

## A Soldier's Life

### - Chapter 33: Collecting the Collector

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Watery blood filled Durandrus' mouth as he floated between us. "Do we bring him to shore?" I asked Brutus.

Brutus considered and searched him. He found the mage's pouch with essences he had accumulated and a small coin pouch. He considered for a long moment before saying, "Shit. Damn, Truthseekers would talk the theft out of us if we took anything. Let's bring him to shore and see what Flavius wants to do."

We floated the body to shore, and men came and helped us drag him up to the center of the small island. They had already buried their companion's two bodies in the island's soft soil. Flavius was the archer-trained scout who was taking command of the remaining men. He looked at the body and just rasped angrily, "Greedy bastard. It finally bit him in the ass." He looked up and addressed everyone, "Ok, we are going to haul the body back to the road." He picked up the mage's pouches. The essences will be divided among us, and the coin will be sent to his estate. Did you find the collector?" He asked Brutus and I.

Brutus answered, "No, could have gone anywhere. Eryk was holding the glowstone aloft the entire time we searched, and we didn't see anything." I kept a straight face, and Flavius grunted.

"Ok, we will search for the collector in the morning. If we don't find it by mid-day we will head to the road," Flavius announced. He pulled the string on the essence sack. "Since essences collected on campaigns are administered at the discretion of the commanding officer in the Legion, I will be handing these out!" There was a chorus of affirmations as the seven of us circled around him.

Flavius took his cloak and placed it on the ground. He slowly dumped the marble-like essences onto the cloak. There were thirty-seven smaller marble-sized essences, three golf ball-sized essences, and seven more in between those sizes. "For those of you who have never consumed an essence before,

the small ones are minor essences, the middle-sized ones are major essences, and the three large balls are apex essences. Each one is ten times more valuable than the prior. Now these,” he took the three apex essences, “are required to be turned into the Empire.” He moved them back into the pouch.

Someone asked why, and Flavius replied, “First Citizen privilege. They buy them all to use amongst themselves. You don’t want a Truthseeker asking you if you consumed one. Although working for Durandus these last few months, the laws are pretty loose.” There were murmurs of agreement among everyone. He had taken the apex essence of the storm giant and consumed it right away, and that must have been his pattern in the past.

“Now the question is most of these minor essences are from our comrades. Do we want to consume them or return them to their families?” Flavius asked us. An argument ensued. Two men really wanted to consume them, and two wanted to return them to their families, not that we could tell which essence belonged to whom. In the end, we added one minor essence to each of bag of personal possessions—leaving nine small essences and seven medium.

Flavius continued, “The color of the essence determines which aspect of self it is related to. The darker colors are all physical traits. The lighter colors are the mental aspects.”

Flavius slowly went through the colors from memory:

Strength

Dark Purple

Intellect

Light Purple

Coordination

Dark Pink

Fortitude

Light Red

(note to readers I will go back and make sure earlier chapters are consistent with this)

Of the nine small essences, four were dark purple strength, two dark red constitution, and three dark orange power. The seven larger, major essences were five dark purple strength, one pink empathy, and one dark pink coordination.

Curious, “I asked what about magic-related statistics?”

Flavius thought for a moment. He slowly spoke, “I think aether essences are a milky pearl-like. Channeling I have seen before. They are glossy black. The others,” he focused and shook his head. “I read it too long ago to remember. I just remember one was clear like glass.”

“What was the one Durandus consumed from the storm giant?” Another legionnaire asked.

“Probably the common lightning affinity. I did not see it. All the magic affinities have some glow and animation to them. These physical and mental,” he indicated the ones on the cloak, “Only glow softly in the dark.”

Everyone looked anxious. Flavius said, “We will pull chips for the order of selection. Once for the lesser and once for the major. The two extra lesser extra will be determined by the lowest two chips on the third pull.”

The chips ended up being a deck of cards with the Roman numerals on them from a pack. One through seven was pulled. I pulled six for the lesser essence. On my turn, I took the dark orange essence for power. The next draw was for the lowest number. I got one, but it did not matter; only strength essence remained, so I took one. The final draw was for the major essence, and this was the big one. I wanted the pink coordination essence, but I drew the number five.

Brutus got a two on the draw, and when his turn came, I offered, “Brutus, I will trade my two minor essences and my fifth selection for your turn?”

Everyone listened as Brutus asked, “Which one are you planning to select?”

With all eyes on me, I said, “The pink coordination.” Flavius’ eyes betrayed him, and he had also planned to select that. I did not get a read on the others. Brutus nodded slowly and handed me his card, and I gave him my card and

the two essences. I selected the pink essence and put it into my mouth immediately. As it dissolved, it had a salty taste to it, but it may have just been the dried sweat from the hands of the people handling it. The familiar cold, tingly lighting washed through my body.

Others started putting their own essence into their mouth, and I almost warned them about taking multiple ones. I think some people planned to sell them, or maybe they worried about consuming the essence of a fallen comrade. When the selection ended, Flavious announced, "It is a half-day trip to the road. It is going to be much more difficult without Durandus to guide us. Get six hours of rest, and then we will pack quickly and search for the collector in the light. Eryk and Brutus, you are on watch for the first two hours."

I was about to say something but then remembered while everyone had been fighting, we had been back peddling and drawing the third shambling mound toward the others. We did the least amount of fighting of everyone here. As I stood in the morning's light, standing back to back with Brutus, I asked, "Are essences important? Are they the soul of the being you take them from?"

Brutus answered slowly, "Some people think so. The orcs in the west in the Boutan Caliphate, for one. They consider it a great honor to consume the essence of their conquered enemy. The teachings of the Telhian Empire are that a person's essence is sacred before they die. Once they die, the essence is for their family to do with what they will. Usually, it is used to strengthen the children if it is collected."

A few men started snoring, and we could see the larger insects going to feast on the corpses of the monsters. I asked, "Why was everyone so upset when Durandus harvested the bodies of the men?"

"Because he would have sold it and not given them to the families," Brutus said steelily. "In the Empire, it is also not common practice to harvest your own men, even in times of war. Outside of Legion Mages and Mages of the College, only the Temple of Minerva has priests with collectors within the Empire."

"How do Legion Mages get away with harvesting people and consuming apex essences?" I asked, trying to understand, and listening keenly.

"The mages of the Legion and the Mage College are the true power of the Empire. Anyone that can learn true spell casting is revered," Brutus said, surprised. "How is it in your home country?"

I panicked because I didn't know how they treated mages in the Duchy of Tsingia. I could only find the country on a map and knew they exported lumber. I had not told anyone in this company where I was from, so maybe I could just make something up. "The same. The mages are a class above the common folk in Tsingia."

"Tsingia? You are a long way from home. What brought you up here? There are a lot of foreign men in the army, but they are uncommon in the Legion ranks," Brutus said, and I could hear the curiosity in his voice.

"Bad luck. How about you? Why are you in the Legion?" I tried to focus the conversation on him.

"Me?" He laughed, "I am the bastard son of a bastard son of a Baron who owns nothing but barley and hops fields. I was taught to fight, and rather than join the Baron's guard, I joined the Legion. It pays better, and I will get my pension after twenty years."

"Pension?" I asked, turning to face him.

"Yes. You continue to draw your weekly salary bi-annually. Did you not know? Are you a conscript, then? I think you are still eligible. When I retire, I will find a wife and raise Tegairosian goats." He smacked his lips, "Their milk makes the most divine cheese."

I told him the truth, "I was railroaded into a guilty verdict and forced to join or work as a laborer."

"Railroaded?" Brutus asked, unfamiliar with the term.

I huffed, "It means I was given no other viable choice."

"Eryk, my friend, that describes most of the army and half the Legion," he laughed. "So you must have trained at western Legion camp then if you were conscripted?"

"I guess. No one told me what the camp was, and I was too focused on not getting sent to the army. How many camps are there to train legionnaires?" I inquired of my new friend.

"Just two. The western camps and the camp in the capital for the volunteers," Brutus informed me. We were silent till we were relieved.

When we were called off watch, and two men took our place. I packed up my things rather than get four hours of sleep in the hot, sticky weather. The sun was out today, and it was going to be a miserable walk through the swamp to the road.

The others who had not been on watch wrapped the mage tightly with his personal possessions. They made small floats from empty canteens to tie to the body. I retrieved some glow stones that were abandoned due to their weight to bring the total in my dimension space to eleven. Flavius asked if I could take some of the dead men's personal possessions into my space since they were small but heavy bags, and I agreed.

Flavius declared the sun was high enough to search for the essence collector, and we walked a grid pattern with everyone in the area where the body was found. I asked Flavius, "Why is this so important? Doesn't the Empire have dozens of these things?"

Flavius clucked irritated, "That was not a normal collector. It was a dungeon-created one. Smaller, lighter, and supposedly more efficient than most. Like all dungeon artifacts, its value is hard to measure. It was Durandus' most prized possession as well. His brother is going to want it back as well."

I looked questioningly at him, and he clarified the misunderstanding, "Durandus' brother is a mage in charge of another company. I only met him once, and he has the most foul temper. While Durandus was self-serving, he was not cruel. His brother is."

We searched till mid-day like Flavius promised. Then we marked the island, and the direction the body was found in case someone wanted to try their luck in the future. Flavius thought the Legion might send a mage to search or even Durandus' brother would come himself.

We moved in a diamond formation through the swamp. Floating the body in the center with three men ready to respond in any direction. It was a painfully slow process as we were weighed down with too much gear to swim, so we had to find paths no deeper than the chest. Even with the man in the lead having a spear to check the depth, he sometimes stumbled and fell into deep water. It was a rush to save him from drowning every time. After the first incident, we tied a ten-foot rope to the lead man to help with the rescue. I was lucky, as I was never asked to be the lead man in the diamond formation with a spear checking the depth.

We got lucky and only encountered one giant frog and that was when we were resting on an island. A man was grabbed but resisted being pulled inside the maw of the frog. We swarmed the frog and slew it. I twitched slightly since I had an essence collector now and could have used it on the frog. From the collector's noted value, I decided to keep my possession of it secret.

The sun was already setting when we reached the road, and our wet and sore bodies collapsed into the rocky dirt. It had taken much longer than we thought it would, and we all had twice as much gear as when we started. Flavius said we had arrived but had come out on the road too far south. We didn't rest long before Flavius had us moving again north toward a comfortable bed.

A half mile later, we approached an area of charred bodies in the dark. They were all frogs, and this was where we had left the men to guard the discarded gear. The gear and the men that Durandus left behind were not there. "They must have returned to Macha," Flavius announced. "A bath and bed are close men. Just a few more hours." Our spirits rose even though we knew we still had miles to go.

## Chapter 34: Spa Day

Our soaked and filth-covered bodies walked down the road. Four men carried the mage in a litter made from two spears. We rotated carrying him as night set in, and the watery Blue Moon bathed us in its light. Every man had a glowstone ready to be released to illuminate a foe if one showed itself. Flavius had us moving quickly, and the city walls came into view after a time. Relief flooded my own body at the sight.

I had turned over a lot of thoughts in my mind on the sojourn back. Should I have revealed myself and risked myself to kill the storm giant with my dimensional space? Men would have lived, and Durandus would probably be alive. The horror of the speed at which the storm giant killed almost twenty shield and spear men flashed through my mind. Experienced men. No, I would have most likely died if I had tried to get close enough. The storm giant was twenty-five feet tall. I could not have displaced enough of his body to win the fight in a single blow.

We reached the gate, breaking my thoughts, and Flavius yelled up to the tower, "Durandus' company is returning!"

“Gates do not open for anyone until first light. Order of the general!” came a return shout.

Flavius swore, “Dragon’s Breath! Seven men with the body of a mage. Open the gates, or I will rip them off their hinges and beat you senseless with it!”

There was a lot of movement in the tower, and then a different soldier weakly said, “They went to wake and check with the general. Just a few moments, legionnaire.”

It was closer to fifteen minutes before the gatehouse door swung open, and a man strode out half-dressed, “What is this? Durandus is dead?” his voice was coated with disbelief, anger, and worry.

Flavius said, “I will report to the Legion command. May we enter, general?” It was not a question, as we just started walking past. The general swore and cursed his men for not letting us in right away, but it appeared more of an act to appease us.

I had a long walk all the way to the other side of the city to reach the villa in the inner orchard. As I passed the upper city baths, I checked to see if they were open. The door was not locked, but there was no one around. I helped myself to soap and a scrubber as I went into the shower and scrubbed the filth off. The water heading to the drain remained murky with dirt for long periods. I located dozens of bug bites I never remembered receiving.

Whenever I thought the water was clear, I would find another patch or crevasse of dirt. My hair was terrible, a greasy, dirty mess that had gotten too long. The members of Dureandus’ legion had all been clean-shaven when we started. I was the misfit with the poorly trimmed beard. I had seen numerous barbers, so maybe I could do that in the morning. Finally, sure I was clean, I moved to the baths. They were not heated, having cooled to a lukewarm temperature overnight. I relaxed into the water, not caring, and promptly fell asleep.

I was awakened by a trio of young women whispering and staring at me. I remembered that they were the group of women that took my clothes and washed them last time. The water had cooled even further. I spoke clearly, “My clothes can be burned, but my armor needs washing.” I placed seven silver coins on the lip of the large communal tub. “Turn the heat on for the water, wash my armor, and get me a new set of clothes. Do a good job, and there is a silver tip for each of you.”



One of the braver women came forward and took the silver. "We will turn on the heater runes, legionnaire." She was young, in her late teens, with dirty blonde hair and soft freckles, pretty in an average way. It had been too long since I had been with a woman, and my desire rose, and I embarrassingly hid it.

I felt guilty of the impropriety of it. "Bring me a double breakfast and see if a barber will service me while I soak," I asked another young woman.

She nodded, "We just prepare and clean the baths up in the morning. The mistress should be here shortly, legionnaire."

I groaned inwardly as I was expecting a verbal fight with the woman for breaking into the baths in the middle of the night. My skin was pruned, but I promptly fell asleep again as the water heated up from whatever magic did it.

I was awoken as two of the young women came in carrying trays of food and drink, and a much older woman followed, showing signs of gray. She had a tight and unhappy face. Hopefully, coin would solve whatever blunder I had made. She said, "You entered my baths past the curfew, legionnaire. Care to explain yourself?" No, not really, I thought.

I inhaled and spoke slowly, "I was filthy after almost dying a half dozen times in the last two days." It was closer to a dozen times in the last week. "I needed a bath, and your doors were open. I have paid for my time in the water and will pay that again if I leave here happy."

"He paid seven silver, mistress," one of the younger women said, trying to help.

The mistress softened. She still did not look pleased but consented to my presence, "Very good then. Your barber will be sent for," she hesitated. "You will pay him from your own pocket." She left, and I dug into the food and drink. Warm wine, fruit, somewhat stale bread, herb-infused butter, and something that appeared to be fresh hummus. I did not taste it as I consumed everything.

I suddenly realized something. After the man had been caught by the frog while shitting, I unconsciously held it in on the return through the swamp. I rushed out of the water to the privy as I urgently needed to make room for the massive quantity of food and wine I had just consumed.

A voice echoed outside the privy, "Your barber is here." It was one of the young women who was giggling at the embarrassing noises I was making.

I finished up, and a middle-aged man smiled as he spoke, "My services are yours."

"Clean shave, hair cut and..." I almost added an eyebrow sculpt, but that was a vanity from a different life.

The shave was done with a foamy mixture that smelled of sandalwood. He used a straight razor, and he shaved my neck first. Having another man go across your throat with a blade is a different experience. He probably sensed my unease as he started talking about his family. The shave was finished, and he applied a balm. The scent was beeswax and cocoa butter. I asked, "What is in this?"

"Aloe, jojoba oil, shea butter, and honey bee wax dissolved in chamomile extract," he replied as he combed and cut my hair. I relaxed, feeling months of growth being removed. Most legion companies were clean-shaven and well-groomed when I saw them in the few cities I had been to. Castille seemed to let us do whatever we pleased. It was like we were the black sheep of the Mage Legions.

When he finished, he used a mirror to show me, which I liked. My off-black hair was finger-length and styled. I asked, "How much for the shave and your entire kit?" He looked confused, as he put his tools away in a large leather satchel. "You have another set at your business, I assume?" I added.

"Yes, but these are my traveling set," he said worriedly.

"How much to replace them?" I asked, not relenting.

He looked in his bag slowly and added up the value. "Seventy silver," He looked at me.

I pulled a gold coin from nowhere and handed it to him, "This should be enough then?"

He still did not look happy at losing his profession's tool set. He said, "I forgot the perfume. It is worth half a gold on its own, and I only use it on my female clients."

Rather than argue, I said, "You can keep the perfume." He finally nodded, somewhat happier as he pulled it out and took the gold coin. He walked out in kind of a daze, like he lost something precious to him. I was alone in the room, and the leather satchel went into my dimensional space.

Personal grooming was in my future. I realized I was accepting my new life. I had not realized up till the bath, but the shock and changes had greatly diminished my desires. Now, they seemed to be returning. There was still no way I was visiting a brothel. I walked to the open dressing room to find my armor clean and oiled and a set of new linen clothes folded neatly next to it.

They were not as heavy as the canvas ones that were normal Legion wear but would work for now. I dressed and found the older woman in charge. I had to change a gold coin for silver since I only had one silver left. I gave her ten silver, seven as agreed, and one silver for each of the three young women as promised. After nearly dying, spending what wealth you had was easy. Enjoy it while you can—I think I was developing a soldier's mentality.

The sun was mid-morning when I reached the orchard. I was whistling the Star Wars theme song as I entered the villa. No one was in the entry hall, so maybe they had gone off patrol or wall duty? I had no idea what day it was. I went into the large ballroom where most of the beds were set up and found five men resting. One sat up, and it was Felix. "What the fuck? Have you come back to frigging haunt us?"

"No. I just got a shave and haircut," I said, trying to sound offended.

Felix shook his head in disbelief. "They said Durandus' company was decimated, and they returned in the middle of the night. That was like ten hours ago. Castille, Delmar, and Adrian went to question the survivors. Since you didn't return here and we didn't get a runner, we all thought you were dead."

"The reports of my demise are greatly exaggerated," I quipped.

Firth came out from the kitchen, "You better get your arse to the Legion Hall in the city. Castille is going to rip you a new one for not coming directly to her when you returned."

"Shit." I dropped my armor, spears and gear and took off running.

## Chapter 35: Tribunal and Judgement

As I made my way back at a steady run through the city to the Legion Hall, I planned to tell Castille I returned late and didn't want to wake her. Or maybe I should just go with the truth and tell her I fell asleep. I had planned to tell Delmar or Adrian when I returned to the villa, but now I was up shit's creek without a paddle. Two legion men stood guard as I entered and slowed to a walk. At least I had built up a significant sweat in the morning humid weather, so it looked like I had rushed here. In the common room, I found everyone.

Flavius and the five men were seated at a long, dark oak table. Across from them, Adrian and Delmar stood behind Castille, and two men I didn't recognize sat with her. One of them was definitely the commander of the other mage company, as he had the same rank symbols as Castille. I slowed and realized I was not even breathing heavily from the sprint of nearly a mile, so I faked some heavy breathing. All eyes were on me, and I guiltily noted all the men I had returned with still wore filthy clothes and were caked in mud. I could even smell their unwashed bodies from twenty feet away as it filled the room.

Mage Castille did not look angry, but maybe she did look amused at my entrance and appearance. It was the man who I couldn't place who spoke, "Are you legionnaire Eryk?"

"I am." I came to what was attention for being in a Legion formation.

The other mage who I did not recognize, said, "Since we do not have a Truthseeker here, let us confirm their story with him and close the matter. The defensive plans for the city are in turmoil without Durandus and his men. We need to start planning and make a request for another mage from the Legatus Legonis."

Castille didn't seem to care at his words and studied me. The first man spoke irritably, "He has repeatedly denied my requests for a fourth mage company. I do not think he will send anyone, Gregor."

The mage, who I assumed was named Gregor, replied, "We must ask. Durandus was the center of our defense planning. Neither I nor mage Castille can handle the load on the defense."

Castille stopped them both with a slap of the table. She focused on me, “Tell us about the storm giant attack Eryk. In your own words. And be brief.” Her eyes told me she did not have patience today.

I relaxed slightly as it appeared my mage commander was not directing anger at me. “Durandus got us there, and we found the storm giant digging. He waited until the giant was resting. Maybe he thought the giant was out of aether. I don’t know. He sent the shield wall supported by the spearmen to attack it and distract it while our swordsmen and archers flanked it. The storm giant called down lightning, and it had no effect. The giant charged the shieldmen when Durandus tried to encase him in ice. The giant plowed through the spearman, casting them aside to get to Durandus. I think Durandus thought his shield spell would protect him from any attack.”

I took a moment to remember. “It did, but the giant’s sword launched the mage 150 feet, his protective ball intact. I don’t know when it failed, but he hit the ground and was knocked out. The giant blew apart the archer formation with a lightning bolt. And proceeded to kill all the shield and spear men.”

Mage Gregor asked with narrowed eyes, “And what were you doing during all this?”

“I used some potions on the archers and then rushed to give Durandus some healing potions. It got him up again, and he was able to immobilize the giant, and we were eventually victorious. Durandus collected the essence of the giant and consumed it immediately,” I ended the bloody tale quickly.

Mage Gregor asked, “And where is the essence collector, legionnaire?”

I was not sure if this was a trap or not. So, I choose my words carefully. “We fought something called a shambling mound on the return trip. The mage thought he had immobilized the last creature and was going to take its essence. It surprised him and threw him into the swamp with the device. We think he was knocked unconscious and drowned. The next day we all,” I indicated the six men, “spent hours searching for it. During the search, we couldn’t find a trace of it in the swamp.” This was true since I had put it in my space when Brutus and I found Durandus’ body.

Gregor seemed agitated, his eyes narrowed and brightened slightly, “I want his dimensional pocket searched!”

Mage Castille got angry, “He is under my command authority and does not have to submit to a search from you.”

“I want him searched as well,” the other man added. I was confused. Was he a mage too? Castille looked at him and was not happy. Gregor had a smug look on his face from this victory. This must be some type of power struggle now that Durandus was dead. The man continued, “Castille, you called the mage tribunal. That is two votes to one.” I guessed then that he was also a mage but did not command a legion company. Well, if they could force open my dimensional space, I was fucked. I had a few hundred pounds of supplies in there—and the collector.

Castille looked hard at me, no sympathy but maybe regret. “Eryk empty your space on the table. You bring the wetted sand,” she pointed to a legionnaire by the door.

Confused, I walked towards the table of tribunal members and put the four potion trays on the table. Only the ten of the cure poison remained. I looked at Adrian and Delmar who had impassive faces but made eye contact with me. Their eyes seemed curious. I decided to add all my coins as well. Three gold, ninety-one silver, and twenty-eight copper. A wheelbarrow of wet sand was rolled in. Castille said, “Fill your dimensional space with the sand, Eryk.” This was the test?

Thankfully, I had taken the box in the Varvao baths. I moved to the wheelbarrow, outlined the section of sand I wanted, and moved it inside the box in the dimensional space. Castille nodded regretfully, “Good. Put the contents of your space again on the table—everything. And then move back,” Castille ordered.

A block of wet sand appeared, and it maintained its shape. I moved to stand behind the Durandus’ men again. A giddy Gregor started carefully cutting through the sand in slices with a long, thin dagger. After he had finished, the third mage asked, “Any voids in the sand?” Gregor threw a handful of sand across the table in frustration. Castille seemed shocked nothing was found as well. Did she already think I was hiding something? Well, I was hiding a lot of somethings.

Castille relaxed and smirked, “I will note that Eryk does not have the collector then. And Gregor, even if the collector was here, Durandus’ brother has a claim to it.” I felt a chill because it appeared the collector was valuable enough to be wanted by a lot of people.

I do not know why I asked, but I did, “Why is it so valuable?”

The three mages turned toward me, and Delmar grinned at my idiocy for interrupting and asking. Castille answered without drawing out the drama. “It always yields an essence in a dungeon from any creature. Durandus’ made most of his wealth from it.”

I played stupid, “Should we have spent longer looking?” Flavius, who was sitting with his back to me, twitched.

“Yes. You should have!” Gregor barked. My thought was mages are all kind of bitchy. Even though my company was known to lose a fair amount of men, at least Castille seemed reasonable.

The questioning of me turned to the fight with the shambling mounds, and I answered two dozen questions consistent with what I remembered of the attack and Durandus’ death. I even told them about the company dividing up the essences, minus the three apex ones. Finally, Castille announced, “It is ruled Durandus died by his own stupidity.” Gregor reluctantly seconded, and the other man confirmed. Castille scribbled out the verdict on a parchment and rolled it up. I assumed it to be an official record of how the mage died.

Castille stood, “You six will be divided among the two companies. Eryk, see Adrian before heading to get some sleep.” Castille walked out. The other two mages went their separate ways as well.

Delmar scooped up my coin and walked to me with Adrian. He grinned as he approached, “Damn, Eryk. We sent word to the villa that you were dead. We didn’t know until the trial started you still lived from the men under questioning.” He clapped me on my back.

“Yeah, I stopped at the baths and fell asleep in the water,” I said, and Delmar just shook his head in disbelief.

“There is fifty-five silver in your room at the villa from the snake hide. You may have to kick someone out of the room when you get back—after all, they thought you were dead,” he chuckled.

“I actually was up there, and they told me to come down here,” I admitted.

“Well, since you are all prettied up, I am assuming you plan to go make a dalliance or two,” Delmar handed me my coin slowly. “But you did not pack my

spinnerets out of the mountains. He took one gold coin from my stash,” smiling as he did so and leaving me with Adrian. Damn, I was hoping he had forgotten about that. He paid me a gold coin to pack his monster parts out of the mountains, but I had been tasked to carry the First Citizen’s gear instead.

Adrian stood in front of me and asked, “Castille wanted me to ask you about the remaining men from Durandus’ company. Any good legionaries among them?”

I nodded, thinking, “Flavius. He was one of the archers but also a trained scout. He was the only one who knew about the shambling mounds. He told Durandus that lightning healed them after he attacked. Brutus is the only other one I talked to at any length. He is a good fighter and has some smarts. When the mounds attacked one side of the camp, he remained on watch on the other side, and a third one did show itself, so he prevented us from being attacked from behind.”

I added, watching the men mill about in the Legion common room awaiting their fate, “They generally were not too welcoming to outsiders. The six men that we left on the road with our gear—I did not talk with any of them.”

Adrian heaved a breath, “Durandus’ company was made of volunteers, not conscripts. They chose the life in the Legion. They trained at the Legion Camp just outside of the capital. When they complete their training and are assigned a Mage or duty, all the missions would be within the confines of the interior of the Empire and not on the borders.”

He considered my words for a moment longer, “So, just the two? No others?” I nodded; he turned and left to talk to the filthy men. He yelled to me as I was almost to the door, “Be careful, where you spend your coin, Eryk. According to the Firth, there is an epidemic of crotch crickets in the city.”

Crotch crickets? I didn’t ask. I was exhausted and needed some sleep. I made my way to the villa and found my gear where I had dropped it. In my tiny room, I found the fifty-five silver on the desk, and my things looked to be in the exact same place as I left them. I locked the door, barred the window, pulled my griffin feather pillow out of my storage, and collapsed on my bed. I was asleep in seconds.

## Chapter 36



When I woke, I was disoriented. I opened the blinds, and it was still light outside. Was it the same day? Had I slept through the night, and it was the following day? I sent the pillow back to storage and left to go to the privy. Lirkin was in the kitchen baking and preparing food. “Ah, pretty boy! Did you come to help with dinner?”

I figured I was going to get these comments about my shave and haircut for a while. Although I already had a five o’clock shadow. “No. Is it the same day then that I returned?”

“Yes. Konstantin said to let you sleep the day away now that you are groomed like a First Citizen,” he chuckled and tossed me a bun fresh out of the oven. I bit into the sweet bun stuffed with spinach, cheese, and egg. I burned my mouth a little, so I chewed slowly and took small bites. I just stood and ate as Lirkin cooked. “Can you get one of the twenty-gallon casks in the larder and bring it up for dinner? Castille said we are celebrating our first un-dead legionnaire in the company.”

I frowned at the joke. I had learned there was real undead in this world. Animated skeletons, wraiths, liches, ghouls. Things that went bump in the night did go bump in the night and wanted to kill you. Undead usually resided in dungeons, but I heard an island was supposedly full of the creatures in one of the great oceans. I went down to the cellar and picked up the two-hundred-pound cask. I was a little unsteady climbing the stairs as it was freaking heavy. At the top of the step, I rolled it on the floor. “Was the sled-cart broken?” Seeing me, Lirkin asked curiously. Of course, there was a cart. It was a large two-wheel dolly that I had walked right past at the bottom of the stairs.

“No. I felt like testing my strength,” I said, and Lirkin smirked. “Where is Konstantin? I am surprised he has not woken me himself for training.”

“Out in the gardens. Not toward the orchards, the other side of the house. He was training out there. I heard we were done with swamp patrols but were going to start doing night patrols in the city. Adrian has the duty assignments.” Lirkin said and tossed me another bun as I left, and I deftly caught it one-handed and tossed it lightly while it cooled. The ballroom had a few men resting in it, and I got some whistles and catcalls. Well, screw them all! See if I would offer them a chance to use my barber’s kit. Konstantin was in the gardens and was training with Brutus and Flavius. I walked over to them, eating the bun.

The two men from the Durandus' had cleaned up, they were even clean-shaven. It looked like Konstantin was testing Brutus' spear skill and Flavius' sword skill. They paused to drink as I asked, "Are these the only two we took from the remains of the Durandus' company?"

Konstantin barked, "These were the only two you recommended to Adrian." They trusted my opinion that much?

Brutus responded, "You are the reason we got stuck in this fiery abyss, Eryk? I don't know if I can ever forgive you. Soft beds? Noble's wine? Fresh meat every meal? I think we are no longer friends!" We clasped wrists. Flavius shook my wrist next.

Konstantin tossed me a wrapped spear. "Since you are all chummy, let us see you fight each other." It was spear and shield practice against Brutus' shield and spear. I was outclassed. Brutus was an excellent spearman and used the shield well. Then, I was paired against Flavius' sword and shield. I fared much better, and it was about even for killing blows. Of course, Flavius' specialization was the bow, not the sword.

Konstantin joined in, and we did some two versus two rotating partners. Konstantin sometimes wielded a short sword and a parrying dagger or a short sword and shield. The parrying dagger was deadly as it could catch the spearhead and prevent you from pulling it back, giving Konstantin an opening. Brutus fell victim just once, while I fell multiple times. We were called to dinner like kids from the playground when the sun was setting.

I had my fair share of bruises and a slight limp, but the pain no longer bothered me. It was a constant part of my world now. Brutus and Flavius went ahead, and I had a chance to talk with Konstantin. He started, "Glad you survived that mess. Heard about it from Delmar. Just know Castile didn't think Durandus was that much of a fool. She sent you with him to evaluate the company for her, not almost get killed."

I was a little taken aback by his defense of Castile. I didn't argue the point. Instead, I asked a burning question, "Firth seems to know a lot about everything. How come he is not one of the lieutenants?" We continued to pick up weapons in the plaza and store them, and Konstantin did not respond for a while.

Finally, he said, “That is because he is a spy. As am I.” I stepped back, and Konstantin chuckled. “Not an enemy spy, you dullard. He works for one of the Praetorian Guard. I do not know which one. I work for one as well.”

“So, you two are spying on Castile?” I asked uneasily.

“Partly. We just make sure the mage commanders have the Empire’s best interest in their actions. Castille knows what we are, and so does most of the company. I think Flavius works for a Praetorian too, but I’m not sure who he works for.”

We finished with the weapons. “You would have found out eventually. Anyway, I am thinking of recruiting you. The issue is you are a foreigner. I am not sure the woman I report to would accept you into her service,” Konstantin admitted.

It was a lot to take in. It made sense that the Empire wanted to keep track of its most powerful assets. I was confused, but at least Konstantin was talking. “Who are the Praetorian Guard?”

“The Emperor’s most loyal servants and followers. Mages, warriors, merchants, nobles, and even some commoners,” Konstantin said. I sensed he was seeing if I was interested in becoming a spy, agent, or asset—or whatever he was. He continued, “The armies keep the borders secure. We keep everything within the borders secure.”

A lot of things did not make sense. The apex essences that Castille handed out for one. I was hesitant to ask but needed to know, “I thought apex essences were reserved for First Citizens. That is what everyone keeps saying. Yet Castille and Durandus...”

“True. You can only sell an apex essence to a First Citizen according to the law as it is written. It does not say anything about giving it away, though. It is why many in the Empire leave to join the Adventurer’s Guild. That way, they can return to hunt for and ship essences to other Guild Halls outside of Desia to sell,” Konstantin informed me. I had only heard of the Adventurer’s Guild and had never actually seen adventurers or one of their buildings. I guessed the Empire preferred to use its Legion companies in place of allowing adventurers within their borders.

“So Castille was not breaking the law when she gave me the apex essences in the dungeon?” I returned to my primary confusion.

Konstantin shrugged, "Mages have a lot of free rein. The Emperor needs to keep them happy. The mage companies of the Legion are the glue of the Empire," he admitted.

"How many mage companies are there?" I asked, extremely interested.

"You are awfully inquisitive this evening. Are you sure you are not a spy from a foreign land?" He asked seriously before slapping me on my back and laughing. But he still didn't answer my question before we entered the dining hall to join everyone for dinner. The food and wine were copious, and I got saluted too many times to count about returning from the dead. They welcomed our two new members as well. The wine flowed freely, and the cask was emptied quickly.

Adrian came up to give orders and got a lot of boos for spoiling the mood. Being on night watch in the upper city was not going to be fun. Sleeping during the day and then walking the streets at night was going to be the new norm for the next few weeks. The baron's advisor in charge of the city was moving more of his men to the lower city as break-ins were on the rise, so we were covering the upper city for him.

To maximize coverage, we would be working in teams of four. My team, unsurprisingly, was Konstantin, Felix, and Mateo. I had frequently been bunked with Felix and Mateo. And Konstantin had taken a healthy interest in me, and now I knew the true reason why.

Adrian finished announcing the patrols but added, "Eryk, Brutus, and Flavius have tonight off!" which was met by mock boos. "They need their beauty rest and the time to see a barber." Some loud jeering erupted from the room. "Since it looks like we will be saving the city in the dark, start to get your sleep during the day. We will be adding black-out curtains to the ballroom."

I doubted the wisdom of sending soldiers out after consuming alcohol. It was a little suspect from my viewpoint. They were dismissed with the call 'to gear up and sober up.' Patrolling started in two hours.

I was already well rested, and I barricaded myself in my room. I had the glowstones, so I would no longer need the oil lamp for light. With my griffin pillow supporting my head, I got serious about working on the spell form for healing myself. It had a lot to do with intent when you imprinted a spell form. I did not want a lesser form of the ability that only healed flesh. I wanted the healing spell form to be able to repair my organs and bones if needed.

I trod carefully in my attempts to create the spell form for healing until I smelled breakfast. I packed up and went to the kitchen and helped Lirkin by cooking a lot of bacon. Squads came in from patrol, blurry-eyed and hungry. Sometimes, they grabbed food and left. Sometimes, they told us about their night. Chasing burglars, escorting drunk nobles home, searching abandoned buildings, and primarily being visible to the people. That was the big reason we were patrolling. They wanted people to know that Legion men were on the job, the elite warriors of the Empire.

As they shuffled off, I helped Lirkin stage lunch and then went to get in on the 'sleep-during-day, walk-around-in-the-dark schedule.'

## Chapter 37: Midnight Patrol

Forcing yourself to sleep in the morning, even in a dark room, is difficult. I had one of the best rooms in the villa temperature-wise, but I still could not get comfortable. I knew what the problem was—the stupid healing spell form. I wanted to learn it sooner rather than later. Even with what I had learned from Damian, I was having trouble feeling my way through the process.

I considered if the resistance was just because I did not have enough space to add the spell form. It felt like squeezing a grapefruit through a hole meant for an orange. Maybe that was a terrible analogy because now I was wondering if oranges were available on Desia. Perhaps if I counted oranges, I could fall asleep...

A loud knock woke me, and Konstantin's too-joyful voice was on the other side, "Dinner is in fifteen. We leave for patrol fifteen after. Gear up!" I sat up and was confused. Had I slept the entire day? I had been exhausted. I checked my curtain, and it was late evening outside. After cleaning, I started to strap on the armor. I decided to carry a short sword and dagger on my belt.

As I walked into the foyer, Konstantin was stretching, "Good weapons choice. If we do have to chase anyone down tonight, draw the entire scabbard, not the blade. The last thing you want is to die by tripping and falling on your own sword." I worked to adjust the belt so I could pull the sheathed short sword out easily. Mateo and Felix showed up all smiles, having obviously slept well.

Konstantin nodded and walked, and we followed. "We are on patrol in fours, so if we divide up, we can remain in pairs. Never go anywhere alone, always in pairs."

"Got it, never leave your wingman," I quipped.

Konstantin gave me a hard look, trying to figure out the meaning of my words. "Eryk, you will be my wingman," Konstantin said with a smirk before continuing. "We will patrol in a diamond formation. The point will scan forward, the right and left will scan their side, and the man in the rear will check behind them every minute." The explanation was for my benefit, as Mateo and Felix looked bored. I had already learned this in training but paid rapt attention anyway.

As we walked out into the city, I was the point on the diamond, Mateo to my left, Felix to my right, and Konstantin behind me. Konstantin talked the entire time, and the other two were bored as they probably heard everything he was saying last night. Konstantin taught his scouting and observation skills as we walked.

He was an endless stream of knowledge. He talked about the structures, noting everything from the construction methods of buildings to what each shop sign indicated they sold inside. I assumed it was for my benefit since I was not from the Empire. Whenever we met a civilian, we talked to them briefly and told them they were past curfew and to get home. After the interaction, Konstantin quizzed us on the encounter. What they were wearing, their story, why they were out, their body language, and what we thought their true reason was for being out past curfew.

It was information overload but extremely useful. All the mental exercises were taxing, and I was glad when we finally returned to the villa at first light. Lirkin had breakfast for us, and after eating a few servings and listening to others returning from patrols, I was ready for a long sleep. Of course, Konstantin noted that I was to be at weapon practice after the mid-day meal. I secured my room, and instead of studying, I slept.

The following eight days proceeded the same. We patrolled at night and returned for breakfast and sleep. After lunch, we did weapons training and calisthenics, and then I retreated to my room to study the healing spell form book. We started to have an informal dinner as a company just before the four-person teams went on patrol. Never again with any wine, but always with a weak ale. I think I remember weak ale had enough alcohol to kill bacteria,

which is why it was so prevalent at meals. But I was uncertain if I remembered this fact correctly from my history of Earth.

Konstantin never talked about his side profession as a spy for one of the Praetorian Guard. I was curious to ask how the Praetorian and Empire treated outworlders these days. My best guess was it had been a few generations since an outworlder arrival was public knowledge. A few hundred years had seemed to push it more into myth than fact. Talking with Linus at dinner, I learned of the possibility of how I managed to remain unnoticed. Linus knew a few tales of arrivals, and large groups were always arriving all at once. The First Legion was the largest arrival in recorded history, but there were others where dozens of people arrived at once.

I do not know what made my transportation to the World of Desia so unique, but I felt that keeping to myself was still my best course of action. I wondered how arriving in a land full of violent orcs might have gone for a group in the past—or appearing on the island of the undead. I had gotten extremely lucky—or something had guided my arrival. But why? I was nothing special—definitely not hero material.

“What do you think of that?” Konstantin interrupted my internal thoughts. I looked left at a boarded-up shop, he indicated. I did not see anything at first. Then, I noticed the bottom half of the panel had been moved, as evidenced by a small line of differential weathering on the door.

“Someone recently removed the board covering the bottom of the door and didn’t place it back exactly the same,” I commented first.

Mateo asked Konstantin, “Do we enter?”

“Yes. We only enter if we suspect something is amiss. That is enough evidence. Mateo and Felix, go to the back of the building and wait there in case someone runs. Eryk, use your heavy dagger to pry the panel,” Konstantin gave his orders.

I tried to be quiet as I worked. It was not difficult; I could have removed it with my fingers. I surmised it had been pried off many times prior. This was only the bottom half of the covering for the door. I could reach the handle, tested it, and the door was still locked. Konstantin pushed me aside, and after just a few seconds, it clicked and swung inward. I whispered, “You have to show me how you did that.”



He did not respond but indicated I should use my glowstone and go first into the shop. I ducked below the higher board with my shortsword drawn and the glowstone in the other hand. My stone illuminated the shop in shadows and appeared to be a clothing shop for women. It was a high-end shop by its location in the upper district.

Konstantin followed me inside and motioned for me to be quiet as he scanned the room. After a moment, he indicated faint tracks in the dust on the floor. They all led to the same doorway. Konstantin whispered, "Basement. We will listen for sound at the door. Walk slowly, and do not make the floorboards creak."

He had already continued into the shop, deathly silent. I tried my best not to make any noise, but for some reason—where Konstantin seemed to weigh nothing and passed over the boards without a sound—every step I took had the floor give a squeak or groan. Konstantin did not say anything and reached the door. We listened for minutes as the stuffiness and lingering day's humidity made my sweat bead and drip from my face.

Then we heard it—very faint voices. They sounded far away. Konstantin seemed to understand what was being said, and I just remained frozen, waiting for an order and trying to listen. I figured we were dealing with looters or squatters. After a good ten minutes, Konstantin leaned in close and said, "I will go first." He tapped my dagger, "Draw it; you will need it. I picked out at least four voices." I wanted to ask how he could have heard anything, but he reached for the door and opened it very slowly. There was sufficient light coming through the door to see the stairs clearly.

With it three inches ajar, he paused, drew his own dagger, and carefully cut a string I had failed to notice. I guessed it was a trip wire for an alarm. He opened the door the rest of the way, and the voices were now much clearer to my ears.

"How many men are in the lower city?" A husky feminine voice asked.

"We have twenty in the lower city and another thirty in the upper city," a male voice responded.

"Have Oliver and his men arrived yet?" The husky voice asked another question. Konstantin took a step onto the stairs and started to descend.



“No, he might arrive tonight along the aqueduct route under invisibility,” the same male replied.

“Damn it! The march starts in the morning, and they will lock down the city when they hear,” the woman said angrily. “I need those fifteen men.”

Konstantin was almost at the bottom of the steps, and I took my first step onto the stairs. I realized I was holding my breath and exhaled slowly as I took the next step. My third step caused the wooden stairs to whine softly under my weight. All talking stopped, and Konstantin rushed his last two steps and turned left at the bottom of the stairs toward the voices. I sped down as well and was going to follow him, but a man came from the right chasing Konstantin.

Konstantin was already fighting, so I assumed we had enemies here. I lunged the rest of the way, plunged my dagger into his neck, and pushed him back the way he had come. I swore as I looked in the direction I had pushed the dying man. A half dozen bedrolls were on the floor, and people were rising. I counted three. I figured to tell Konstantin why I was not at his back, “I have four to the right!” I only had three opponents left, but it sounded better as Konstantin’s side increased the fighting intensity.

I waded into the room and stabbed a man in the throat, who was reaching for a sword. It was more of a lucky strike as I had aimed for his chest. I wrenched the sword loose, causing blood to spray. I briefly stared into the man’s wide eyes as he grasped his throat and rolled away. By the spurts of blood, I had severed at least one of the carotid arteries. If he didn’t have magical healing, then he was dead.

The other two men were armed with long swords and eyeing their shields, leaning at the base of the wall. I wished we had gone and got Mateo and Felix before coming down here. I was matched against two skilled men with much longer reach blades than myself. My advantage was that I was wearing armor, and they had linens on.

I decided not to risk fighting them. I tried to outline two small fist-sized blocks where both their hearts were. I could pull their hearts into my dimensional space and kill them since they were within ten feet. I quickly got frustrated as I could only establish one region at a time. I focused my effort on the most confident appearing swordsman. He was within ten feet, and I moved his heart to my storage.

I got slight vertigo, letting me know my aether had just bottomed out from moving the small object. He screamed, clutched his chest, and collapsed in a smooth motion. Even though I was confused that I was out of aether from such a small object, I could not hesitate and launched myself at the last man. His shock at seeing his companion fall without a blow quickly disappeared. His long sword cut the air as he turned his body into a fencing pose and edged toward the wall to retrieve his shield.

I moved to cut off his route, and that was what he had expected. I was fooled as he moved quickly in the other direction in a lunge. I parried the thrust, but it glanced off my leather chest piece slightly, leaving a gash in the leather. He was already retreating by the time my short sword came at the opening. I only nicked his forearm, but a steady flow of blood started. He flexed his sword arm and winced. I had gotten some muscle on the cut.

He considered his shield again but then switched the long blade to his left hand instead. I could tell it was awkward and unpracticed in his other hand. I launched into my attack, and he defended while retreating. It gave me a chance to take the shield for myself. I knew this fight was now over. Konstantin was still fighting, so I needed to help him by ending my fight quickly.

I pressed with the shield. He tried to use his superior reach to score on my legs, but my speed allowed me to strike his chest before he retreated on a failed swing. My strike had parted the outer layer of the pectoral muscle, and he was wincing, just trying to hold his blade. I thought he would surrender, but he rushed me again. The sword attack was weak on my shield, and I hacked his neck on the side, certain it was a killing blow by the depth of my blade. I left him to bleed out. I stabbed the man whose heart I had taken in the throat on the way by to conceal how he died.

On the other side of the cellar was a stalemate between Konstantin and a short woman. She had a buckler and a shortsword. She had one wound, a gash on her upper shield arm. Two dead men were on the floor. One had distinctly pointed ears, meaning he was the first elf I had laid my eyes on. The other dead man was human.

“Any others?” I asked as I joined Konstantin’s side. He looked at me, and I think he was surprised I was not wounded—or maybe that I was alive at all.

“Not in the cellar. We need this one alive. I believe she is the commander,” he said, and her eyes narrowed at Konstantin. She looked resigned to her fate,

but rather than surrender, launched herself forward, tossing aside the buckler in an effort to distract Konstantin. I only meant to parry her blade, but she impaled herself on my sword. I awkwardly rushed my shield to protect my head from her final blow. Konstantin aided me by hacking her swinging arm, killing the momentum of the blow to just cutting lightly into my pauldrons.

My blade pieced near enough to her heart to kill her. “Shit,” Konstantin swore. The dwarf woman was dead. He started searching her body and, not finding what he wanted, started on the rest of the basement. “Eryk, see if there is any access to the sewers from this basement. They mentioned something about the sewers earlier.”

I walked the outer walls and checked the floor. The dead men’s eyes seemed to follow me as I went and gave me the chills. I felt nothing for taking their lives, which surprised me. Maybe having been close to death a few times myself was numbing me to it.

I returned to Konstantin and reported, “Nothing on the walls or floors that seems to grant access.”

“Troll shit! She said nearly fifty of them were in the city, but nothing to tell us where!” He made a decision. “Keep searching. I will post Mateo and Felix upstairs and get more men here. I have to tell Castile there are at least 43 men in the city and more traveling along the aqueduct tonight under a spell.” He quickly grabbed his weapons and swore as he stomped up the stairs, “The Bartiradians are already in the city!”

I was left alone with seven corpses of the Bartiradian army infiltrators.

## **Chapter 38: Essence Thief**

I was left in the basement as Konstantin rushed up the stairs. I heard him yell for Mateo and Felix. It was not long before the two men came down the stairs. Mateo looked at the carnage and said, “Centaur shit, Konstantin is a bloody monster.” He addressed me, “We are to get the front door completely open and wait in the street. Konstantin said you should continue to look for clues on the whereabouts of the others in the city.” They did a quick walk-through of the basement before heading back upstairs.

I could have told them that I had killed five of the seven, but I don't think they would have believed me. It was quiet and a bit spooky with the dead eyes of the soldiers in the basement. I had killed actual people. That should have shaken me, or at least how easily I had done it without any hesitation. This brutality was my new reality.

I counted the bedrolls, and there were seven to match with the seven dead. Then I searched the bedrolls, finding nothing in them. I covered the bodies with them because it seemed like the right thing to do. I tried pulling the essence collector from my storage, but my aether was insufficient and was still recovering.

I searched as ordered, but all they had down here were supplies and weapons. It looked like mostly food and casks of water. Strangely, there were no supplies that I would equate to being tailor's goods for sale upstairs. Maybe the owners did not use it for the business? I stopped thinking about it as I was no detective.

But I did need to find out why my aether bottomed out when I took the man's heart. As I was thinking about it, I pulled the shields and weapons into a pile. I guessed they would be sent to the Legion Hall's armory as they were good quality. Maybe I should search the bodies again? Konstantin had done it quickly. I started with the elf, uncovering him. The ears were not too pronounced but were pointed. Maybe a half-elf? His face was angular, and he looked on the thinner side.

I searched his body and found two secreted knives, but his musculature looked somewhat frail. Were all elves weak? Maybe he was a scout and not a fighter. I found a coin pouch, but that seemed odd to have on you when you invaded a city. Inside were five large coins: one gold, two silver, and two copper. Large coins were ten times the value of small coins, so this was a sizable sum. They were all stamped with a five-headed hydra on one side and writing that was not Latin on the other side. I could not read it.

I don't know how I felt about robbing the dead. I tucked the pouch into my pocket for now. He had jewelry on as well, two rings and one earring. I checked for runes but did not see any, so I assumed they were not magical. It reminded me I still had my magical pendant from the dungeon in my dimensional space that needed to be identified. I stood and looked at the dwarf woman next. She had tried to sacrifice herself to kill me.

I checked again and had just enough aether to pull the essence collector from my dimensional storage. I debated the risk. What if others came, and I did not have enough aether to return it, and it was discovered? Was I even okay with harvesting dead people for essence? And how much aether did it take to activate the device? Was there even an essence to take? It had been almost twenty minutes since they had been killed. How long did you have to harvest a corpse after killing it?

Fuck it. I took the device out of my dimensional space and inspected it closely for the first time. I laughed aloud as it looked closer to a sterling silver plate the women won at Wimbledon. The runes were magical, and I could sense they had a purpose, even just holding the metal disc. I placed it on the chest of the dwarf woman and channeled my aether.

It did not take much, just a kiss of aether to activate. A light blue mist quickly pulled into the plate from the body, and a large orange orb formed. Damn, and apex essence of reasoning if I remember correctly! The dwarf woman had been all corded muscle, and she gave a mental essence, not a physical one. I only hesitated for a moment before popping it into my mouth.

I got a brain freeze and felt dizzy. Vertigo caused me to trip on the body and fall. The floor felt like the safer place for the next minute as I bathed in the euphoric changes. Next time I consumed a mental essence, I would ensure I was sitting down. I guessed that maybe it was ten times more intense for me than others since I was able to milk the essences I consumed for more power.

I covered the body and turned to the elf. I placed the collector on him and activated it. The same effect occurred, and a golf ball-sized sphere formed on the plate. The only problem was the ball was rich brown with swirls of gray and black. I had to be a magical apex affinity essence, but I did not know which affinity. I could not consume a second essence so soon. Castille said to wait an hour between, but maybe, with my spell form enhancing my gains, I should wait longer. Maybe an entire day. I pocketed the essence and moved a little excited onto the human male between the elf and the dwarf.

I placed the collector again; this time, a large marble formed from the blue smoke. It was dark purple, meaning it was a major essence of strength. One of the most common essences. I planned to go to the other side and collect more essence. But clear thuds of footsteps walked across the floor above me.

My heart thudded, and I tried to send the collector back to my space. I didn't have enough essence to transfer it. Should I hide it in the room? Someone

was on the stairs descending. I forced the plate inside my chest armor. Damn it. The hard leather was formed to my body. I sucked in my gut and stood as relaxed as I could as Adrian, Linus, Flans, and Brutus moved into the room.

Adrian looked on both sides of the stairs and asked, "Why are the bodies covered?"

I spoke softly while holding in my gut, "Because I found their eyes staring at me creepy."

Adrian snorted and shook his head, "It gets easier. Did you find anything?"

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the coin pouch, "I only searched the elf and the dwarf. Just some coin," I tossed him the pouch.

He caught it and tested the weight. Then, he tossed it back to me, "Keep it. Castille will be here soon. You can stand guard in the street till she arrives and then go and get some rest. Konstantin said you fought well." He chuckled, "He actually said you fought better than expected, which probably means you impressed him." They started searching the bodies and the room again, and I went upstairs and into the street. It was still a long time till dawn. The oil street lamps gave the city a dull light. Mateo and Felix were flanking the entrance and at attention. I stood to one side.

Mateo asked with interest, "Did you really take down five by yourself? That was what Adrian said."

The collector was making me slightly uncomfortable, but it was manageable. I shifted slightly, "It was all luck. I got one at the bottom of the stairs, and another was just waking up. The fifth one actually impaled herself on my blade rather than be captured."

Felix whistled, "Five kills in one evening. We need to come up with a nickname for you." I then had to listen to the two toss nickname suggestions back and forth between them. When I tried to give my own input, they told me a person could not help choose their nickname. It had to be bestowed on them by another.

Silent Sheep, Madien's Thief, Pocket Puncher, Ghoul, Night Prince, Graceful Fork, Foreign Spear, Thundering Demon...

The names went on and on. I was confused as no one else in the company had a nickname I knew. Mercifully, Castille returned with Konstantin just moments later. She paused to address me, "Good work, Eryk. You can go get some rest."

Mateo and Felix started to move with me, and Konstantin rasped, "Just Eryk. You two remain here on guard." They entered the clothing shop, and I walked away, leaving two very disappointed legionaries. There was still about four hours left before dawn. As I walked, I finally had enough aether to move the collector back with the essences and could relax. I probably would not take such a risk again.

At the villa, I found a swearing Lirkin in the kitchen. "Eryk, there are rats in the cellar. The anti-vermin wards must have expired. I need help eliminating them." My jaw didn't work as I thought I was going to get some time to rest and study. "Come on, Eryk, the bastards are eating the tubers and grains."

I nodded reluctantly. "Do you want me to cut the tails off after I kill them and present them to you as proof so you can grant me a reward?" I said, trying to sound cheerful about the quest offering.

"Why the fuck would I want rat tails? Do they eat rat tails where you are from?" Lirkin sounded slightly mocking. "Just kill them and see where they are getting into the basement larder. I saw a mortar mixture in one of the outbuildings. Your reward will be not having to eat meat chewed on by a rat."

He went to get the mortar, and I went into the basement with a glowstone from my pocket. I heard them immediately, but they hid from my light. I searched the perimeter wall and found two holes in the base of the walls. I moved the casks out of the way to get easier access to both of them. How was I supposed to catch a rat? I walked through the room and started to see them as their tails disappeared. They were definitely in here.

Lirkin returned with a bucket of gravelly and powdery mixture. He inspected the two holes in the walls, "This one we can plug with mortar. This one is the drain. The grate is missing. With anti-vermin wards, no one probably thought to patch this hole and replace the grate." He considered. "I will let Kolm know. He can bang out a replacement grate at the forge in the citadel. Let us block it with a crate for now." We mixed the mortar with water and filled the other hole.

"I have to start on breakfast. I am sure you have the rat problem well in hand," he patted my back and went up the stairs before I could respond. I spent



hours chasing rats in the basement, crushing three, but I could still hear more of them. It was driving me insane. I got an idea and put a small pile of grain, cheese, and meat in the corner lit by a glowstone. I backed away to the extent of my dimensional space, ten feet, and waited. I had regained enough aether to try this.

Ten minutes later, the first cautious rat moved to the pile, and then, a second, I queued up the space to send the rats to my dimensional space together. Both rats popped out of existence, and I felt intense backlash as my aether bottomed out. It was even more intense than when I took the man's heart five hours ago.

I sat with a migraine, trying to figure things out. Anything alive appeared to have resistance to being put into my dimensional space. Maybe that resistance didn't matter since my space affinity was so high. I always won the contest of wills. Was there a related mental attribute that played a role in resisting? Maybe resilience? Maybe it is the magical trait of aether resistance? Questions that I would need to answer.

I listened for a long time and did not hear anything. I walked up the stairs triumphantly with the three dead rats. Men were already getting breakfast from the kitchen as they returned from patrol. I was mocked as some demonic slayer of the Bartiradian Army. The name that Felix and Mateo settled on was [taking suggestions readers, this will be a nickname he uses later in the story when he has to do 'dirty jobs', so give me something good [LINK TO VOTE AND COMMENT](#)]. Lirkin consoled me and said it would only stick for a few days before everyone forgot about it.

I ate my fill of a porridge topped with honied nuts and fruit. We also had thick bacon on the side. Not the usual strong effort from our cook, but he was busy with rats most of the morning.

I ended up in my room after filling myself on the breakfast offering. I had one more thing I wanted to test. I waited anxiously for hours, and when my aether was half full, I opened the window and expelled the rats from my dimensional space. They fell five feet, were briefly stunned by the fall, but then scurried off. Well, that was very interesting. It barely took any aether to bring them out, and the rats lived. They were unharmed from their stay in my dimensional space.

## Chapter 39



As I watched the disoriented rats scurry away, I should have realized that the griffin egg I collected had allowed me to bring live objects into my storage. Castille had confirmed it was viable after I removed it, and then I transported it for the First Citizen. The only difference was it did not bottom out my aether when the egg went into my dimensional space. Still, it was good to see live rats scurry away and know the other griffin egg in my storage was probably viable. It opened the possibility of possibly moving an entire person or monster to the dimensional space and knowing they would be alive when I retrieved them.

The bell rang for lunch, and I had not gotten any sleep. I joined the line in the kitchen for sliced roast beef in a thick gravy with a side of candied carrots. I took my plate, filled to overflowing, to the gardens where we would have weapons practice directly afterward.

For the last week, Brutus had been helping me with my spear, and Konstantin was helping me with duel-wielding. I think Konstantin was planning to have me with the short sword in my right and the parrying dagger in my left today. He kept changing the weapons that each hand wielded to work on my ambidexterity.

As the company ate, Adrian and Delmar came into the gardens. Delmar led, "No weapons practice after the mid-day meal." The pronouncement was met with cheers. Even though everyone knew it probably meant we had other duties coming. "Instead, we are going to search every boarded-up house in the upper city," the cheers went silent. "The other Legion company is handling the lower city."

Someone barked, "What are the lazy regulars doing?"

"Keeping an eye on the remaining citizens and guarding the wall. The Bartiradians have started their march from the city of Guiracas," Adrian snapped. "They will arrive at the walls in three days." I realized that confirmed what the dwarf woman had said last night. She said the march was going to start today. Everyone was suddenly silent. The reality of our situation was settling in. Everyone in the company knew the plan was to hold up in the city. When the Bartirdians fortified for a siege, our noble rescuers would come and wipe them out. It all seemed good on paper unless you were the ones holding back the tide of enemies and waiting to be saved.

Delmar got everyone settled down and announced three teams of eight to do the searches. My group was adding Firth, Wylie, Pavel, and Regis. We only

had an hour before starting, and I lamented not sleeping this morning and would be running on adrenaline for the evening and into the overnight patrol. I had been too anxious waiting for my aether to recharge to test on releasing the rats.

Linus stopped me, “Eryk, run down to the city. In the Legion Hall, there should have been a shipment of potions from the portal opening by the Displacement Mage this morning. Go retrieve them. We are going to divide them among the three groups. There should be seventeen simple healing and three full healing. Also,” he thought for a moment, “One rack of healing salve, one rack of stamina potions, and four water purification potions. Castille paid for all of this, so do not let them short you. Hurry!”

I rushed to put my armor back on and ran down to the lower city and the Legion Hall. I was not even winded entering the building and heading to the back where the Legion warehouse was located. Unlike picking up weapons, the potions—and now also the foodstuffs were tightly monitored. Two civilian males were behind the desk. “I am here for Castille’s shipment of potions.” One of the men went and got the racks and brought them out. One small rack had the water purification, all four potions. The next was the complete rack of ten stamina potions. The third rack was full of ten of the minor healing potions. The healing salve was next and had all ten. When we got to the fifth rack, I inhaled sharply. It only had five of the lesser healing potions. I was missing three of the major healing and two of the minor healing potions.

The man slid me the log book to sign off on receiving the potions. The logbook noted the potion order as being complete. I stated, “There are some potions missing. I need two more simple and three more full healing potions.”

The man spun the ledger around to read it and carefully counted the potions he had brought. He turned to his partner, “Marx, do you know anything about this? We are missing two lesser and three greater healing.” The man, Marx, took the ledger, counted the potion racks, and compared them to the ledger. I could tell it was an act, but how deliberate and orchestrated his actions were.

Finally, he said, “No.” He looked at me, “Check with the other company commander. He was in the here when the shipment arrived and took everything he ordered.”

I was calling bullshit. I looked at the ledger again. “Are these your signatures by the ledger saying the potions arrived? You logged them into the store

room, yes? Then get me my potions. I need to get back to the upper city soon.” I let my irritation grow as I continued.

Marx did not look happy, “You should talk with Mage Gregor. I believe I noticed him taking the potions from the shipment.”

I growled in irritation, “Where is the mage?”

The first man, whose name I did not have, spoke, “He is staying at the Cock and Hen down the street. It is the nicest inn in the area.” He looked apologetic. Should I have been afraid of confronting a mage—maybe. I stacked the remaining potions and moved them into my space in one action. I left and did not sign the ledger book to their protests.

The Cock and Hen was easy to find. The sign had a proud rooster standing over a pair of chickens. I thought the sign indicated the name should be Cock and Hens but did not dwell on it. I entered to find a few familiar faces in the common room. Men from Durandus’ company who were now assigned to Gregor. I saw Gregor at a table with books spread before him and some maps. I approached, and he slowly looked up, waiting for me to speak.

“The men at the warehouse said you mistakenly took Castille’s potions,” I stated loudly and clearly.

Gregor appraised me, “No, there was no mistake. I just took back the potions I had supplied to Durandus’ failed mission. Since he is not alive to reimburse me for their use, Castille, who suggested the exploration, can reimburse me.” He said it calmly, like it made sense. Our confrontation was getting the attention of the legionaries in the room.

Damn it. Did Linus know this was going to happen? Was this why he sent me? I looked around the room at the fifteen or so legionaries. They all appeared curious as to the outcome of the confrontation. I backed down as I did not want an escalation, “I will relay your reasoning to Mage Castille.” He twitched slightly as I turned and left.

I fast walked to the villa and found Castille, Adrian, Delmar, and Konstantin talking. Adrian, Delmar, and Konstantin were each leading one of the eight-man search teams. “Do you have the potions, Eryk?” Delmar asked.

"Most." I faced Castille, "Mage Gregor said you owed him potions and took them before I arrived. He took two simple and all three full healing potions," I answered.

Anger clouded Castille's visage, and thin black tendrils of smokey shadow appeared around her. She said steelily, "I will handle this. Start the searches. Adrian, I will join your team on Fortuna Street." Castille left with a determined walk.

Konstantin muttered, "Hope neither ends up dead." He addressed me, "Eryk, let's divide the potions you did get and move out." It took just a few minutes for Adrian and Delmar to take what they needed, and then I went to get my weapons and shield.

I took a medium-round shield with me. House-to-house searches sounded slightly dangerous, and I had been exceedingly lucky in my first fight. When we left, I walked next to Konstantin. "Did anyone get the enemy they said were using the aqueduct to enter the city last night?"

He shook his head, "The upper city guard sits on the route, and there is a gate across it. They assured us no one came through. We searched two other businesses last night and found nothing. They were talking about a sewer route, but all the entrances are gated and guarded. The city guard will search the sewers tomorrow."

"Do you think they heard us enter and were trying to lay a false trail?" I asked, and Konstantin laughed.

"If they heard us, then we wouldn't have surprised them, and both of us would be dead. The elf was a mage, and Castille thought he was decent at that by the equipment he had on him. You were not the only one lucky last night. Things could have gone much worse if I hadn't killed the mage first. The dwarf was a commander; she had a tattoo on her forearm indicating so. I think she was in charge of this secret assault. Adrian thinks they meant to sabotage one of the gates," Konstantin added doubtfully.

"What do you think was their objective?" I asked the veteran.

He thought for just a moment, "They probably planned to target someone specific. One of our mages or a general. The sewers run under the whole city, so maybe they planned to use them to reach their target." He reached inside his armor and pulled out a small bag. "The soldiers didn't yield much in terms

of essence. They must have been dead too long, but it was unusual the mage did not yield something. I have two power and one dexterity from Castille. All minor essences. You killed the majority of them, which two do you want?"

I looked at the two dark purple and one dark yellow marble-sized spheres in his hand. I took the yellow sphere and one dark purple. I realized that Konstantin would expect me to consume one immediately, but I was fairly certain I would get negative feedback as it was too soon since I consumed the apex reasoning essence.

I put the dexterity essence in my pocket. I made a show of consuming the power essence but actually sent it to my storage. I added the dexterity essence to storage as we moved out. Konstantin popped his own essence into his mouth. "I would have preferred the dexterity," he muttered and mockingly continued, "But you definitely needed it more than me."

We searched our first shop, prying the boards off and going through the house. I handed out glowstones to everyone to make the process quicker. I was unsure if I would get them back after mentioning they were from Durandus. Firth's argument was they should have been sent to the Legion Hall warehouse and available to everyone. So, he argued that I had saved them the trip of heading to the lower city to get one. Everyone agreed with his argument, and Konstantin looked to be sympathetic but smirked and kept the one I lent him as well. Glowstones were a bit of a luxury item at a little over a gold coin each. I now had four remaining.

We searched two residences, a cobbler shop, a butcher, and a furniture maker. We did not find anything. It was near darkness, and Konstantin announced, "We will head to the villa and get dinner before continuing." Some good-natured groans erupted, knowing we were not finished for the day.

As we walked through the orchards, a town guard came rushing up behind us, "Legionaries! Come quick! The Displacement Mage has been attacked and killed!" I looked at Konstantin, who had the 'I told you so' look. This was terrible news, as a Displacement Mage was needed to operate the portal stones on both ends of the connection. Most cities had just one since they were rare—and I believed that was the case for Macha.

"Let's go. Guess they couldn't wait to set up an array around the city to cut us off from the rest of the Empire," Konstantin roared and jogged after the anxious city guard, leading us to the scene.

## Chapter 40: Massacre

We ran at the hustling guard's pace to the upper city's far side. For some reason, everyone formed up into ranks as we jogged. Wylie loudly asked a question for everyone to hear: "Where were his legionnaire guards?"

Firth grunted, "He should have had at least a dozen. My guess is they are all dead as well."

Konstantin, leading us, shouted back, "He had fifteen. I checked this morning and warned them of the enemy in the city."

We turned to a wide street with opulent buildings of white marble highlighted with black granite. We had not patrolled this part of the city, and the polished stone made for an impressive site. Even the road was made from textured gray granite. Regis muttered, "Damn. In my next life, I want to be a Portal Mage."

"If Janus bestows you that blessing for the life of debauchery you have lived, I might as well not try to be so pious any longer!" Pavel grunted.

"Who is Janus?" I asked no one in particular.

Firth responded, "You don't have gods in your lands, Eryk? Janus is our god of Rebirth. The god of endings and new beginnings."

I had heard some old Roman gods worshiped and even passed by a few temples in the cities, but I had never heard people worshiping them openly before. Maybe in a world of magic, their miracles were less important. Even though the guard leading us was sucking wind, we could all talk easily at his slow pace. I asked, "How many gods do you worship in Telhian?"

Firth barked with mirth, "You do not worship the gods. You respect them and ask for favors."

Wylie added to my knowledge, "There are maybe thirty faces of divinity the First Legion brought with them. But the only true god you will ever see is an ancient dragon delivering its vengeance on a city." There were murmurs of agreement.

We slowed to a walk as we could see a number of our legion company milling outside one of the residences. There did not appear to be any current threat, as they were just guarding the building and keeping people away. Konstantin went inside, and we talked to the other members.

“It is a blood bath in there. They broke through the wall in the basement,” Lucien said to us.

Orson added, “Foul magic, just ripped the men apart.”

Firth asked seriously, “How many of ours dead?”

“The mage and all of his men, maybe twenty in total when you include his family. But there are so many body parts around it is hard to count,” Orson added.

“Did they kill any of the Bartirdians?” Wylie asked.

Olson nodded. “Eighteen, I think, maybe nineteen. They retreated back into the sewers after they killed the mage.”

Konstantin came outside, “Eryk, you are needed inside.”

I started walking, confused, “Which potion?”

Konstantin shook his head no, and said, “Castille is going into the sewers. Go see her.” I swore in my mind. Every time there was a dangerous mission, I was involved. I would have been better off lugging rocks in a quarry to pay back the farmers. I might have ended up crippled, but at least I would have been alive.

I entered the house and passed the entryway; blood and gore made the floor slick and slippery. I paused at the carnage that covered the once gorgeous polished stone walls and floors. They were not kidding. Bodies were ripped apart at the torso. The site didn’t faze me as much as it would have just a month ago.

I was immune to the metallic smell of blood. The dead eyes of the men still gave me the chills, and I avoided making eye contact. I was waved into the basement and found Adrian, Delmar, and Castille talking by an opening in the wall, emitting a foul odor. Large stones from the wall were strewn on the floor.



By the rancid smell, it was definitely an access to the sewers. Castille looked up, and I dreaded what she was going to say.

“Eryk, I need you to harvest the essence from the men here, just the enemies. I do not have time to do it myself. Here,” she handed me her essence collector, and I was confused. Happy would be a better word, as I was not going into the sewers. I turned over the disc that was twice the diameter of mine in my hands. Castille snapped, “Do you not know how to use it?”

Panic welled up. Was this a test? Did she suspect I had taken the essence from the others? I played stupid, “No, I have never used this,” I indicated the device I held. “The only magical item I have ever used was the translation amulet in training.”

Castille studied me for just a moment, eyes narrowing slightly. “Were you able to charge the amulet?” I nodded. “It is the same. Just keep the center of the collector between the heart and head, rest it on the body, but keep it level. If you don’t, the formed essence will roll off the disc.”

She did not give any more of an explanation as she went into the opening, followed by Delmar, Adrian, Konstantin, and two members of the city guard. There were three bodies in the basement, and I moved to the first one. He had been wearing fine chain mail, but it had not saved him from a spear to the heart. Not that using a spear inside the confines of a house would have been my first choice.

I laid the disc and was interrupted as Firth came down the stairs, “Did they already head in?”

“Castille was leading them into the sewers,” I pointed at the destroyed wall.

“I will not let them have any fun without me,” Firth grumbled as he made his way to the opening. If Firth thought trudging through other people’s shit was fun, I needed new friends. The other men started moving the bodies of the dead legionnaires and the mage and his family outside. I used the collector on the enemies and ended with one apex strength essence. Three major essences, one each of power, endurance, and quickness. And ten lesser essences that were a mix of strength, constitution, and endurance. I put all of them into a bag. Fourteen of eighteen bodies had given an essence.

I started helping move the bodies. Outside, there was a cart to take them away. Wylie noted dead bodies in a city during a siege spread disease, so we



needed to get them buried outside the city before the enemy arrived and surrounded the walls. I noticed Mage Gregor walking toward us on the road with nine of his men at his back, walking in a three-by-three square.

Orson, our company's other scout, went to talk with him since all our leadership was kneedeep in shit. They were too far away to overhear, and I continued back into the residence to remove more bodies. I asked Wylie, "Do we have to clean up the blood too?"

"No, when Castille returns, she will hire some citizens to do it. The Empire owns this building. The Displacement Mage just gets to live here as part of his extensive compensation," Wylie said while we carried the top and bottom half of a body outside on a bed sheet. The residence was extremely lavish from what I had seen in my time so far in the Telhian Empire. The furniture was exotic wood, the library was filled with leather-bound books, every room had a woven rug, and the bedrooms looked almost modern to my eye. Of course, everything was marred by blood and body parts.

When we got outside on this trip, Mage Gregor was getting animated, and from the wisps of the conversation, he did not sound happy that Mage Castille had traveled into the sewers to search for the assassins. I think he was mostly worried about being the only mage left to defend the city from the approaching army.

On the next trip, we went upstairs and grabbed the last body. I recognized the man, and it was the third judge in the Tribunal I attended when I returned with the remains of Durandus' men. "It looked like he was killed defending his family," Wylie muttered. I noticed the blood stains of bodies already removed by others. We loaded him onto a bed sheet and carried him outside with the others.

Four of Gregor's legionaries went into the basement as we brought the mage's body to the cart. Gregor left with the rest of his men. I still had Castille's essence collector on my back and was curious to know what the mage would yield. But it seemed Castille's policy was only to harvest the enemy, not our own. I asked Orson, who was cursing up a storm after Mage Gregor left, "Orson, should I harvest all the bodies for essence? Castille only told me to collect the enemy."

A highly irritated Orson replied, "Castille believes if you take the essence from a person, they are weaker when they are reborn into their next life. If you want to give your essence to your family when you die, just let her know. She will

arrange it if she can,” Orson replied hastily before going into the residence and following Gregor’s men. Twelve men of the company stood covered in blood while civilians took the carts away.

There was some uncertainty, so I offered, “How about six of us remain here, and the rest go to the villa to eat and clean up? When you are fed and clean, come back and relieve us.”

I picked the men I knew to return first. Brutus, Mateo, Felix, Pavel, Regis, and Wylie. It felt awkward being the least experienced person in the group to give an order—or maybe it was a suggestion. They followed it, and we were left. I told three men, Donte, Benito, and Linus to go to the basement and stand guard over the passage.

I remained outside with two legionaries I had not talked much with, Blaze and Caius. Blaze was the best archer in the company, and Caius was not too far behind. Caius was also deadly accurate with a pilum out to fifty paces. We stood in the sun while brushing away flies, trying to land and lay eggs on our blood-soaked uniforms.

Caius asked, “Did you actually kill five men to Konstantin’s two?” There was a note of disbelief in his voice. I had learned that Konstantin was probably the best raw fighter in the company.

“No, just four. The last one killed herself,” I replied, trying to sound modest.

Blaze injected, “She was so dazzled by your skill, she just jumped on your blade? Maybe we should put you at the front of an army, and you can conquer the world for the Empire, the great Satis Galdio!” He said in good-natured teasing, using the nickname I had been saddled with.

I countered, “She was the last one standing and did not want to be captured,” I said softly, reflecting that I did not think I would be brave enough to sacrifice myself in such a manner. I had to respect the dwarf woman.

Silence reigned for a while until Mateo and Felix came strolling down the road. I released Blaze and Caius to return to the villa. I guess I was somehow in charge. Brutus, Pavel, and Regis returned next, and I sent them to the basement. Wylie came a half hour later, eating a large bun sold on carts in the city. He handed me one from inside his armor with a big smile. I gave him a curt thank you as I left to be the last one to return to the villa.

It was late evening, and I thought I deserved to take a side trip to the baths. I had only walked maybe fifty yards when a shout came from behind me, "Castille's back." I froze mid-step and slowly returned.

As they emerged from below, we all kept our distance as the smell was horrendous. "Where is everyone?" Castille asked.

I answered from a safe distance, "I sent half the men back to wash and eat. When they returned, the others went. I was the last one." I pulled the pouch and held my breath as I approached and handed her the essences and her collector before backing away. I then continued, "Fourteen essences from the eighteen dead men."

Castille nodded, "Fourteen of eighteen. A good ratio for how long they were dead. We were very unfortunate only to yield three of seven from yesterday." She held my eyes, and I sensed her evaluating me. She broke the stare and announced to the men who did not travel with her, "They collapsed part of the sewer, so we could not pursue. They have a very strong air mage with them. We will need to continue searching the city till we find them. We have three days before the enemy surrounds the city. We can not have that air mage inside our walls waiting to strike."

She turned and walked down the road with her chin high like her shit didn't stink. The other urine and feces-soaked members followed, and I was glad that I had my own room at the villa.

I took a different path, not wanting to walk in their wake. I headed toward the lower city baths just in case our leaders thought to stop in the upper city baths.