidus," he said, holding out his hand.

"Eryk," I responded, grasping wrists with him. "So why does everyone have a stick shoved up their ass?"

He scrunched his face as my analogy didn't quite translate. "You mean, why is no one talking to you?" I nodded. "It takes a while for them to warm up. If Durandus was not around, we might be more prone to conversation. I overheard you talking with Durandus and that he wants to keep going."



“What is a storm giant anyway?” I asked, finishing my tent setup and laying my oiled cloak on the damp ground to protect my sleeping bedroll. I was planning to change into my dry clothes so I could sleep comfortably, but Leonidus motioned me to wait.

“Give the mage a moment to think. He will dry everyone’s clothes before we sleep.” My eyebrows went up. He finished his tent and said, “Never heard of a storm giant before. We have fought hill giants on two occasions. One grabbed my shield mate and ripped him in half,” he uncomfortably shuddered at his memory.

We didn’t talk for a while as we prepared our respective sleeping areas. Delmar had been right on what I needed to pack. I started gathering twigs and dead wood for a fire. Leonidus stopped me, “No fire. Not out in the wild. Draws the creatures in, and we hate fighting in the night.” He took a small black pouch out and tossed it to me. I opened it to find a glowing oval rock inside. I looked up, curious. He answered my unspoken question, “It is a glowstone.” My face was still blank. “It has stored aether in it. Gives enough light at night to take a piss without tripping over every damn thing. Durandus got everyone one, so night marching was easier. You can borrow mine for the night in case you need to piss.”

“Thanks. How long does it last?” I asked, putting it back in the bag.

“It lasts a few days. Durandus recharges them. Kyle, one of our bowmen, can do it too, but he is usually a pain about it and tries to get something in return,” he replied.

Since Leonidus was talking, I asked, “After the giant frog was killed, I didn’t see him give the essence to anyone.”

Leonidus sighed, “Yeah, we heard Mage Castille hands out the essence. What Durandus doesn’t consume himself, he sells. He has a large estate near the capital. He wants to marry a First Citizen.” He leaned in close and spoke, “About two months ago, a duke offered him his daughter if he paid the tithe on her behalf for her to gain the status of First Citizenship. He refused, saying if he was going to give away half his estate for a woman, she better not look like a pig.” Leonidus checked to make sure the mage wasn’t coming to smite him, then said, “At least that is how we heard it happened.”

He had some soft jerky and cheese as I ate my dry ration. As we got more comfortable with each other, he offered, “I am guessing that is why he wants

this storm giant.” He explained his thoughts, “The essence it would yield probably had a magic affinity to it. He wants to improve his power over the aether affinity for lightning.” I nodded, remembering High Mage Dacian was hunting the bulette for the same reason. The powerful just wanted more power.

I noticed one of the other legionaries had a metal fishing line and a small spell form that sent a blue shock down the metal wire to stun the fish. Leonidis noted that it was Kyle who could also charge the stones. Kyle worked with a partner who had a net, and they quickly had six fish for themselves. The fish were flat and black and swam on the bottom of the muddy swamp so that was why I have not noticed them during our travel in the muck.

Contrary to Leonidus’ advice, they started a fire, cooked their fish, and then extinguished the fire. They did not offer any to anyone else. Leonidus did say Kyle was a bit of an asshole. I drank half a gallon of water to get my dry ration bar down. Leonidis showed me a trick for the wax leaf. You cut it up into four sections and then rub the wax off. It left a soft fibrous sheet good for wiping your arse. He admitted that some legionaries got the ration bars just to make toilet paper and tossed them away, not eating them.

As the sun set, it was as predicted, Durandus came by and dried everyone’s clothes. The water was not evaporated but pushed toward the ground, causing a puddle underneath you. The smaller bugs of the swamp seemed to wake up as the light disappeared. The humidity lessened slightly, but I was still sweating non-stop. I folded my sleeping roll around me. I pulled out the glowstone, refilled my canteen from my storage space, and then pulled out the healing affinity book to study.

I risked it because I felt some urgency. Locking in a spell form was more likely to happen in a stressful situation, and there was no more stressful situation than fighting for your life against a giant. I still managed to get a fair amount of sleep as I did not have to participate in the watch rotation. The cold water in my canteen was a godsend as I sweat through the early night.

I had just put my book away to sleep when a shout came from the sentries. We all scrambled to put on armor and move to aid the ten men on watch on the perimeter. A massive island was moving toward us in the moonlight. Durandus stood ready, and one of the archers announced, “It is a giant tortoise. Hold positions, and it should pass without attacking.” We were all tense as the island loomed closer and finally veered away.

Getting back to sleep did not take long for me, knowing we had good sentries on watch. The camp noise woke me, and I dressed. One man was handing out salve for bug bites. The men who were on watch took more than a few. Now that the sun was rising, the small bugs were fleeing, and the large fist-sized insects buzzed. I was one of the first to pack up and unwrapped my breakfast ration bar. I was already sick of them, but a few men had gotten their own rations wet on the walk through the swampy water. I ate half of it before switching to the trail mix. My canteens were empty by the time I was done eating.

We soon moved on toward the flashes and low thunder. I guessed it was just over three miles remaining. We trudged through the water, following the mage's direction. The air turned misty and then to rain. The closer we approached, the heavier the rain became. I did not think approaching something that could control Mother Nature like this was wise.

The ground switched from swamp to mud, and we started to climb a mud-slick hill. The rain was heavy at the top of the mud hill, but it gave us a view down into what I would describe as a caldera. This was not a volcano, but that was the shape. No rain fell inside, and we all stood dumbfounded as a giant of a man, easily over twenty-five feet in height, called down and directed lightning into the expanding earthworks. The lightning stuck, and the earth surged and rolled away like a wave.

The mage seemed to consider our next action. I was just glad the monstrous giant had not spotted us. Finally, the mage said to no one in particular, "He is not building a lair. No, he is digging for something." Our heads barely peeked over, but he signaled everyone back. He called his four lieutenants to him for a strategy session. I was not privy to the words exchanged.

Orders were given. We were to wait on the mud-soaked lip of the crater. When the storm giant was resting, we would attack. It was terrible because we ended up in the heaviest rain on the lip of the crater, and I took out my cloak, but that just meant all my dry clothes were not going to be protected from the heavy water. I huddled in my cloak, hoping that whatever the attack plan happened to be, it would go well.

The storm giant seemed tireless, and I could feel the muddy earth surge underneath me every few minutes as he moved it. If the mage was correct and he was searching for something, I wondered what it might be. It started getting dark, and a whisper came down the line, "He is resting. Shield Wall Ready!"

No one had told me what my role in the fight would be. Staying at the back and handling the wounded sounded like a good plan to me. I even pulled two of the full healing potions and one of the lesser to my hand from the dimensional space.

The shield wall headed straight toward the giant with the spearmen behind them. Mage Durandus followed this group at a distance. To the right, the swordsmen lead the way with the archers behind. It was clearly a flanking maneuver by Durandus. I moved behind the archers.

The giant noticed us and stood and watched, unconcerned, as we made our way down the muddy slope. Keeping their ranks in the rocky mud was difficult, but they did an admirable job. The sky roiled above us and grew thicker. A lightning bolt flashed down toward the shield wall, but the man it struck glowed, and the bolt raced into the ground, not affecting anyone.

So the mage did have a plan. If the giant's lightning ability did not work and we closed to the range, we could possibly take down the towering man. I could tell the failed attack had emboldened the shield wall as they drew short swords. The giant seemed to consider and then picked his own weapon off the ground. A weapon was an understatement. It was as thick as a man and nearly nine feet long. The giant twirled it easily, and you could hear it whistle in the air, even in the storm conditions.

A second lightning strike occurred amongst the archers. Once again, it had no effect, going into the ground, but I noticed Durandus stumble slightly. Was the spell drawing aether? That could be bad if it drained him before we engaged.

The shield unit reached the bottom of the crater, and the spears were thrown on command from the ranks behind them, and only two penetrated the giant's thigh and chest. He roared in anger and charged the shield wall. The giant built speed, and instead of swinging his sword, he went into a feet-first slide. His massive frame bowled through the shield wall and even past the spearmen. He had taken a few slashes but quickly stood. The mage was now directly in front of the giant, a malicious grin on his face.

He roared as he swung the massive sword, and Mage Durandus stood confident. A ball of energy flared around him before the sword connected. Then that ball of energy, and the mage in the center, was sailing through the air two hundred feet to my right. Far away from everyone. The giant pointed at the archers, and a lightning strike came down again. This time the man it

struck exploded and tossed the men who had been around him to the ground. My ears were ringing, and I had some gore on me from the exploded archer.

I was halfway down the mud-soaked crater. The shield wall was quickly forming again to face the giant, with the spearmen rotating to the back for another volley. I needed to decide if I should get the potions to the archers or go and try to get Mage Durandus back on his feet. If I lived through this, I decided I never wanted to fight a giant again.

## Chapter 30: Losing a Friend

Our mage was out of commission, and it looked like the storm giant was unhappy with our interruption of his rest from digging. I hustled down the slope and slid on the mud to the downed archers. With the three potions in hand, I quickly administered them to three different men who appeared alive on a quick inspection. I was too focused to be affected by the gore and strewn body parts as I worked. The metallic smell of blood filled my nostrils but that was because I had pieces of flesh on my face and armor.

Getting more archers back in action, in my mind, was important. I wanted to move away from the congestion of soldiers in case the storm giant decided to explode someone else with a bolt of lightning, so I worked quickly and then separated myself from them as they recovered.

The archers were already organizing and started firing arrows again. I quickly looked and noticed the storm giant attack with an overhead swing. The blow from his sword crumpled the soldier with the tower shield, driving the legionnaire into the ground with a sickening thud and crunch. I imagined it as a foot crushing an aluminum soda can.

Shit. There was no way I was going to risk getting close to the giant to use my dimensional space with that sword's reach. I started running away from the battle. The mud made it difficult to sprint, but I built up some speed. I just hoped the freaking mage was still alive when I reached him. With the screams of men and the clash of battle at my back, I ran. I pulled out two full healing potions out of my space.

I tried to mimic the storm giant's slide as I reached the mage. The ground may have been muddy, but it also had many rocks. My canvas pants tore, and the

rocks dug into my flesh, but at least I stopped in the perfect position to administer the potions.

Fuck! He was bleeding from his mouth and eyes. His arm was at the completely wrong angle, too. I would be wasting two potions on him if he was already dead. It looked like blood was still flowing, so maybe his heart was still beating—fuck it. I popped both seals on the vials and poured them into his throat. He gurgled, and then he started coughing. Before the healing got too far, I wrenched his arm back into the mostly correct position. He grunted in pain but didn't wake.

I could not wait for him, and I was off running again. I thought about running up the muddy crater and into the swamp but decided maybe we could win if the mage got back on his feet. Also, with the giant's long legs, it would be very easy for him to catch me in the swamp.

As I ran, a flying head nearly hit me on my sprint back to the archers. I recognized the head as it flew by. That was Leonidus with a shocked expression on his face. I looked at the main combat; only three shieldmen remained and six spearmen. Nope, one of the shieldmen was missing the top of his shield and his head. The body crumpled with no brain to give it direction. Rest in pieces, Leonidus, my friend.

The storm giant had dozens of arrows in him and half a dozen spears. He looked like he was speeding up and not slowing down. His rich red blood flowed from his wounds, but when you are twenty-five feet tall, you have a lot of blood to spill. Two archers I had not tended to were dead when I reached them. Another groaning archer took a healing potion as I forced it down his throat. The swordsman unit was still intact but had not advanced on the storm giant.

I couldn't blame them; their smaller round shields were useless against a telephone pole-sized sword. Even the body shields of the shield wall were useless. They could have hampered the flanks of the giant and helped their companions but had remained here. I guessed it was because Durandus was not here to give orders.

Finally, everyone was attended to that was alive. I figured out that the archer who had exploded was the archer unit's leader, one of the four lieutenants. The storm giant had chosen the optimal target. Since it had this much intellect, I was reconsidering staying. I watched as the giant executed the last shield and spear men, and slowly turned toward us, bloody and angry. I had

dropped my own spear long ago when I had been knocked to the ground by the lightning bolt. Well, maybe not that long ago, I laughed somewhat wildly uncontrolled in my head. It had been what, maybe two minutes? Fuck, I was losing it as I did not think I was going to live through this.

Then the ground under the giant heaved, and tendrils of muddy ice started to work their way up the giant's legs. Durandus was back on his feet. Well, mostly on his feet. He looked unsteady as he directed his magic. The giant called another lightning strike down on the mage, and it dissipated into the ground, not affecting him. He took a step toward Durandus, and I thought there was no way ice was going to hold the storm giant. That was not the mage's plan. Durandus had made massive mud ice cubes on the giant's bare feet.

The giant stumbled at the awkward footwear. Durandus screamed at us, "Advance, you fools! This will only hold him till I run out of aether!" They hesitated for only a moment before obeying. The remaining archers were building up a steady rhythm of arrow strikes, even if the arrows barely penetrated. I was a spectator and moved up the slope of the crater to get some weapons from the fallen archers, as close-range combat was not on my mind. If the giant reached the mage, running would be my only choice. Hopefully, the giant would be too injured to pursue.

Durandus had not used any lightning attacks on the giant, which was probably smart. If it could call lightning itself, it probably made sense it was immune. The giant was struggling but was getting closer to the mage, who was not remotely healed yet. His arm was still hanging loosely, and he was swaying on his feet. The giant paused a heartbeat, considering the advancing swordsmen, the mage, and the pesky archers. He made a decision that surprised everyone. He flung his massive sword helicopter-style at the tight formation of swordsmen.

I heard the whoosh, whoosh as it spun, and two men were hit squarely. One man was cut in half, his intestines spraying the field, and the other was struck by the handle and thrown away in a crumpled mess. The blade did not slow as it continued into the row of archers. The blade had rotated, so it struck flat-side into the concentrated archers. Men screamed as they were flung aside like rag dolls. I was in shock and paralyzed as the hope of victory seemed snatched from us.

The mud-ice prison was creeping up the giant, who was now on his knees. The remaining swordsmen were close to the giant, and we had four archers

still upright. "He is immobilized and unarmed!" Durandus yelled weakly. "Finish him!"

I was spurred to make a decision. I grabbed a bow, and two quivers moved to help the archers. When I reached the downed men, I pulled out more potions to heal who I could. Now that the sword was gone from the giant, I could get close to the monstrosity and kill it with my dimensional space if the opportunity presented itself. The last six swordsmen engaged just out of its reach, and the archers fired steadily. One arrow pierced an eye, and the giant lunged in anger to grab a man, uncaring about the sword blades stabbing his massive hand.

The giant fist squeezed, and the man popped and oozed out of his armor like crushing a grape. The dead soldier was also now a projectile. The giant looked at the mage quickly before throwing the body at the closest swordsman, who had no chance to dodge. The throw's speed told me he would not live through the impact. Both bodies rolled thirty feet before skidding to a stop in the mud. The giant made the hand motion for lighting again, but what he called was tiny compared to before. The swordsman struck had no defenses, though. Mage Durandus was too focused on encasing the giant to shield him from the lightning. The swordsman did not explode, just crumpled to the ground, charred and smoking.

I gave an injured archer a potion. We had three swordsmen and five archers remaining. Mage Durandus was focused on the giant who was waist-deep in frozen mud. The giant looked pitiful in his rage and started slamming his fists into the icy mud. But it was like concrete, and he only took small chunks off with his bloody fists. If he did free himself, we were all fucked. I looked at the mage; he looked pale and no longer had energy to scream orders.

I took my bow and quiver and joined the fight. At thirty yards, I missed my first five shots. I was rushing and not aiming as my heart beat crazily in my chest. The other archers were searching for arrows in their companions' quivers. Each archer had two small quivers, a total of 34 arrows, to start, and now they had run out.

I finally hit on my sixth shot. It was a shoulder strike that barely penetrated. I was useless as an archer. I dropped my bow and moved toward a spear nearby. With the creature immobilized, I moved to its flank, looking for an opportunity. It was not needed as the giant slowed, leaking from dozens of wounds. It was all about making sure it bled out now. The archers continued ranged attacks until we ran out of arrows.



It wasn't pretty what we did to the creature. But it eventually stopped moving. Durandus ordered a man to stab his uninjured eye. He moved cautiously, and the sword sank in without resistance or movement. We had won the fight.

I looked around the battlefield and promptly vomited. It was not from the gore but a pent-up emotional release of being alive after running on adrenaline for endless minutes. The landscape had body parts, and innards were everywhere. The mud was red with the giant's blood, which had apparently run out. The shieldmen and spearmen bodies had been brutalized. It was a literal meat grinder. My canteen was up at the lip of the crater, so I just spit to get the taste of vomit out. Durandus hobbled forward eagerly with his essence collector in his hand. His device was only the size of a dinner plate, smaller and more intricate than the one Castille used.

He placed it on the chest of the giant. The device worked, drawing in a blue etherally smoke from the body. The mage murmured in delight, even though only seven of his men remained alive. I knew by its size that it was an apex essence, and I guessed by its strong glow it had a magic affinity. It disappeared in the mage's mouth as soon as it had fully formed on the collector. His broken body savored the essence as it was consumed.

I sat down heavily. I may have played the role of support, but we would have all been dead if I hadn't gotten the mage back on his feet. We would have all been dead if the giant hadn't also been near aether exhaustion when we launched the initial attack. I couldn't fathom why the mage risked the lives of forty men for an essence.

After the essence was consumed, Durandus started giving orders. "Give me the rest of the healing drafts," was the first. He consumed half of them before giving the rest to the injured men.

Durandus then moved among his dead men and used the collector on them. I could tell the men found this slightly off-putting. We all just worked on stripping the bodies of their gear and getting ready to bury the men. Durandus pocketed every essence he was able to collect.

I looked forward to going back to the city. We were not returning, though. Now healed and functional, Durandus addressed everyone still alive. We had one spearman, who had lived through the massacres, five archers, and three swordsmen. "Well fought today against imposing odds. That was a creature of immense power, and our teamwork brought it to its knees and ended its life. Now, for the good of the Empire, we will spend a day trying to figure out what

the giant was digging for. If we do not find anything in a day, we will return to Macha." I think I was learning to appreciate being in Mage Castille's company.