

A Soldier's Life

Chapter 31: Aftermath

The mood was somber as we grabbed our packs from up on the muddy ridge while Mage Durandus searched the storm giant and where he had been focusing his digging efforts with magic. The stormy sky slowly cleared, and the sun started sporadically showing through the clouds. The men left back at the road would know we had succeeded when there were no more storm clouds. Exhausted from the fight, it took a lot of energy to climb the muddy slope multiple times to get all the packs down. As Durandus recovered his aether, he healed himself and the most severely wounded men.

After setting the camp up, the grizzly job of digging the graves started. Durandus told us to bury them on the far side of the crater, well away from the dig site. The soft, muddy ground made it feasible with our terrible tool set. We made crude shovels from destroyed shields and spears. The dead men were stripped of their legionnaire gear, placed in shallow graves, and then covered. The ten of us were exhausted as the night rolled on us with no warning since we were essentially in a massive hole. We lost daylight earlier and faster than expected. Durandus was still studying the dig site well into the night and got irritated when disturbed.

I did not even bother setting up my tarp tent. I just laid out my oiled cloak and bed roll. Others did the same, and the night watch was going to be a single person at a time, a one-hour shift each. I was even woken to take my turn. Not that you could see anything other than Durandus with glow stones mounted on spears driven into the ground at the dig site.

The morning came, and my hip and thigh throbbed. The rocky slide that had torn up my canvas pants and the damaged flesh was probably infected. As the camp stirred, a legionnaire noticed and said, "Have Durandus heal that. His aether should have recovered by now." I nodded and took out a meal bar, unwrapping it and nibbling on the cracker outside. It was like a dam of hunger had burst, and I consumed the bar rapidly with a canteen of water. It was one of the best meals I had ever eaten, but I knew it was just my body telling me I was starving for calories.

After the meal, I limped over to the mage and asked him, "Mage Durandus, can you heal my leg? I think it is infected."

I waited patiently while he continued to stare at the ground. Finally, he spoke with some excitement, but not looking at me, "There is an entire city covered under the swamp. A city built for giants!" He knelt in the mud, pressed his hand to the earth, and whispered to himself, "What was it searching for?"

I asked again, "Can you help with my leg? I think it is infected."

He looked up, irritated at the interruption. He put his hand on my thigh, and I felt the familiar feel of aetheric healing. I focused on it as the warmth spread and dirt and tiny stones were pushed out of the flesh. I thought I had cleaned the wound well, but I was wrong by the amount of material being extruded. Next time, I would save a potion for myself. When he was finished, he returned to studying the ground with whatever magic he was using. I returned to the others who were setting up their tents and going through all the gear from the comrades. Laying out weapons, personal items, and bulky gear in three piles. The two men looked up, their faces black with dirt. My own face could not look much better. One man said, "Besides the coin purses, you can take what you want. We will get the coin to their families through the Legion Hall." I walked over and picked up the best spear of the bunch and the spear I had brought with me and dropped when I had been thrown back when the archer exploded in front of me.

The other man commented, "You did well. We would all be dead if not for your actions yesterday."

"I am glad someone thinks so," I looked quickly at the mage to indicate who I was talking about.

A grunt of agreement, and then he said, "We never experienced a defeat like this before." I would not contradict him, arguing that it was a victory since the giant was slain. It certainly felt like we had lost. "We have sustained heavy injuries before, but Durandus usually heals us right after the fighting."

The other man added, "And he has never been injured that badly in battle." He picked up some small black bags in a pile. He whispered to me, "Want some glow stones? If you pawn them, they are worth over a gold piece, and we will not take them all." I still had the one from Leonidus but bent down and scooped up seven. The stones were the size of a small chicken egg and maybe four ounces each. He smirked and nodded as I brought them to my pack. I felt like he was offering me a reward for my efforts in the fighting. Two pounds of glow stones was a fair amount of weight, so they would be added to my dimensional storage later. I returned and sat with them.

“Do you think we will be heading back tomorrow?” someone asked another man. I was happy that they were talking around me. Surviving the near-death experience had brought me into their trusted circle.

“Probably. He might have spells to see deep into that muddy earth, but he doesn’t have a single one to dig,” his fellow said with some malice directed at the mage.

I asked, “Does he always loot the legionaries for essence when they die?” They looked at each other and then back at me.

One shook his head, “No. Well. Usually, a dozen monster corpses keep him busy, and we rarely lose anyone. I have been with him for almost four years. Although we rotate the men in our company, I think only nine,” he paused thinking, “no ten have died in all that time. Most of our missions are escorting some baron or baroness between cities. We typically just see a wandering monster or a few bandits.”

I nodded. “I am filthy. I am going to bathe in the swamp,” I laughed at the absurdity of it—going into murky water to get clean. “Can you come and guard me for a short while?” Both men struggled to their feet, and a few men joined us.

We stripped and bathed in pairs while the five others remained on watch. Four men remained to watch over the engrossed mage. The filth was real, and even bathing in murky water, I was thrilled to get cleaner. I pulled some things out of my hair that I cared not to identify and just flung them away.

I thought about taking one of the dead man’s pants or even pulling one from my storage. We had only stripped the bodies of armor and possessions, not clothes. We buried them with their clothes.

The man I washed with tried to start a conversation, “This water is not bad. I remember passing a swamp as a child with leeches as big as my fist!”

I noticed one of the black bottom-feeding fish scurry away from my feet, and I swore and kicked at it. Stumbling back, my foot caught on a root, and I fell in. The man laughed, but I did not appreciate his humor. He was one of the archers I saved with a healing potion. He continued to talk, obviously trying to make me uncomfortable, “You know, now that the storm and lightning have cleared, I bet the giant frogs will return with the other predators. Your company killed a big snake? Wonder if there are any more in the swamp?”

I played his game and acted nonchalant. “Yeah, took all twenty of us to bring it down, and it swallowed two men during the fight. They barely survived. With any fewer men, and without our mage, they would have drowned in the snake’s gut.”

It worked as he suddenly became more observant of the surrounding water. I finished cleaning as best I could and returned to my tent. I pulled all eight of the glow stones into my dimensional space. I was not going to carry the extra two pounds out of the swamp. Around mid-day, with nothing left to do, I milled about the piles of equipment since everyone had now picked it over.

Each of the dead men had their prized possessions whittled down to a small sack for their families. At least I would not have to help carry them out. Well, so far, I did not think I would have to. I probably would if asked. It felt too much like robbing the dead to me. This was not a fantasy game where looted people. Still, I searched for something more edible to eat. I had one bag of trail mix left and the ration bars. One canteen smelled like wine, but I was not in the mood. I found some wrapped sausage, which I munched on while I ate. I also found the heavy metal fishing line with the hook the soldier used. I pocketed it.

The soldiers had packed fairly light, so there was not much of interest. I added a small sewing kit; just a wallet of needles and heavy thread, a small jar of horse rub for chafing, and a small, wonderfully crafted wooden flute wrapped in an oiled cloth. I couldn’t play a lick, but maybe I would find the time, and it was a beautiful instrument. It would have been a shame to leave the flute behind weather in the elements.

As I returned to my tent to rest, the mage finally broke his gaze and returned to our camp. He seemed to be seeing it for the first time, his daze broken. He was completely healed and only looked slightly pale from lack of sleep and aether usage.

“We will be returning in an hour. You can pack everything up.” He looked over at the pile of gear I was standing at. “Take what you can carry.” With those words, he went to his larger tent that had been set up by the men and started to eat his own rations. He deeply thought about whatever he had found and ignored everyone as we picked up the camp.

An hour later, Durandrus packed up his tent and carried his backpack out of the swamp. The rest of the men were too burdened with gear to help him. We were going to have to stay the night on one of the small islands.

The mage was distracted as we made our way through, and twice, the men in the lead fell into deeper waters. Both times, Durandus had to save them with his magic from drowning with their heavy packs. When the sun set, Durandus chose an island, and we began to set up camp. As we did so, one of the giant frogs found us. A man had been sitting on the island's far side, and the frog grabbed him and pulled him in and under with its rope-like tongue. Durandus scrambled from his position, but the frog was already in deep waters with its prize. Durandus fumed, "You are all getting sloppy! In dangerous terrain, it is three! Three men at all times together!" He continued yelling at the legionnaires, but they were numb to the verbal assault. When he was done with his tirade, they returned to camp duties, mourning the loss of their companion in silence.

I realized the man taken was the one I had bathed with in the swamp water. Well, he was right about one thing. The predators of the swamp were returning to their territory now that the storm had been dispersed.

Chapter 32: Swamp Things

The loss of another legionnaire hung heavy on the company. The remaining men were splitting the night watch, and we were all bundling our tents toward the center of the island. I was asked to participate in the second watch and agreed without hesitation. I was going to share it with four other men. The air remained humid, but the temperature had dropped significantly. Mage Durandus had only dried himself before going to sleep. He informed the men that he was still recovering his using his aether healing men in the morning. We would have to sleep in wet clothes tonight.

I slept heavily, even soaking wet. I was roused in the middle of the night and felt yesterday's aches. Durandus had only healed the skin and cleared the infection on my leg. My muscles were still sore. Since there was a chill, I wrapped my bed roll around me while I went to serve on watch. We sat, and the watch was explained in a whisper, "We will each cover an arc of a quarter island's shore. Your arc is here," he pointed out in the moonlight the range of my focus. "The water is still, and the moonlight is strong. Focus on the shoreline and look for ripples in the waters. If you see anything just tap me and point it out. I will decide if the alarm needs to be raised."

We positioned ourselves on a rotting log on one side of the camp. The other three men took the other side of the camp. It was about fifteen minutes before my partner whispered, "Eryk, right?" I nodded in the moonlight. "I am Brutus."

"Nice to meet you, Brutus," I whispered back. "How long have you been with Durandus?"

"About two years," he whispered back and was quiet for a period. "I always thought having a company mage with healing would be good. It did not help that the giant was splattering us with one swing."

I recalled Brutus was the lone survivor of the spearmen. He had received a massive blow to his skull and been knocked out and revived after the fighting. "We should just be happy we survived and get back to the city," I whispered back. Two loud clicks from the other side of the camp had Brutus turn his head quickly.

"Hold up a minute. That is a signal for a possible attack," he remained still, and we both listened hard. After five minutes, a single click came, and he relaxed, "It happens two or three times in the night. We have a strong moon tonight, but the dark still plays tricks on the eyes."

I looked up at the moon and studied it. Unlike the moon I was accustomed to, this moon was twice the size and had deep blue coloring. Maybe it was covered in water because it had a glossy look. "You shouldn't stare at it," Brutus said. "It will ruin your night sight for a few minutes because it is brighter than the surroundings."

"Is the moon covered in water?" I asked as he was proved correct. Everything looked much darker as my pupils reset.

"I think so. It is called Neptune's Tear. Neptune controls the tides and storms," he said, tensing, shifting, and pulling a dagger, "Quiet!" he rasped as he focused. I saw it too. There were ripples in the water on the shore. He stood and produced his glow stone bag. I pulled one from my dimensional space. I had charged all of them, so I knew it was ready. He moved to the right, "If I see something, I will throw the glowstone at it so we can fight with more light."

"I am ready as well," I whispered back. Brutus tapped twice on his spear with his dagger, signaling the others on the watch for a possible enemy. I gripped my own spear tightly, trying to see movement in the blue-gray-lit swamp. I started to get an uneasy feeling rising in me. "Do you?" I questioned.

“Yes.” he tapped twice more on his spear. “The smell is getting stronger.” I inhaled deeply, and the stench of the swamp was stronger. I hadn’t noticed. “It might be the giant tortoise again stirring up the swamp waters nearby,” Brutus said hopefully.

“Should we wake everyone?” I asked, trying to find movement.

Brutus started to say, “Yes,” then the alarm went up on the other side of the camp. Metal banging together. “Go help them. I will watch this side of the island so we don’t get attacked from behind.” I hesitated for a moment before running through the camp to the other sentry position. The tents were stirring as I passed them.

A scream of pain from where I was running to, “It has got me! Cut it!” I hurried, thinking it was a giant frog tongue pulling a man to a watery grave again. I took my light stone and threw it toward the screams for help. What I saw did not make sense to my eyes.

A mound of vegetation had wrapped wrist-thick vines around a man’s legs and was pulling the man toward itself. He had lost his bow and was stabbing the vines with a dagger. To my left, the other pair of sentries was hacking away with short swords at a similar mound of plant mass. The swamp thing was attacking us like in a bad horror movie from Earth. I ran and stabbed the body of the one pulling the archer in. He screamed at me, “Cut the fucking vines!”

He was only a few feet from the body of the monster. The tents were lit with glowstones, and the other men would be here soon to help. I started stabbing the vines pulling him, but it did not break them. His foot reached the mound, and the vegetation moved aside for his foot to be pulled inside. Glow stones were tossed around the fight, and two men appeared next to me and began to hack the vines with swords. Chunks of gooey plant parts started flying off the creature from the assault.

We were making progress. A vine lashed out from the creature and slammed down into a swordsman’s shoulder with an audible crack. His knees buckled, and he dropped his short sword and struggled to pull a dagger with his other arm. Finally, Mage Durandus arrived and moved to cast a spell at our creature. A lightning bolt flared in front of me, blinding me and forcing me back a step with a minor clap of thunder.

“No lightning,” rang across from a soldier in the other fight. “It is a shambler. Lightning only heals it!”

I was blinded but heard the mage swear, “Damn it, shambling mounds, should have known.”

I stepped away as I attempted to find my sight by blinking rapidly and listening to the struggle. The loudest sound was the scream of the archer being pulled in, and I could hear his bones breaking. I blinked my sight back to see the man inside the mound, his body crushed in the mass. His screams mercifully ended when a vine forced its way into his mouth, filling his throat.

I could see the frost on the ground as the mage started to freeze the creature as he had done with the storm giant. The creature tried to lash out at the remaining swordsman, with the archer’s life now ended in its body. Brutus yelled from the other side of the clearing, “Got another one over here!”

With my spear ineffectual, I grabbed the short sword from the legionary who dropped his when the vine whip had broken his shoulder. The mage had frozen the creature and was out of his range, so I rushed to help Brutus. On the other side of the camp, the creature was dripping with swamp water as it moved onto land. Brutus’ light stone shadowed the mound to make it look even more menacing.

Brutus was backing up toward the camp, not engaging. He looked at me, “How is it on the other side?”

I told him, “Mage Durandus has one captured in ice, and the others are hacking the other one.”

“I do not know much about these things,” he admitted. Our scout was the one that knew lightning healed them. “What do you say we keep backing up until we reach the others for help?”

“That sounds like a bloody brilliant plan,” I remarked at the smartest thing I had heard in a while.

Another man was grappled and pulled inside one of the creatures. They couldn’t kill it fast enough, and the mage was occupied freezing the other one. His panicked cries and then screams ended in under a minute.

We backed halfway to the others when the fighting started to die. A call that it was dead reached us. Mage Durandus yelled his creature was contained and for everyone to finish off the one in camp.

Mage Durandus came to our aid first, and the ground frosted over as he began his spell. Soon, we all surrounded the creature and waited for the limbs of vine-like limbs to freeze before hacking them off. I joined in, and soon, the mound was nothing but a big pile of green vines and sap. We were all sweaty and covered in the sticky goo. Another victory in defeat—two men lost to gruesome deaths.

The scout said, “The frozen one is still alive. We should hack it to pieces.”

Durandus countered the order, “No, it is more likely to give an essence if it is alive.” He took out his plate-sized essence collector and placed it over the pile of goo. It flared for a moment, but nothing formed. He frowned. He moved to the other mound, and our group of seven moved with him. This hacked mound also gave nothing but a flash.

“Damn it. It should have given something!” Durandus voiced angrily. I think because the soldier was trapped in the remains, he thought either the shambling mound or the dead soldier would have yielded something. His last hope was the living mound, frozen in place with a body trapped inside.

The scout advised, “Durandus, we should just hack it to pieces before you attempt your harvest.”

He waved him aside, “It is contained. If the ice casing cracks, you all can move in and slash it to death.” We all moved in close, and I was facing the trapped man whose face was twisted in pain and agony with a vine shoved into his throat. That could have been me.

Durandus placed held the disc out and began the process. Apparently, it took longer on living creatures because it was still glowing after a few seconds. The mage’s face was expectant and smiling. That was when the ice coating shattered, and a heavy vine instantly slammed into his body and threw him out into the swamp. A heartbeat later, we were hacking away at the not-so-frozen creature.

The scout yelled, “Brutus, go get the mage. Eryk, use a potion on him! Go!!”

I didn’t tell him all I had were ten cure poison and two stamina potions remaining. I just moved with Brutus into the water. I hoped there were no more of these creatures. I still had my dimensional trick, at least. “How far did he fly?” I asked.

“Don’t know, space out about ten feet, and we will walk away to look. Walk slow and stay alert.” I took out a glow stone and held it high as we walked in waist-deep water. We were almost thirty feet from shore, and the safety of being in a group. My anxiety grew, and a silvery reflection at my feet startled me. It was the essence collector. I oriented my dimensional space to the area and moved it into my space without bending and going into the water to pick it up.

A minute later and almost seventy feet from shore, we found Mage Durandus floating face down. Brutus hesitated and then waded toward him and flipped him over. “He is dead. Must have been knocked unconscious and drowned. Terrible fate for a water mage, to drown.” He did not sound too disappointed. I thought the mage’s death was karmic.

Shambling Mound Monster:

