

## A Soldier's Life

### Chapter 41: Discipline

The lower city baths had a number of regulars and civilians. As I entered, they eyed me in curiosity in my bloody legionnaire armor and clothes. There was only a large communal shower here—no hot soaking tubs. The young boy attendant approached me. “Three copper for a rinse and seven to wash your armor and clothes,” he informed me.

“Do you have any soaking tubs?” I asked looking quickly over the array of naked men showering.

“Sorry, legionnaire. We only have two private tubs, and both are in use. Everyone is here because the water rationing will start soon,” the young boy said.

I nodded and stripped down. I handed him two large coppers, “Please make a double effort on the cleaning. Do you have an oil for the leather?”

“Yes, legionnaire! I will take care of it,” he snatched the coins and bundled my gear and clothes together. I went to reach for one of the scrubbers and used soaps, but the boy said, “Wait! I will get you a new scrubber and block.” The boy moved my things to a back room and returned with an abrasive brush and a new block of hard soap. The brush was not new, just clean. The ones on the communal shelf I had been about to grab had small growths of black mold.

I gratefully took the clean abrasive brush and a new bar of soap. This bar was free of prior users’ hair embedded in it. The next time I used the common baths, I was bringing my own soap. I moved to an open shower. I was taller than most men. The average height of men in the Empire was around 5’7”, and at almost 6’1”, I was tall compared to the men around me. My shoulders were square from my training, and they moved aside as I walked to an open spigot. The soldiers around me were muscled but lean as I stood between the two of them in the cold trickle of water as I began to scrub.

A regular with short black hair to my right asked, “We heard the portal mage was killed. Is it true legionnaire?”

"It is. This blood I am cleaning off of me is from the cleanup. We got about half the infiltrators, but some remain in the city," I replied without thinking. I realized I should have restrained myself from giving too much information. The Displacement Mage had been under the protection of Legion men, so it was a failure on our part to protect him.

The guard on my other side grunted hoarsely, "They will begin rationing at the next meal, trust me."

"So soon? I heard the Bartirdians are still a week away. We can still get shipments along the road," the guard on the other side added.

"Unlikely. The men in the east tower at the Tarder's Gate say their griffin riders scouts can already be seen," the gruff guard replied. I knew we expected the army in about three days, but I remained silent and listened to the soldier's banter.

"The west gate is packed with those with enough sense to flee," another soldier offered. "We have been searching the wagons and confiscating half their food."

A guard on the other side questioned, "The general is allowing that?"

"He is paying them a few silver, but he ordered it done. I am more concerned that the entire staff at the Summer's Flowers has left. Best brothel in the city," another man griped.

"You mean the only one you can afford!" barked another man who had to dodge a scrub brush. The conversation devolved into what constituted a good brothel. I finished scrubbing. My clothes were not finished, so I went and sat in another room with cold stone benches to air dry.

The young boy who washed my clothes handed me a towel and apologized, "We are no longer burning wood to heat this room and the water. Give me another hour to finish cleaning your clothes and armor." He rushed away, and I waited. I heard the echo of conversation from the showers but ignored it. When my clothes and gear were brought, I tipped the boy another large copper for his effort.

He had wrung out my clothes, but they were still damp. I made my way to the villa, and the city seemed to accept its inevitable fate. Several civilians were leaving toward the west gate with large packs on their backs. Without the

portal mage, resupplying the soldiers was going to be impossible. Konstantin had said when they surrounded the city, they would have set up a magic array that would have prevented the portal stones from working, but I guessed they couldn't wait.

By the tension and thickening fear in the city, the Bartiradian assassination of the Displacement Mage had done more than just cut us off from the Empire. The city guards at the entrance to the upper city had been doubled. I reached the villa to find a flurry of activity. The company was hauling in casks of water and food from the citadel nearby. I approached and asked, "What is happening?"

Mateo answered, wheeling a cask into the villa, "The Citadel guard is being moved to the upper city by order of the Baron's Advisor to protect the residences of the nobility from inevitable looting. They abandoned their barracks in the Citadel, and Lirkin told us to grab everything we could before they realized they needed it." He laughed, wheeling the wine cask inside.

Was this an every person for themselves siege? I did not think we would last too long if it turned out that way. I went to my room to drop my gear and started helping everyone. Our villa was in the orchards and gardens adjacent to the Citadel. The Citadel was the central fortification of the city. It was also the residence of the count who ruled the city and where he housed his royal guards. The last count was dead, and now an interim baron was running the city. It was my understanding that the baron left the city to join the army that was going to rescue the city and wipe out all the Bartiradians sieging it.

It all sounded extremely complicated and may make a great tragic play, but I would have preferred not to live through it. I dropped my gear in my room, stripped my armor, and went to help. The citadel was only a hundred yards from our villa, and I went into a heavy oak door in the fortification. I followed everyone else down into their storage room. It was massive, easily a hundred feet long and forty feet wide.

The stone shelving was polished, and hundreds of crates, bags, and casks lined the series of shelving. Large glow stones in the ceiling lighted the space. Wylie elbowed me softly, "Come on, Eryk. We need to grab as much before they realize it." I picked up a sixty-pound sack labeled as flour and walked back to the villa. The line of men carrying and pushing foodstuffs had stopped outside the villa. Castile and the company leaders had returned from the baths and were staring at us.

Delmar spoke for the group, "Just what the in a demon's asshole do you think you are all doing!" His voice started soft but gradually increased into a scream. We were a bunch of kids with their hands in the cookie jar.

Regis was at the front of the line and spoke, "Lirkin said to grab what we could." It did not sound very convincing. Castile looked over the line, made eye contact with each person, and then went inside the villa, not saying anything.

A quick conference between Delmar and Adrian, and then Delmar spoke, "Bring it inside. BUT NO MORE TRIPS unless ordered."

I walked into the kitchen to bring the flour down to the larder. Castile was talking with Lirkin in the corner of the kitchen. I didn't linger to overhear and went and deposited the flour and then retreated to my room.

I secured the room and tried to study my healing spell form book, but fatigue overtook me, and I fell asleep with the book in my lap. A loud banging on the door woke me, "Eryk, food. Dress for patrol." The voice belonged to Konstantin. I suited up and met everyone in the large dining room as we did the nightly ritual. The food was a dense bread with a thick stew. The stew was mostly meat with a few purple potatoes.

As we ate, Castile climbed up on the table, surprising all of us as she paced its length, obviously unhappy. I had never seen her angry, so maybe she was angry. After walking two lengths, she spoke, "We are in Jupiter's shit storm. The heart of it! You know I appreciate the initiative, as stupidity can get everyone killed. The actions today were idiocy beyond compare. The lower city is as tight as a witches' arse, and the looting will begin tonight. Keeping order is going to be a full-time occupation for the city guards and army. THEN I COME HERE AND FIND MY OWN MEN LOOTING THE CITADEL FOR FOOD!"

Ok, she was definitely angry by her tone, and I was not the only one shocked. She paused in the complete silence and calmed, "Not only did I already secure enough food for us to make it the month, but the citadel guards could have attacked and killed one of you and had just cause!"

She paced the table, "Lirkin, you are relieved of cooking duties. Lysander will take over." The whole table groaned, and I knew that was because I had often been informed that Lirkin was the only decent cook among our number. He had cooked for a baron's son before joining the legion.

Castile stopped the groans with a look and continued, "The regulars will be on guard at the sewer entrances. We are not going into the sewers to find the Bartiradians." No one cheered because there was a feeling there was going to be a 'but.' "We will be continuing our night patrol of the upper city, and until the army comes to siege the city, you will each also be patrolling the lower city for five hours during the day."

She began pacing again and announced, "No one leaves the villa without permission, and no one travels alone in the city starting now. We believe maybe twenty Bartiradians survived the attack on the Displacement Mage. Some were injured, but the signs we found in the sewer indicate they have a healer and powerful air mage amongst them. Those who witnessed the carnage saw what the air mage could do to a body. We believe," she spun slowly to look everyone in the eye, "they will try to kill the other two Legion mages in the city." She was referring to herself and Gregor. She continued, "Konstantin believes they are smart and will work to thin our company before attacking me directly."

She let that sink in before she stepped gracefully off the table onto a chair and then the floor and walked away. Adrian announced patrol groups and their routes through the city. "Eryk, Brutus, Mateo, and Wylie. You have Veritas Street from the main road to the west gate." My confusion could not be hidden.

I interrupted Adrian, "I do not understand. Who is in charge of our group?"

Adrian smirked and looked me in the eye. His dark brown eyes showed mirth, "You are. When a group is announced, the leader is the first person mentioned. We think you can handle it."

Damn it. This was because I took charge outside the residence of Displacement Mage after the cleanup. I looked at the three men around me—I guess under my command. Brutus and Wylie had huge grins on. Mateo looked bored. I processed and then ordered, "I want everyone equipped with a short sword, buckler, dagger, and spear. Bring a small canteen of water only." I pointed at Mateo, knowing he liked to mix a little alcohol in to give his water flavor. "Be back here in fifteen minutes."

After three weeks in the company, I was already being given responsibility beyond carrying around potions.

## Chapter 42: Growing Pains

While my squad went to gear up, Konstantin walked over to me. He was surely coming to give me some wisdom, but instead, I pleaded, "Why me?"

He arched his eyebrows in amusement. "Eryk, you showed yourself to be capable multiple times. In the dungeon, surviving Durandus, in the basement against Bartiradians, and then directing the men to a rotation while we explored the sewers."

"I have only been with Castile for a few weeks. Everyone has logged more time than me," I argued.

"Eryk, you are in charge of just three men doing our safest patrol route. We are giving you the easiest, most docile pony to ride. If you fall off, then Castile can minimize her losses," Konstantin explained. "Now you can keep two healing salves and two minor potions in your space. Everything else is coming out. When you get back from patrol, see Delmar, and you can store them again."

I removed the potion racks, took the four potions out, and put them back into my space. Konstantin then gave me the expected wisdom, "Eryk, keep to the main street and never split the group. Keep all four of you together at all times. Most of the buildings in the area you are exploring are abandoned and empty. The regulars should have swept them all during the day, so do not expect much action. If you find anyone past curfew, just question them, and angrily order them home. A legionnaire yelling at them is usually enough to set fire to their pants." Konstantin muttered as he walked away, "Although you did fall off your first horse."

Mateo and Wylie arrived together, followed by Brutus. We headed down through the orchards and past the checkpoints. The city guardsmen were tense as this would be the first night the city was aware the Bartiradian army was marching.

On the main thoroughfare, I ordered, "Brutus to the front. You are best with the spear. Mateo, to the left because you are right-handed. Wylie, you are on the right because you think you always are. I will be in the back, diamond formation, spear's length apart."

Wylie retorted, "If you can name one time I was wrong, you can have the last of my griffin jerky, Eryk."

Mateo laughed loudly, "Oh, let me count the times!"

"Mateo! Come on; we are friends! No, helping the new pack leader here," Wylie pleaded jokingly.

"Give me the jerky, and I won't help him," Mateo laughed, but Wylie pulled a wrapped bundle from under his chest piece, took a piece for himself, and tossed it to Mateo. The bag was circled around the four of us until it was empty. The griffin jerky was one of the best things I had eaten since arriving in the world of Desia.

We reached Veritas Street, and the sun was setting. There was not much daylight left, "Let us head down and stay in the middle of the street." The curfew required everyone to be inside after sunset. As we walked, civilians hurried home, most carrying bundles with them. The oil street lamps had been lit, but only every other one. It was a way to ration the oil in lieu of the siege.

At sunset, we started stopping people and questioning them. I found myself doing the same thing Konstantin had done when he trained me. After each encounter, I would ask the men questions. I found it was a good way to discover something I may have missed. We walked up and down the our patrol route. At the west gate, seven city guardsmen were stationed at the barred city entry point. The guardsmen could also see us walking the entire route, so if we got into trouble, they could help us. I really was on the kiddie patrol route. And I had no trouble with that at all.

I remained in the back all night but cycled the other three. After a while, checking behind me every thirty steps became a habit. Sometimes, I checked in between as well to make it appear random. That was one thing Konstantin had repeatedly said, 'on patrol, do not be predictable.' To go along with that, we did not walk the length of the road back and forth but sometimes turned around and headed back.

On one such quick turn, we caught a man rushing across the street. Wylie sprinted after him and caught him before he reached an alley since he was burdened with a heavy load. It appeared he had a bag heavy with silver cutlery, candlesticks, and two medium mirrors. The mirrors shattered when Wylie tackled him. He was definitely a thief, and we dragged him to the guards

at the tower to handle him. That was our only real excitement for my first night as a patrol leader.

As the crack of dawn appeared above the city walls, we headed back to the villa. We had slightly burnt bread and watery oatmeal filled with candied fruit in the kitchen. The whole company was suffering. Wylie chirped, "I hope not all the cart vendors fled the city. If they did, I am going to starve." He still forced down the food, lathering the bread in a quarter inch of butter. It wasn't Lysander's fault. The only thing he knew how to do well was boil and mash potatoes. I admit it was an apt punishment for looting the stores of the citadel.

Adrian gave me all the potions to store in my space to extend their shelf life. I would have to pull them again before the squads went on night patrol. Adrian said Castile's squad found two of the Bartaridans hiding in an attic. Both were killed by Castille and the men with her, but if they had all split up into pairs, it was going to make finding them all extremely difficult. It was obvious Castille wanted the threat of the air mage to be dealt with soon by her efforts.

The lower city patrol was another part of our punishment, but it was not as bad as it sounded. Each unit had to make a zig-zag trip through the lower city, about a four-mile route. After being on our feet all night, it would not be too much fun, but it would only take about two hours. I volunteered my squad for the first route. Mateo grumbled discontentment, but it would allow us to get continuous sleep and edible food in the city for the rest of the day.

The patrol went quickly, and we got mystery meat pies from a vendor. Brutus was sure it was horse meat, but Mateo argued it was a rat. Since the chunks of meat were so large, I ruled in favor of Brutus. It was still better than what Lysander was preparing for lunch. I actually think it was a conspiracy, as there was no way someone could be that bad at cooking. Mateo warned me not to complain, or I would end up helping Lysander do the cooking.

When we got back, I reported to Delmar so he could send the next squad out. I retreated to my room and secured the door. I got comfortable on my bed and pulled out my four essences. It had been long enough that I could assimilate another one.

They felt solid in my hands as I rolled them. I had the large one, which was an affinity for one of the magics. The dark purple major essence of strength and two minor essences, one dark yellow dexterity and one dark orange one of power. I knew I was going to try the magic affinity essence even before I pulled them all out. I sent the other three back and held the ball.

Black and gray swirls flowed around the surface of the brown ball. It gave the ball life while it emitted a strong glow. Holding it, I could feel the power within, yearning to be consumed. I dropped it into my mouth and felt a warmth spread from the ball throughout my body.

At first, it was euphoric, but then my muscles spasmed. I rolled in the fetal position and shoved my griffin feather pillow into my face as I started screaming in real pain. It felt like I was being pulled apart. No, something was trying to fill me, and there was no room—so it was making room.

I started swearing violently into the pillow as my body started sweating uncontrollably. My muscles clenched, and it was too painful to move significantly. I was helpless as I tried to ride out whatever was happening. I thought about screaming for help but kept the pillow over my face. I was starting to feel fairly certain my heart would explode as I could hear it pounding in my ears at a tempo well beyond a safe limit.

My bladder released without me being able to hold back. I managed to keep my bowels contained, at least. Minutes passed, and I finally started to feel the pressure alleviating. I rolled out of bed and dragged the bedding to the floor to try and save the mattress from the urine. My clothes were drenched in sweat. It looked like I had saved the mattress—no wet spots. The cold stone floor also felt very nice on my heated body. I curled into a ball and passed out.

I woke late in the day with a thirst I had never experienced before. I drank the large canteen, filled it from my space, and drank it again before my thirst satiated. I stripped and put on clean, dry clothes, then bundled the filthy urine-stench clothes and blanket into a roll. I would be slightly embarrassed having them washed, but it needed to be done. I also smelled beyond ripe. I almost could not stand my own smell. It almost matched Castile and the others emerging from the sewers.

I sat at the desk as I pondered my life choices. I think I understood what had happened. It had been simple when I thought about it. The magic affinity, whatever it had been, was one I had not had. I had an effectual zero in the attribute. So, the essence had made a space for itself on my aether core. Even now, I could feel the change when I used my limited aether manipulation skills. The expansion of my core still felt raw, and my aether core was healing itself with the new addition.

I really wanted to know what I had gained by racing to a tablet, but we could only travel in groups when we left the villa, and it would get back to Castile

that I had used a tablet. I would have to wait. I definitely needed to get to the baths. I opened the door and eventually found Lucian, Linus, and Benito would go to the upper city baths with me. After they caught a whiff of me, they kept their distance from me as we walked. I was looking forward to getting clean once again.

## Chapter 43: Enemy at the Gates

As we walked to the baths, Linus asked from a safe-smelling distance, “How was your first night in charge, Eryk? Did you have to chase someone into the sewer?”

I was walking behind the group so they didn’t have to smell me, “Something like that. I mistook a bedpan for a clothes-washing basin,” I fabricated a tale similar to something I heard Firth tell about one of his trips to a brothel.

They started laughing and thankfully dropped the subject. I listened to their tales of their overnight patrol. Nothing too exceptional happened, they stopped three break-ins and turned the criminals over to the city guard. The holding cells were over capacity in the city, so the prisoners were tasked with constructing barricades to be used in the city.

We arrived at the baths, and I embarrassedly asked for my clothes bundled in a blanket to be washed. The young woman recognized me from when I broke in over a week ago after returning from my swamp excursion.

I pulled her aside to explain why my clothes were filthy, “I am sorry about this, but my legion mates tossed my clothes and blanket in the pig pen. I could not get them clean. An entire silver bonus if you get the smell completely out,” I said pleadingly. Her eyes brightened at the incentive, and I noticed she was the only one working. “Where is everyone? Were there not three of you last time I was here?”

She nodded, “They left with their families yesterday afternoon. About half the city is gone now. My parents died two winters back, and my only other family is in Bartiradian lands.”

“So you are alone in the city?” I asked the young woman with a mildly suggestive tone. She was plain-looking but not unattractive. I guessed her age to be close to Renna, about 19.

"I live with my older brother, who is a guard in the lower city," she said, blushing slightly. She focused on my clothes, scrunching her nose, "I can boil the bundle with lye, white ash, and oil scents. It worked on the last group you had come through here smelling this foul."

"Great! Can you wash what I am wearing separately as well?" I said while removing my clothes. She seemed uncertain as she was the only one working and had a lot of piles of laundry to do. I produced two silver coins, one for the bath, one for her bonus, and one large copper as an additional bonus, "Please?" I asked, handing her the coins. She nodded, and I did catch her eyes look down for a moment. I still was not accustomed to the fact that nudity was not a taboo in the Empire.

She handed me a new bar of soap and a clean scrubber. Unlike the baths in the lower city, everyone got new soap and a clean scrubber in these baths. "Thank you. What is your name?" It actually seemed a little absurd to ask her name in my state.

"Carina," she said shyly, tossing my clothes in a woven basket, trying not to touch the foul-smelling ones.

"Thank you, Carina," I said with a reassuring smile and moved to the showers. My companions had already cleaned in the showers and moved into the communal hot tub. I spent a much longer time scrubbing my skin raw to remove the scent of whatever the apex magic essence did to me. I settled into the heated pool with the others. I think I had been successful in removing the odor from my body.

My skin was raw from the scrubbing and a bit sensitive to the hot water, but the heat was divine on my sore muscles. The training did not get me sore any longer, but my spasming muscles from consuming the magic affinity essence had done a number on me. My body felt like the first day in the legion training barracks. I was quite good at hiding my soreness but settling into the water, I let out an audible sigh.

"You should just visit the brothels, Eryk. Too much work in pursuing the young bath girls. And then, half the time, you have to deal with their irate lovers," Lucian advised with a smirk. Lucian was the horse master for the company and taught me to ride.

Benito remarked with mirth, "Yeah, you rubbed yourself red, and I doubt that she wants to deal with a tomato of your bulk. She probably prefers a smaller

and more handsome package,” he indicated himself. Benito was the shortest man in our company at about 5’5”. He preferred a body shield and a short sword in combat to serve in the shield wall.

Linus, our company medic, said, “Our young friend has more sense than the both of you. Benito, you spent nearly half your silver from the snake at the brothel! And the other half getting cleansed of the crotch crickets!”

“It was still worth it!” Benito pouted, “For Mars’ blade, we might not see the end of the week. I prefer my coin spent and my urges satisfied.” Benito’s reminder of our dire circumstances killed the verbal jousting.

My companions left and informed me they were headed two buildings down for food. I could meet them there, and they wished me luck with the young woman. It was not Carina who came and told me my clothes were ready but the older woman who ran the bathhouse.

She scolded me, “My girls can do better than a muscled brute. I would prefer if you and your Legion men avoided my baths altogether! I suppose the enemy is going to sabotage the aqueduct when they arrive, and my baths will be shut down. Until then, legionnaire, I suggest the lower city baths!” She dropped my two wicker laundry baskets at my feet to emphasize the point I was not welcome. I take she did not like soldiers for some reason.

I dressed and noted that my clothes and blanket now had a strong floral scent. Carina did an excellent job. I decided, the Mistress of the baths be damned, if I wanted to take a bath in fancy upper city baths, I would.

I met the others at a small café style restaurant. They were eating something akin to a thick taco, and I joined them. I mentioned, “Life seems too normal for a city that is about to be attacked.”

Lucian spoke as he ate, “The civilians don’t care. This city has been passed back and forth a dozen times in the last hundred years. When the fighting starts, they will hide in their basements, come out when it is all over, and resume their lives no matter who controls the city.”

It made sense now why that bookstore vendor did not care to flee. I asked, “So, they will not loot the city if they conquer it?”

Lucian was shaking his head in the negative, “If they did, then it would be hard to find civilians who wanted to settle in the city so close to the border. It is just

the soldiers that pay the price in the border expansion wars with the Bartiradians. You could almost call it a war with civility!" He laughed at his joke.

"Now, when we fight the orcs of Boutan Caliphate, that is a bloody war of attrition," Linus added to the conversation.

Benito contributed his knowledge, "We haven't fought the Boutan orcs on the northern peninsula in a century. If we leave them alone, they will keep to their own."

Lucian disagreed, "Their Supreme Cleric has been pushing his people to settle the plains across the ocean to the west of the Telhian Empire. Even though the swamps separate our lands there, trust me, there will be war soon."

Benito laughed, "When have we ever not been at war? The Emperors have been trying to conquer all of Desia for two thousand years. Besides, the Esenhem Elves block the land passage to the peninsula."

"You are daft, Benito. Have you ever heard of a boat? How do you think they settled the western plains?" Lucian spoke in disbelief. I had not talked too much with Benito, but he did come off as a bit of an idiot.

Linus focused on me with a knowing smile and asked, "So, Eryk. No luck with the young bath attendant?"

I rolled my eyes at the question, "The Mistress of the baths warned me off."

The entire group started laughing. Lucian so hard his face turned red. Linus consoled me, "Well, this is the upper city, Eryk. She probably only works in the baths to land herself a wealthy patron. We are just men who swing big swords."

Lucien laughed, stood, and slapped me on my back, "Some bigger than others. Let us get back to the villa before Castile sends out a search party."

We had eaten enough to avoid Lysander's dinner tonight. My overnight patrol remained the same, and the night got interesting as a fire was set in one of the warehouses on our street not long into our patrol.

The first story of every building in the city was made from stone and mortar. The second and sometimes third floors were wood. The warehouse that was burning could not be saved, and the fire brigade was focused on just containing it and preventing it from spreading to other buildings.

As the fire brigade arrived, I ordered my men, "Let us keep an eye out in case this was set as a distraction. Keep in the center of the road, and do not watch the fire burn." Maybe I was being paranoid, but something felt off. I moved us toward the city's outer walls so we wouldn't be in the path of the smoke.

Brutus felt it, too, "Seems awfully convenient to have the warehouse burn down," as the flames started to reach higher and higher, and would easily be seen from anywhere in the city.

Two loud, shrill whistles rang out from a few streets away. That was the signal the Legion used to alert others that the enemy was near. Faint sounds of combat could be heard even with the fire and men trying to contain it nearby. Everyone looked to me for direction. "Form up tight behind me. Fast jog," I ordered as I broke into a jog, heading toward the sounds of combat.

We ran to the main thoroughfare and toward the upper city. It was just three streets down when we ran into the fighting. It was one of our patrols. The legionnaires were engaged with a dozen men. "Full Run!" I screamed as I bolted forward, ignoring the formation. My scream was to draw the attention of the attackers to give our men some relief.

On quick inspection, one of our men was already down, and two looked severely injured. The legion men had their backs to building, protecting the downed man. A spear flashed from over my shoulder, and then two more. Two of the three spears connected with the assailants. One was a chest strike, and the other a hip strike. Both targets collapsed and screeched in pain. With a spear in them they were effectively out of combat.

The odds were much better, seven of us versus eleven of them. I had miscounted, there were actually thirteen enemies. I didn't throw my own spear. Instead, I preferred to charge with it. My target was one of the attackers closer to our defending men. He was distracted, and I took him through the side, losing my spear two feet into his oblique and exiting out his belly. I released the spear, unable to retrieve it, and pulled my short sword, deflecting a slash from another man.

My men reached us, and in the dim light of the oil street lamps, the carnage of battle waged. My focus was not to let any of the enemy behind me. I was able to identify the four men we were trying to rescue. Orson, Lirkin, Blaze and Caius. Blaze was the man who was down. He was trying to hold his neck while blood oozed from the wound.

I didn't think as I yelled, "Form a wall around Blaze! Give me time to get to him." As if by magic, the six legionnaires pushed the attackers back, and I was able to kneel by Blaze and get him both the lesser potions from my storage space into his mouth. The blood was slowing, but I didn't have time to help further, as the effort to create space for me had gotten Brutus injured. It looked like Lirkin had a serious thigh wound, and Orson was fighting one-handed.

I joined the fray, and it turned into an exchange of blades. Another squad of men was running toward us, led by Firth. I could hear not what he was screaming, but the remaining attackers ran. I returned to Blaze and checked on him. He was unconscious but breathing, and the neck wound looked completely closed. The company medic, Linus, knelt with me, "I already used all our potions. What do you have left?"

"Just the two healing salves. Only good for closing surface wounds," I produced them and handed them to him. It wasn't long before Firth came back from his chase.

Firth addressed Orson, "How many attacked you?"

Orson responded immediately, "Thirteen."

Firth did a mental count, then spoke, "Five got away then." Firth started inspecting each of the men as I helped Linus with our wounded. When he was done, he sounded irritated, "Only five of the eight were Bartiradian soldiers by their clothing and callused hands. The rest were men that were probably insurgents assisting them from inside the city," he concluded.

Orson ordered the enemy to be moved together in a pile, and then we returned to the villa. The news was not good. Another squad had been attacked, and Flans was killed. The number of injuries also put a huge dent in our potion stock. Castile, Delmar, Konstantin, and Adrian had not returned yet either. They had tasked themselves with hunting down the air mage.

Toward morning, our leaders returned. They returned and had obviously battled with the state of their equipment—blood, cuts, and filth covered their clothes. As one of the squad leaders, I was called to report on the events of the night. No one was happy with losing Flans. Castile did not blame anyone, though. We were almost out of potions, which was extremely bad. Durandus had been the only healing mage in the city.

Adrian told us about their night, “We found the air mage. He got away and collapsed the aqueduct just outside the city. We managed to kill the seven soldiers with him, but he fled into the country outside the walls. If no one else fled the city, our best guess is that around ten Bartiradians infiltrators are left in the city now. Hopefully, the air mage does not return.”

Castile made some rapid decisions, “We will combine patrols for the night watch. Day patrols are canceled. Lirkin can resume his duties. I want rotations to the city wall, Adrian. The enemy should be arriving soon, and I was to know when. Send a message to Gregor and let him know I want to meet him here at the villa. Linus, take Eryk and see if any apothecaries are still functioning in the city, and get what supplies you can. Get all the potions to Eryk’s storage before you leave, and send me an accounting later.” Castile left to talk with Delmar and Adrian.

I went with Linus, and we scoped out the city’s apothecaries, but all had fled the impending siege of the city. Linus broke into one shop and was disappointed with what he found. All he found was some red aloe that could be used as a topical disinfectant.

We returned to the villa. I gladly went to my room to rest. There was some relief to see Lirkin cooking merrily and whistling to himself. I secured my room and stripped off my armor. In the fighting hours ago, I was shocked to find that I had taken a shallow cut to my bicep. The blood was dried, but I did not remember receiving it during the fight. I closed my eyes and tried to replay the fight in my head. There! In an exchange, I remembered that I had deflected a swing with my buckler and felt a sting, but I did not think the blade reached flesh then. I felt better remembering how I received the injury and thought about how I could avoid the same mistake in the future.

I cleaned the injury and used the red aloe we had just procured. It was going to leave a nice scar. I did not study the healing spell form, instead deciding to get as much sleep as possible. A knock woke me for dinner, and I gladly went to eat with everyone else. Even with the improved fare, the mood was still somber with the loss of Flans last night. The mood got darker when a city

guardsman rushed into the villa to alert us that the lead elements of the Bartiradian army were visible from the walls.

## Chapter 44: Firth's Brilliant Plan

I was seated between Brutus and Wylie when the city guard announced the enemy had arrived. Brutus murmured, "Damn, they must have run here to arrive so quickly."

Wylie gave his opinion, "No, it is probably just the lead elements. Two days and mounted men could have easily made a hundred miles on the road."

Brutus jested, "While as long as the horses can't fly, it won't matter. The regulars can hold the walls. It will all come down to how many mages they brought with them. Eryk, you were not here when Castile and Gregor were arguing over the city's defense. Durandus may have been a greedy fool, but he was a powerful wizard. From the shouts raining down the stairs, I guess things are not pretty."

Wylie added, "Do not worry, Brutus. I am sure Castile has a plan to keep most of us alive," he added jovially, while shoveling food into his face. I disliked that Wylie said, 'most of us.'

During the meal, Castile left with Adrian for the lower city to further strategize with Gregor and the Army's General at the Legion Hall. After dinner, my patrol was merged with Firth's patrol to give us eight legionaries. Firth took the lead, so I was removed from having to think too much. We did not talk much as we walked. I was slightly caught off guard when Firth did not lead us to our assigned patrol route of Venus Street and Vesta Street. Instead, we went into the lower city, and Firth guided us into an alley.

He talked softly to the seven of us, "I know where some Bartirdian collaborators are. I know you all want to get some revenge for Flans' death." Murmurs of agreement answered him. "Good. Now we will go in and search the house for the unaccounted-for Bartiadian soldiers." Nods of agreement and excitement swelled among our number. Firth added, "Hold your blade unless attacked. No killing unless necessary."

We left our spears in the alley, and Firth's plan was simple. Four of us would rush to the second floor, and four of us would search the first floor and then the basement. I was part of the second group with Brutus, Mateo, and Wylie.

We walked out into the street, leaving our spears in the alley as they would be difficult to use in a house. Firth walked four houses down and indicated a door. The houses in this section of the city were well maintained but not opulent like our patrol routes in the upper city. Brutus and Mateo rushed the door together and shouldered it open, storming into the dark house. Those of us who had glow stones held them for light.

Footsteps and curses could be heard on the second floor. Brutus went right, and Mateo left as they started their search of the first floor. I found the basement door while Firth and the others thundered up the stairs.

The basement was locked, and as I shouldered it, I could hear harsh whispering below. Just great, we had struck gold. I was at the forefront again. I heard fighting on the second floor as I struggled with my own door. Mateo arrived and heaved to no success. He pulled a hand axe on his belt and began hacking around the hinges, taking chunks of the door with each swing. Wylie and Brutus arrived as well, the first-floor search complete.

I whispered loudly, "Definitely some people down there. Last time, there were seven, and we took them unaware. They know we are coming." I looked at our small bucklers and wished we had taken the medium shields for the patrol. There was no time. The two hinges were free of the frame, and we removed the door from the other side.

A quarrel bolt thudded into Wylie's stomach as the door cleared the opening. Brutus did not hesitate to go first, tossing his glow stone and racing down the stairs after the man who shot Wylie. Mateo was behind him, and I quickly kneeled next to Wylie. It looked like a straight gut shot. "Don't move Wylie. Just lay down; you don't want the head shifting around inside of you. After the fighting, we can get the last healing potion from Linus and get you patched up." He nodded and moved to get comfortable.

I focused on the fight. I hurried down into the basement. A man with a crossbow was dead at the bottom, with a slash from shoulder to hip, and a stab wound in his heart. The wall was to my left, so the entire basement was open to my right. Brutus was cutting down another man, and Mateo was engaged with two more. A fourth man on the far side desperately tried to load

a crossbow but didn't seem to know how. I rushed the crossbowman, and one of Mateo's opponents broke to stop me.

It cost the man a slash from Mateo on his shoulder, but that was all the help he could give as his other opponent pressed him. The man blocked my path, and his shoulder wound was not serious. I needed to get to the crossbowman quickly, or one of us was going to take a bolt. Two exchanges with the man blocking me told me I was not getting by. I bull-rushed him, taking him by surprise as I drove his sword up and drove my shield into his face. I had assumed he would fall back and give me a path to the ranged threat, but the asshole grabbed my clothes and pulled me to the ground with him.

I released my short sword and went to my belt for my knife. He had the same thought, and we tried to hold each other at bay with one hand while trying to stab the other with a dagger. I was stronger and had the body position. The fear in his wide brown eyes as my blade pressed into his throat shook me a little. I was killing without hesitation.

A man doesn't die when you cut his throat. He bleeds and drowns in his own blood. I had to hold him down or risk his vengeance with the blade. I held him at bay as he choked on his blood and sprayed it into my face as he fought till his end. During my struggle, Brutus had finished his man and stabbed the crossbowman in the chest. Brutus hit a lung, and the crossbowman was foaming at the mouth as he struggled to breathe and desperately held the wound closed to prevent blood loss.

Mateo's opponent was injured and now outnumbered. My own foe was dead, and I stood, and all three of us faced the last man who slowly backed toward the stairs. A twang of a crossbow and then a thud to my back spun me around hard. Mateo swore, "Fuck, he must have had a healing potion."

I went down hard on my knees, a bolt tip protruding from my chest a few inches. It had struck my right shoulder and passed partway through me.

I quickly got my senses, though. I told myself I had endured pain this intense before. My right arm was useless since the bolt had ripped through the muscles in its path through my body. Mateo had returned and was ending the man who had shot me, and Brutus was handling the man close to the stairs. We won—I could rest. I reached and touched the tip of the bolt protruding from me in slight disbelief and shock.

My first thought was it was sharp. My second thought was, why did he have to shoot me? There were two other targets. In a daze, I turned to ask him, but Mateo had killed him with a blade under his chin, and into his brain. Mateo saw me approach and explained, "I am looking to see if he has any more healing potions on him, Eryk. He has to." He frantically searched the man's pockets and was getting frustrated.

I knew I was in mild shock, but my mind was crystal clear, "He doesn't have any potions on him, Mateo. He was a healing mage. There are no vials around his body. He didn't take a potion to heal himself, he used magic." Mateo swore and stood, seeing the truth of my words.

Brutus joined us and was inspecting the bolt through my body. I ordered him, "Go and find Linus in the city. Wylie needs that healing potion. He should also have a healing salve. We can pull this out and close my wounds with it on both ends." He hesitated, but I said angrily, "Go, Brutus!" He nodded, turned, and ran up the stairs.

"Mateo, go upstairs and help Firth and the others, it sounds like there is still fighting up there. I will be fine down here." I sat on a stool next to the dead healing mage to prove my point. He rushed up the stairs a few heartbeats later. My only thought was—healing mage? I only heard muted sounds from two floors up. I pulled my collector out of my space, painfully bent over, and placed the disc on his body. He was slumped against the wall, so the disc was angled as I activated it.

The familiar blue mist left his body and coalesced into a sphere. I marveled at the white misty pearl with swirls of gold and silver. It was beautiful. Then, it rolled off the collector and across the room. Shit, Castile had told me that would happen. I was too injured to get the body prone, though. My luck was terrible as the sphere rolled right between two crates filled with coal.

I walked cautiously and stiffly, as too much range of motion really fucking hurt. The shock from the injury and my training had killed the pain momentarily, but it was slowly magnifying with time. I found a broom and used the handle to tease the ball out from between the crates. I held it in front of me and admired it, getting lost in its soft glow and the movement of the metallic swirls. The allure of the power it contained was muted slightly by how I had obtained it. The wooden stairs shook as someone descended, and I sent the apex essence and the collector to my space. I could have gotten more from the warriors if I had not dawdled.

It was Firth coming down the stairs, and he voiced his anger on seeing my injury, “Bloody harpies tits, three injured. Castile is going to be pissed.”

“I sent Brutus to find Linus,” I said with effort.

“Good man,” he looked around the room. “Well, that makes eight total. This might have been the last of them in the city, so there is that. Didn’t expect to find them here, though. I just hoped to get information on where they were hiding from the collaborators.” He shook his head, “Let us get you upstairs with Wylie and Lysander. Lysander got stabbed in the thigh, all the way to the bone. He can not walk.”

I hobbled up the stairs carefully to find Wylie lying on the kitchen table, still with a bolt sticking out of his stomach, and Lysander sitting with a bloody wrap around his leg. Wylie chuckled, “Come to join the infirmary?”

I gingerly pulled a stool and sat carefully. “Yep, looks like no one died. Should we wrestle for the last healing potion?”

Lysander scoffed, and Wylie clucked with mirth, “The way our night has gone, it was probably already used on someone else.”

Linus came rushing in a few minutes later and assessed all of us before dealing with Wylie first. He cut the shaft, pulled it through, and then administered the last healing potion to him. He came to me next, “Eryk, that was a broadhead quarrel. It missed the bone, but your muscles are cut to shit, and the bleeding might drain into the chest cavity. If you have trouble breathing, let someone know immediately. You need a full healing potion for the extent of the damage. If we used a lesser potion, then the muscles might not knit themselves back together properly.”

He turned to Lysander, “You will not be doing any cooking on that leg,” he smiled at the terrible cook. “One of the lesser potions should heal you up as just one muscle was sliced. Castille keeps one on her person; if not, we will find one in the city.”

It was almost two hours before Castile, Adrian, Delmar, and Konstantin arrived. They had been hunting for the very men we found. Castile was beyond angry at Firth. She knew the healing mage was still in the city and planned to capture and use him during the siege to heal our men. Now, he was dead.

I did learn that two hours was too long to wait to harvest essence, as Castile did not even try. After Castile yelled at Firth in a lengthy tirade, she said to everyone present, "I am going to go beat some potions out of Gregor. Get these two to the villa in a cart."

As dawn broke, I was seated in a wagon being pulled by a mule. Lysander was sleeping in the wagon bed and somehow snoring, even with the bumpy ride and his wound, he was still able to sleep. I watched the civilians braving the morning streets to stare in awe at me while sitting on the tail of the wagon. I still had a frigging arrow through my shoulder.

## Chapter 45

When we got to the villa, Konstantin had a fine saw to slowly cut the rear of the bolt off. I was extremely uncomfortable waiting for the return of Castile. My breathing started to get strained, and the wound tightened, making any movement painful. I understood they wanted to wait to remove the bolt until they had a healing potion, but it wasn't very pleasant, and being stoic was taking a lot of mental energy.

I awaited Castile, but it was Linus who returned with the healing potions. Lysander was treated first. It was a quick rub into the open wound, and then he drank the remainder. I was a bit more of a project.

Linus looked at the bolt. It had been cut off in the back, "We are just going to pull it the rest of the way through Eryk. The blood has coagulated a lot in the three hours, so it is going to be painful. Take this and drink it later," he handed me one of the cure poison potions.

"Was the bolt poisoned?" I asked with the potion in my hand.

"The healing potion is going to focus on the tissue and correct the damaged muscle. Normally, it would also handle any infection, but that bolt has been inside you for hours. So, after I pull it, we will pour the potion into the wound rather than have you drink the sure poison potion. The cure potion is just insurance as the healing potion may not have enough aether left to cleanse your blood after it heals the wound." He explained, "A potion works its way out from where it is administered until it expends its aetheric stores. Usually, drinking it is fine if the wound is not too severe, or you could take two potions. We only have one," he held it up.

He didn't wait any longer and just reached out and pulled. My body held the shaft for a moment before it pulled out. I grunted, holding in a scream as that was what a stoic man should do. If I had been alone in private, I would have definitely screamed.

Linus worked quickly, getting my armor off and clothes as my wound oozed dark blood. He quickly cleaned the area with water and then red aloe. He then carefully opened the hole wider with tongs to make sure no potion was lost. That hurt more than anything so far, and I let out a cathartic scream—forgetting all about being manly. He carefully poured the entire vial into the wound, and I felt the warmth spread and the muscles heat as the magic worked to repair them.

After a few minutes, Linus inspected the work, “You look good. Three inches lower, and you would have been in trouble. Let's check mobility.” I went through ranges of motion, and the shoulder was tight, but I had no issues. Linus reminded me to drink the potion of cure poison in an hour or so and left.

I locked my door again. I was lying on my bed with the griffin pillow under my head. I was rolling what I thought was an apex healing essence in my hand. I was only hesitant to consume it because of the nasty surprise the last apex essence had given me. What if my theory was wrong and the pain was not from a new magic affinity establishing itself on my core? Could I go through that again? Also, I was not even sure this was a healing essence. It just came from a mage that could heal.

A knock at my door disturbed me, and I sent the pillow and essence to my storage. I opened the door, and Firth was there, “You know, Eryk, if you keep locking yourself in here, people are going to create rumors about what you are doing in here alone.”

I shrugged, “Sleeping without having to listen to a symphony of snoring is worth it.”

Firth got serious, “Just wanted to apologize for the patrol. I was not expecting the Bartiradians to be there.” He handed me a satchel, “some food, and you have off from tonight's patrols. You are on the wall at first light, though. Get some rest.” He turned and left.

I realized it was midday, and Firth had brought me lunch. There was even a pouch of griffin jerky in there. We had been told it was all gone. I resumed my

previous position with the essence in my hand and munched on the jerky. When the jerky was gone, I popped the essence in next, committing to it.

I braced myself for another unpleasant experience. Instead, as the essence dissolved in my mouth, my skin cooled, and I got goosebumps. The coolness spread to my breath, and I shivered. The feeling slowly disappeared, and that was it—much more manageable than my last affinity essence. I was fairly certain that had been a healing essence. I couldn't differentiate the affinities on my core, but it definitely added to something already there. That also confirmed that I had awoken a new essence with the brown apex essence.

I immediately pulled the healing spell form book out of my storage with a glow stone. The light from the covered windows was not enough to see clearly. I had studied this book for almost two weeks and had been frustrated. As I reread and studied the forms in the book, I felt it was possible. I put the book down and reviewed everything in my mind that Damian had taught me when I imprinted my dimensional space. Then, I returned to the reading. Making sure I was being careful about my intent and picturing the simplified spell forms from the book.

A knock and Mateo's voice came from the door, "Eryk, dinner is served." I heard him walk away and was grateful he had alerted me. I had been studying for hours, and my eyes were dry and aching from the effort. I cleaned the room and joined everyone.

Felix blurted, "Look, he is absolutely glowing!" Panic welled up—maybe my change was noticeable. Instead, it was just a joke about my large amount of alone time in my room.

Mateo added as I sat beside him, "He does smell funny. Does he smell funny to you, Pavel?" Pavel was on my other side and took a big sniff.

Pavel considered his words, "I do detect a faint scent of perfume." Everyone started laughing, but Pavel had a good nose. The perfume from my bed's prior occupant tended to linger for a while on my clothes. That was the end of the joking as Adrian started to assign the night patrols. As Firth had told me, I had the night off. No one seemed upset about it.

I returned to my room after visiting the privy as they geared up. Securing myself once again, I resumed my studies. It was late into the night, and I kept weighing whether or not I should get some sleep; then it happened. I was blurry-eyed and exhausted, but my need to learn to heal after being shot in

the back was too much. It felt like all the pressure I had been trying to force into me had just been released; the dam had broken, and I was now satisfactorily filled. I knew I had a new spell form, and it felt like I had correctly imprinted what I wanted on my aether core.

I took out a knife and cut a thin line on my forearm. I focused on the wound and my aether core together and pushed my aether into it. The thin line of red remained, but the flesh underneath pulled together. I wiped the blood away and found just smooth skin. Well, hairy skin but no cut—no scar.

I became a little masochistic as I cut and burned myself a few times to get comfortable with the healing ability. Closing a minor cut took less than a relative point of aether, a deep cut, maybe an entire point of aether. I was not stupid enough to damage muscle tissue or organs during my impromptu testing. When I finally fell asleep, I felt much better about my chances of surviving my legion tenure.

At first light, Konstantin banged on my door, “Eryk, you have slept enough. Wall duty after breakfast!” I scrambled to clean up and felt like an idiot for not storing the book last night. I had gotten so caught up in my testing that it had remained on the bed. I sent it with the pillow to my space and dressed. I took a short sword and the bow I had requisitioned with me as I made my way to breakfast. I did not need to carry the arrows as there were bins of arrows on the wall.

Everyone was tired from the patrol and was mechanically eating. It was not long before five of us headed to the wall. Konstantin leading with Pavel, Regis, Malcolm, and myself. I walked next to Konstantin and asked, “How were the patrols last night?”

“The upper city was fairly tame. The city guard had a number of issues in the lower city,” he said calmly as we walked.

There were a lot of citizens about—much more than normal. I asked, “Why is everyone so active so early today? Is that a sign of trouble to come?”

Konstantin nodded, “Nice observation, but no. There is a curfew from mid-day to sunrise. Everyone needs to get everything done in the morning. Especially get water. There are only four wells in the city. Be glad we are not tasked with guarding them as the civilians draw water. The wells can barely support the population.”

We reached the wall and climbed the stairs to our section. I asked another question of Konstantin, "Why only five of us today?"

Konstantin smirked, "Eryk, this is what happens when you spend all day in your room. We are only on the wall for show and to give the regulars a spell during the heat of the day. Five men are enough to do that. If there is an attack, we will group at the Legion Hall with Gregor's men. From there, we listen to the mages on where to go."

Fortunately, today was cloudy as we reached the top of the wall, and the morning had a cool, humid air to it. I was astounded at what I witnessed in the distance. Beyond the abandoned farms and buildings outside the walls below us, a pair of mounted griffins flew over an army.

"Shit," was all I managed to say. Hundreds of Bartiradians were setting up a sprawling camp.

The others laughed, and Konstantin gave his feedback. The griffins are not the true threat if that is what you are thinking, Eryk. Any flying mount is useless on the ground, and almost any strike on their wings brings them to the ground like rain in a storm. They are used as scouts and to relay messages when magic arrays prevent magic sending."

"Still, it would be amazing to ride one," I said, watching them glide in the skies just over a mile away.

Konstantin grunted in what sounded like a disappointment at my fascination. Pavel said, "You are too fat! All those riders are women and weigh less than half your beefy frame."

Konstantin affirmed the fact, "It is true. Griffins may be large but tire quickly with a heavy rider. Those riders are most likely slender elves and most likely women. That has been my experience anyway."

"Is it the same for the Empire? Do only women ride griffins here?" I inquired.

Konstantin seemed in a talkative mood. "Griffins are kept as pets for hunting. Some people do fly them. The Emperor doesn't like them. He has a cohort of drakes ridden by the Draconic Legion."

"How do you get selected for that job as a legionnaire," I asked jokingly.

Konstantin grunted, "They are more for show than combat. Fancy-suited legionaries to fly over parades or march in them. Taming a drake isn't as hard as a true dragon, but half the men in training die to their own mounts."

"That is not true," Regis voiced loudly.

Konstantin shrugged, and Regis continued, "I was almost selected for training. I had the attribute requirements on the tablet reading. I was just afraid of heights back then."

"You still are!" Pavel teased his fellow bowman.

"What are the stat requirements to train as a member of the Draconic Legion?" I moved closer to the tower for shade as the clouds evaporated.

"Besides the normal potentials, they look for forty-seventy in quickness, dexterity, and coordination. They also want a high empathy score as it helps in dealing with animals. My empathy is thirty-seven, and its potential is even higher," Regis boasted.

I thought this might be a good time to get answers on what attribute scores were good. "What does it even mean? I never saw a tablet reader before coming to the Empire. Why is it based on one hundred, for instance? Can you pass one hundred in potential?"

Konstantin stood, "Damn Errk, what kind of backward village did you come from?" I didn't answer. He scoffed, "I can forgive your ignorance, I guess. All Empire tablets are calibrated for humans. The epitome of human ability is determined at birth. If you are perfect in an attribute, they say your potential in that attribute will show as one hundred on the tablet's potential. Never seen it all my years, though."

Pavel butted in, "They say the Emporer has attributes over one hundred from consuming apex essences."

Konstantin looked annoyed, "With how many essences he consumes, it is not surprising." He looked at me. "The other races, if they use a tablet calibrated for a human, can have potentials over one hundred. I have seen a male elf evaluated with 122 in aether shaping and and a female orc with endurance and constitution over 110."

Pavel, Regis, and Malcolm were also listening intently. I asked, “So what is average for a human? In terms of the attribute and potential?”

Konstantin grunted, “There is too much variation to say definitive values. I would guess that most men’s physical values are in the twenties, with potential in the forties and fifties. But if you stop training, they are just as likely to go down unless you fortify them with an essence.”

I was not the only one with a confused look on his face. Konstantin laughed, “Ah, one of the great secrets of the wealthy and First Citizens! No harm in telling you. Maybe an example is best. Pavel, let’s say your strength is 30, and you have a potential of 70. You train for months and raise your strength to 50. If you take any strength essence, you will keep that 50 in your strength for years without putting in much effort. Without taking an essence and ending your training, your strength score will fall back to 30, maybe even lower if you are lazy.”

All of us were silent. Konstantin had a massive smile as something flashed in Regis’ eyes, he started to speak, but Konstantin cut him off, “Exactly, Regis. That is why Castile divides up the essences the way she does after talking with Adrian and Delmar. She tries to spread the attributes around to fortify the company’s scores.” His smile grew, “It is why we are one of the strongest of all the Mage Companies in the Legion.”

There was a long pause of disbelief before Pavel asked, “Why is this not common knowledge?”

Konstantin laughed, “It is to those who can afford essences! Also, the more people know, the more valuable essences become. I am sure in some lands, it might be common knowledge; in other lands, they like to keep people ignorant.” He looked pointedly at me.

As we walked back to the villa, I found I had a lot more respect for Castile and our commanders after we were relieved.

## **Chapter 46: Castile’s Plan**

After we returned from the wall, everyone removed the gear and went to sleep in the ballroom where their cots were. They had been on an eight-hour night patrol and then five hours on the wall watch, so they were exhausted, unlike

me, who was excited as I had just imprinted the healing spell form. I wanted to confirm that I could repair bones but was not dumb enough to break one to test my ability.

I changed out of my armor and helped Lirkin in the kitchen adjacent to my room for a time. I was thinly slicing a cold roast so it could go in a pita-like bread for lunch with marinated vegetables. As I was helping Lirkin, Delmar found me, "Eryk, we do not need you to hold the potions. We do not have any more healing potions, and the remaining stamina and cure poison have been distributed." I nodded in understanding. "You can ask Lirkin here what perishables to store for now." Delmar left, and Lirkin was already thinking.

"Never been on the inside in a siege," he was in deep thought. "Something that will spoil and will not be available during the siege," he continued to think. "I know! Butter! It goes rancid in the damn bloody humid heat. You all consume five bricks at every meal, and most of the milk cows in the city will be slaughtered for meat. I will get you some freshly churned butter from the Citadel." He was excited, "Keep it a secret from the men; otherwise, they might nag you. How much space do we have to work with?"

I showed him on the counter, gesturing with my hands. A brick of butter was about three by three inches and six inches long. The box in my space was a fifteen-inch cube, so we estimated seventy blocks of butter. That was going to be a lot of calories. After lunch, I took a nap and, as promised, was awoken to add a lot of butter to my storage. Lirkin brought two hundred blocks from the Citadel, and I could fit the seventy expected blocks in the crate I reserved for legion goods in my dimensional space. The rest of the butter would be used in the next week for cooking.

I went to train in the gardens rather than remain in my room. Now that the city was under siege, Konstantin spent all his free time in the city kicking for rumors like Firth did. Everyone was training on their own, as our leaders were preparing defenses and meeting with the general and city guard captains.

I reviewed the seven movements of the seven sword forms. Then I stretched for a good hour to cool down. I finished with some bow practice. We had some straw dummies set up, and I was shooting from thirty yards. "Who gave you a bow?" Regis asked, watching me score a hit half the time. Regis was one of our company archers and had helped everyone during the archery competition on the wall to see who would wield a bow during an attack.

I actually had three bows now. Two in my storage space salvaged from Durandus' men, and this one I got in the Legion Hall armory. "I figured it couldn't hurt to practice. We only trained with a crossbow in training."

"Eh, a crossbow doesn't take much skill. Bows are superior because they are not as heavy, have a better rate of fire, and are not as bulky as the crossbow. Do you want some help?" Regis offered.

"Definitely," I replied. Regis was very helpful with helping with my pull and release. I tended to hold the arrow too long to aim. For the heavy pull weight of the compound short bow, I needed to draw, aim, and release in a single heartbeat. Regis advised for smaller targets, I could aim, but for people-sized targets, you just aimed and released as the rate of fire was just as important as hitting in a battle. At first, I got worse, but then I rapidly improved. There was some growing familiarity with the bow, but I was also getting a feel for aiming. I practiced till my fingers started bleeding.

Regis offered, "I have an old arm guard if you want it. I only have right-handed gloves for drawing. All our company archers are right-handed, but you can probably find an old glove in the regular army archers if you ask."

"Thanks for the help, Regis," we clasped wrists.

Regis advised, "If you want to be trained to be a real expert in marksmanship, talk to Blaze. He can hit a moving target at a hundred paces!"

We both went to dinner prior to the night patrol. Adrian read the duty assignments for the evening, "Eryk, Brutus, Felix, and Mateo. You four are on guard duty at the gate to the orchards. The guard captain there will tell you what needs to be done."

"I thought we were in teams of eight?" I asked before he could continue.

"Just one patrol tonight now. We are mostly guarding inner city gates to give the city guard some sleep after the increased activity. The days in the lower and upper city are getting busy for them," Adiran answered as he read off the other groups. Konstantine led the group of eight. By the look on his face, I guessed, like Firth, he had other plans tonight than doing his assigned patrol route.

I considered Konstantine's offer to join the Praetorian Guard. Konstantin and Firth always seemed better informed. That would be a huge benefit. My

hesitation was rooted in the fact of revealing my affinities. From collecting essence from two dead mages, I learned that collectors seemed to form an essence based on a mage's strongest affinity. If they knew I had a 98 affinity in space, would the Emperor or a First Citizen think the essence I could give them was more valuable than what I contributed as a soldier? Supposedly, the forming of an essence from a living person was outlawed in the Telhian Empire. I was skeptical that the Emperor followed his own laws.

I focused on my duties. With my squad being in charge of guarding a gate, I had them take larger round shields over the bucklers. We were stationary so that the weight wouldn't matter.

After a short walk through the orchards, we reached the small gatehouse at the inner city wall. We passed through this very gate every time we left the villa, and the guards were familiar with us. Two guards in the uniform of the Count's Citadel were stationed here. I approached and said, "We are here to take over your duties for the night."

With a few days' growth and haggard eyes, the older man gave a curt nod, "Thank you, legionnaire." He banged on a door inside the wall, and two of his men stumbled out. They had definitely been napping. "Let me show you how to close and bar the gate," he said, gesturing me inside the room.

The guard room had a table and six chairs. The older guard said, "The cask over there is lemon water. Always keep two men on watch. We have been seeing more looters in the upper city in the last few days, but do not pursue them. Your job is to protect this gate since it gives access to the Citadel through the orchards."

He brought me over to the gate mechanicals. The mechanism was a simple winch that lowered an iron gate inside the archway. There was a quick-release lever that would drop the gate instantly. A heavy block could also slide over the lip, making raising the gate by force impossible. A rope was also attached to a bell mounted high on the wall. Sounding it, would mobilize the city guard barracks in the upper city if we rang it.

After the city guard left, I announced, "Brutus and I will start on watch, and Felix and Mateo can get a nap in."

Felix advised me otherwise, "Everyone is going to be passing through this gate from the company, Eryk. I don't want Adrian or Castile to see us neglecting our duty."

I was confused, "The gate captain just told us we only needed two men on watch."

Felix and Mateo laughed. Felix said, "Adrian does the duty assignments and expects us all on duty. You have not been with us long enough to see the company discipline. When Lirkin screwed up, Lysander being made the company cook was a mild punishment."

Mateo added, "Once Malcom fell asleep on watch in the wild. The entire company stayed with him the next six nights to ensure he did not fall asleep."

"That was in the Dragon Spine mountains. We were hunting down a legionnaire on the run. Why anyone would try to pass over the Dragon Spine is beyond me. It was freaking freezing every night. Worst week of my life," Felix added.

Brutus joined the conversation, "Durandus was the same way. He expected orders to be followed immediately and unflinchingly. Though it appears the discipline is lax in our company, it is not."

Felix and Mateo nodded, taking it as a compliment. And Felix pointed down the road. Some people in dark clothes moved under the gas street lamps further down the street. "Probably looters he muttered. I think we are going to see a lot of traffic." As if prophetic, five city guards came after them in pursuit.

Brutus muttered, "Not long before the city descends into chaos. At least between the regulars and city guard, they almost outnumber the civilians."

We watched the activity from a distance. Around midnight, Castile, Adrian, Delmar, and Orson returned. Konstantin was leading the eight-person patrol and not with them. They just nodded as they passed and returned to the villa. I guess if you were in charge, you could work half the night.

Felix and Mateo were talking quietly about what they planned to do with the gold they would receive from the dungeon discovery. Brutus and I were on the other side of the arch. I broached the curious subject, asking softly, "Brutus, what do you know about the Praetorian Guard?"

He looked at me and said, "I am not one of them or an agent of one if that is what you are asking."

I nodded, believing him, but asked, "How are they viewed in the Empire?"

Brutus seemed to think about how to respond, “They are considered loyalists. The Emperor’s secret force of powerful intellects, mages, and warriors.”

“Would you join the Praetorian Guard if asked?” I asked my friend.

He had a shocked look, “Firth asked you? He seems like a loner. I thought he just worked as a Praetorian agent and was not one himself. But then again, you never know.” As to my question of joining, Brutus said indecisively, “Probably not. I just want to complete my twenty years and get my pension. Praetorian servants serve for the long term. It is also the closest you can be to being a First Citizen. So there is that.”

I thought about it and said, “It was Konstantin who approached me.”

Brutus eyes went wide, “Really? Two agents of the Praetorium in one mage company? Usually, there is just one in case the mage goes rogue.”

I was interested, “Who was it in Durandus’ company?” My curiosity focused on why he had not stopped the mage earlier. “Why did he not stop the attack on the storm giant?”

Brutus huffed at the memory, “Tauro. He led the archers and was the one the storm giant exploded with the lightning strike.” He continued after a pause, “I don’t think the Praetorian agents interfere with a mage unless they intend to kill him. I think they are only there to kill the mage if they betray the Emperor or Empire.”

That was something I might be really good at—killing mages. I joined the Legion for protection and to learn how to defend myself in my new world. It got me thinking that maybe I should join the Praetorian for the same reason. It seemed sensible if I could avoid having my affinities read when I joined.

Perhaps before I do that, I should read up on the Duchy of Tsinga, where I professed to be from. I was sure they would ask me questions about my homeland. There was also the fact that Konstantin said foreigners were usually not allowed into the Praetorian Guard or as agents. So maybe any desire I had to join would be moot.

Just as the sun started to light the sky, our relief came. It was the same older city guard from last night. I guessed he had to work the post from sunrise to sunset since the Citadel Guard was stretched so thin with helping the upper

city guard maintain order. Delmar told everyone to remain after breakfast when we arrived at the villa. Castile was going to address the company.

It took an hour for everyone to get back. A few people had minor injuries, the worst being Kolm, who broke his ankle jumping off a roof. One thing Linus did have was painkillers. Linus just planned to wrap the ankle tight and have Kolm take the painkillers if he needed to fight. Otherwise, he would get to remain in the villa to heal and rest. Others were already joking that they planned to jump off a roof in pursuit of a street urchin as well to get off duty.

With everyone present and attentive, Castile addressed us, "I wanted everyone to know my plan on how we are going to get out of this."

## Chapter 47

We all listened intently as Castile was going to voice our salvation. The company had a lot of faith that she would have a plan up to this point. Castile paced slowly, "We will be stationed at the Trader's Gate if the enemy marches on the city." Some men groaned at this announcement. The Trader's Gate faced the assembling Bartiradian army. It would be in the path of the attack.

Castile silenced everyone with a wave of her hand, "Mage Gregor and myself will be in the gate's tower. We are going to be countering the Bartirdian mages. The company's archers will be with me; everyone else will be stationed inside the tower on the ground floor. If it looks like the walls might fall, we will retreat to the inner city wall. We will move to defend the orchard gate with the upper city and citadel guards." This got some grunts of approval. Not having to sacrifice ourselves at the Trader's gate.

"If the inner city wall is in jeopardy of falling," she continued, "we will retreat to the Citadel. If the Citadel is going to fall, we will jump to the aqueduct and use it to vacate the city. Last night, we hauled up planks to bridge the section of the aqueduct that was collapsed by the Bartiradian mage," she finished.

No one seemed upset with the plan, even though it sounded like many things could go wrong. Our primary objective as men of the company was keeping Castile alive. If she died, we would be under the command of the nearest mage. That would be Gregor if he was still alive at that point. That would probably be a bad thing.

Castile let her words sink in before continuing with some scorn in her voice. "Duke Tiberius plans to ride at the head of his army from the City of Caranhagan and rescue us. He will march when the Bartiradians launch their first attack on the walls of Macha or in seven days' time from today." Everyone present had already heard the plan but not the details.

Adrian stepped forward, "When you report to the wall today, I will give you a tour of the gate tower so you can be familiar with it. I will also go over the retreat route to the inner city walls. Same groupings as yesterday." I groaned as I volunteered for the first watch yesterday.

It was not long before I was walking with Adrian, Konstantin, Pavel, Regis, and Malcolm. I fell in beside Konstantin and asked, "How was the patrol? No one mentioned anything at breakfast."

Konstantin grunted, "We searched a few houses. Didn't find what I was looking for."

I was silent, waiting for him to tell me what he was searching for. When he did not elaborate, I asked, "And what were you searching for?"

"Missing people. There is something in the city taking them and probably killing them. We were investigating the houses of the missing people. It is probably a shapechanger of some type. With fewer people in the city, the disappearances are more noticeable." Konstantin walked on unconcerned.

"What did you find in the homes?" I inquired.

"Nothing. They were all abducted in the streets. Usually sneaking around in the evening. The city guard lost the two men investigating two nights ago, so Castile was asked to help. She sent me. I think the child that Kolm was chasing on the rooftops might have been the monster. It moved too fast to be human." Konstantin elaborated.

"There is a monster in the city?" I sounded kind of shocked.

Konstantin huffed, "When isn't there a monster in a city? We don't have the Truthseekers or the Legion Hounds to investigate, so it is up to me."

"Legion Hounds?" I asked.

“The trackers of the Legion. It is usually a squad of four to six legionaries that specialize in tracking beasts, runaway soldiers, and missing legionaries,” Konstantin explained. “I was a Hound for a while before joining Castile’s company as a scout.”

“What about the Truthseekers? I have never met one,” I asked, trying to learn a little more.

“They have mastered a spell form in the clairvoyance magic affinity. It lets them discern when someone is telling the truth. Some mages also learn the spell, but the best Truthseekers always imprinted the spell form on their aether core.” Konstantin patiently explained to me.

“Do you have any spell forms?” I asked the warrior.

“You don’t ask a man that, Eryk. But I do have two. You need at least one to become a Hound, and no, I am not going to tell you what they are.” Konstantin said lightheartedly.

“I do not see how that is fair. You know mine already,” I joked back, trying to tease it out of him.

“Do I?” Konstantin had a serious tone. “I know you have a magic box, but is that all you have, Eryk? You don’t offer up secrets if you do not have to. Telling you I had two spell forms could have been a lie. But now you think I have a secret or two up my sleeve,” he smiled.

We walked for a while, and I decided to guess at one of his spell forms, “I already know one of your spell forms, Konstantin,” I said casually. “You can move objects.”

Konstantin skipped a step and was silent as we walked, not responding. As the wall came into sight, he asked, “It was the door I opened? I think that is the only time I used my spell form in view of anyone in years. Damn, Eryk. Sometimes, you surprise me for being a country boy.”

We reached the base of the tower, and instead of climbing up to the wall, we went inside. Castile and Adrian were inside the tower talking quietly. They must have come here while we were gearing up after breakfast. Adrian noticed us, and Castile climbed the stairs in the tower.

Adrian began his lecture, "The crates over there are the arrow bundles. If you are not on the wall, you are runners for our archers. Our legion archers only!" Adrian spent a few minutes at the crates, "These arrows on the left are the junk arrows. The arrows are imperfect, and we will use them for trash attacks. These on the right are the best arrows we have and are with a black and white stripe near the notch," he pointed out the paint markings.

He moved to the other side, "These casks are sugar lemon water. You will fill the canteens of the archer in the tower from them. We still have to source our food from the Legion Hall. Either Delmar or I will send runners." There was a heavy table with seating for sixteen people; that was the only furnishings in the tower room.

Before he headed upstairs, Adrian told us about the retreat route, "If the wall is going to be taken, we will escort Castile to the Legion Hall first and grab prepared supplies there and then retreat to the inner city walls."

Pavel asked, "Do we really have time to stop for supplies?"

Adrian smiled at the man, "Never been in a city being overrun? Once the walls are breached, forming their army inside the city will take time. The regulars also have dozens of barricades planned and prepared to slow their advance through the streets. We will have time, and only a few of the invader's forerunners will reach us while we stop."

Pavel said, "That sounds like you plan to have the enemy within the walls."

Konstantin answered for Adrian, "If they want to breach the city, there is not much we can do to stop them. At least, now that we lost Durandus. Our job is to hold out long for the Duke to arrive."

I muttered, "That sounds like a terrible plan."

Adrian mimicked me, "Agreed. But we will work with what we are given and do our service to the Empire."

We climbed the stairs to the tower and found Castile staring out across the deserted buildings toward the army in the distance. Adrian asked her, "Anything new?"

"No, still just five mages, but there has to be more in their camp. They are blocking me from getting closer," Castile sounded annoyed.

Adrian turned his attention to us, "So here are our fourteen archer positions and the barrels where you refill their arrows. Castile will be in this tower, and Gregor will be in the tower on the other side of the gate."

Pavel and Regis in our group checked out the field of view, and I walked to the parapet and looked out on the field. I was surprised as the army looked twice the size as yesterday, and I counted six—no seven griffons in the air over their camp. I missed some of what Adrian was saying and didn't realize it when Castile suddenly stood beside me and said, "It is impressive. The might of an army of men. But one mage with enough power could bury that army in a heartbeat."

"Great, so we are not going to have to fight then," I said hopefully, but I knew she was not indicating herself.

"No, there will be a fight. The Emperor himself is the only mage in the Empire who could end that army. His mastery over void magic is the most frightening thing I have ever seen," Castile murmured as she continued to study the enemy.

I boldly asked, "Why did you let our company get trapped in this city?"

Castile didn't respond immediately, and I thought I had offended and angered her. Adrian was leaving, and my squad was heading out onto the wall for their watch.

When everyone was gone, Castile answered my question, "Mages are not as free as you believe us to be. We can not deny an order by the Emperor or any Duke. That is why I take the most desperate missions—at least that way, I can somewhat control my fate."

"It does not seem like fighting here in an unwinnable battle is controlling your fate," I offered in return and was expecting a harsh rebuke.

Castile tensed slightly. "No battle is unwinnable," she said softly, and I do not think she was referring to the army gathering outside. She turned, and we made eye contact. "It is all how you go about fighting the battle. Perhaps one day you will understand that, other worlder." Castile turned and walked down the tower's steps, not saying another word. I was too stunned to say anything.

Regaining myself, I spun to make sure no one had overheard her call me an other worlder. No one had been close, and she had said it softly. When did

she learn? Did Adrian and Delmar know too? Konstantin had not figured it out, or he would have turned me into his Praetorian Guard master. I wanted to follow Castile and ask her questions, but Konstantin was already calling for me to come and enjoy the hot sun.

I joined them on the wall. I needed to find some time to talk to Castile alone in the future. I looked out over the wall—hopefully before the Bartiradians killed me.

## Chapter 48: Rats Again?

After the wall watch, I tried to find Castile to talk with her, but she was not at the villa. The other men thought she was with Delmar in the city, making more preparations. After lunch, I took a nap in my room as I needed the rest, even with my anxiety about Castile's knowledge—or maybe guess she was guessing I was an other worlder?

My dreams were filled with nightmares. Konstantin presented me bound and gagged before an ancient-looking woman who was the Praetorian Guard he served. Delmar ordered me to attack the invading army by myself while completely naked, with just a bow and no arrows. Adrian sent me into the sewers to look for the last two Bartiradian soldiers we suspected of being in the city. Castile immobilized me with her shadow chains and then used her collector on me to harvest an essence.

I woke in a hot sweat in my bed. My sheets were soaked, and I drank an entire canteen of water to replace the water. My sweat was not just from the dreams, though. I walked out to the kitchen, and it was stifling, and none of the ovens were being used. It was still a few hours to dinner, and Lirkin was not around. I went out back to find a few men sitting in the shade and joined them, "Is it just me, or is it extra stifling hot out today?" I said, sitting with Brutus and Felix under a cherry tree.

Felix piped up, "Nope, it is not just you. Castile left an hour ago with Adrian and Delmar. She thinks the Bartiradians have set up a weather array around the city. Guess they plan to cook us alive."

"What? I thought they were not going to hurt the civilians?" I wiped the salt stinging my eyes away.

"Most have left the city already. Most likely, they can only get it so hot in here. It is probably just a scare tactic," Brutus contributed.

Felix spat a filmy mass of something he had been chewing on, "Well, I am already scared, so it is working."

Brutus said, "Heard Konstantin talking to Lirkin in the kitchen. He is planning to go into the sewers tonight to look for the monster in the city. He thinks it is a lycanthrope." I realized one of my nightmares may have been from overhearing the conversation while I was sleeping.

"Lycanthrope? You mean a werewolf?" Felix asked.

"No, Konstantin thinks it is smaller than a werewolf. He thinks maybe a wererat or werebadger. He found two spots it was heading in and out the sewers today," Brutus elaborated.

Felix drank deeply from his canteen to clean his mouth, "Does Konstantin ever sleep?"

"He is napping right now. Plans to put together his sewer squad at dinner," Brutus took the canteen from Felix and drank.

I joked, "So if we skip dinner, we won't be selected? Guess I am not feeling hungry." We all laughed and went inside. I invited them to the basement larder to cool off, and we found Lirkin down there doing his prep work for dinner. The heat had not penetrated here yet. We all helped him prepare the food. Cold sandwiches and vegetables marinated in vinegar and olive oil. Olive oil was a luxury item as the only orchards existed around the capital, according to Lirkin. He only found one small cask liberated from the Citadel stores and planned to use it all.

We helped carry up dinner to the dining room, and everyone had a sheen of sweat and looked miserable. Konstantin was talking with Delmar, and I did not see Adrian or Castile. The mood was subdued as we ate. Castile and Adrian entered and took some food as well. Castile spoke before Adrian announced the deployment for the night.

"This is the magical weather of the Bartiradians. They are trying to soften us up a bit. I suspect they will try to freeze us when the sun sets." Some groans echoed among us, including me. "Bring your thermals with you on gate duty and patrol," she continued. "Adrian and I will be moving to the Legion Hall

after tonight to be closer to Trader's Gate to respond faster in the event of an attack." Everyone was silent as we assumed our days in the comfortable villa were numbered.

Adrian stepped forward. "We will continue to keep you quartered here." Some sighs of relief, "Tonight we have four inner city gates to watch, and Konstantin is taking five with him into the sewers," a panic rippled through the men, and some swore softly. "It is not that bad, men. The city has half as many people, and the damaged aqueduct flow has been flooding the sewers, cleaning it out some."

Wylie chirped, "So you are volunteering?"

Adrian held up his parchment and made a show of crossing off a name and writing a new one. He announced, "Konstantin's squad is Wylie," the men laughed as Wylie's mouth had gotten him in trouble. "Brutus, Mateo, Felix and Eryk."

Really, frigging selected again? I did the only thing I could and asked a stupid question, "With the aqueduct damaged, how are we going to get clean when we get out?" Apparently, it was not as stupid a question as I thought it was, as there were murmurs of agreement. Adrian looked to Castile, who went contemplative for a moment.

Castile smiled thinly and said, "The Citadel has its own reservoir for its baths. I will arrange for you to use the Count's baths when you return." That got murmurs of appreciation.

It looked like I would not be able to talk with Castile, and instead, I would be wading through shit and piss tonight. Konstantin brought the unfortunate ones who were following him off to the side. "We are looking for a wererat in the sewers. It has killed at least four within the city in the last week. Most likely, it is feeding a brood, so it is imperative we find the nest."

Thankfully, Brutus asked the question I was thinking, "Should we be worrying about this during the siege?"

Konstantin's glare made me glad I had not asked the question. "Wererats can become a plague in no time. One can become a dozen in a month. Now to the hunt. We are going to stop in the Citadel. We will be coating our blades in silver. In case you were not aware. Normal steel can cut, but it heals rapidly as do all lycanthrope species."

Mateo focused a question on the hunt, "Is there going to be more than one? Are they hard to kill?"

Konstantin nodded at the sensible question, "As long as they are struck with silver, they will die like any other creature. Silver is a strong poison to them. Now, I selected this group because you all have glowstones. Make sure Eryk tops off their charge." Stones started to be held in my direction, and Konstantin continued, "Although only one has been seen in the city, I suspect there are more. Not many, but more. My best guess is whatever their food source was, it has dried up since many of the citizens have left, so it was forced to take people from the streets to feed its young."

Konstantin then advised us, "Leave your lower body armor and get some wraps for the top of your boots. You don't want them filling up with sewer water." We all suited up and went to the Citadel.

The silver coating of the blades was simpler than I had thought. The smith had a boiling vat of thin adhesive. Our blades were dipped and then quickly had silver dust added to the blade. It was set on oiled stones to dry for a few minutes. When I got my short sword and dagger back they looked like they had been coated in fine glitter.

The smith advised us, "The glue will deteriorate in about a week. But even before then, the silver will be deposited in wounds made with the blade. It is much more effective than dipping a blade in molten silver to coat it."

Konstantin added with mirth, "And it takes a lot less silver, so the lords can save a little coin."

As we stepped outside the Citadel, it was as Castile had predicted. The temperature had plummeted. It was close to freezing, and the city was bathed in a rising fog. Konstantin paused at seeing it, "Ogre's piss." He signaled for us to be silent, and we all listened intently in the night air.

After a minute, he voiced his concern, "The Bartiradians are going to attack tomorrow. Should have realized all the aether they were burning to cook us was for a reason. One more cycle of a hot, humid day and cold night will make the fog too thick to see twenty feet in front of you. If they were attacking tonight, then it would have already started."

Wylie added his thoughts, "I vote we give them the city and let them take care of the rat problem." We laughed, but Konstantin's hard eyes made us stop. It looked like we were going into the sewers whether we wanted to or not.

The access we were entering the sewers had a barred iron gate. Two city guards stood near it, and one nodded to Konstantin, "We were told to expect you. Thank you for taking care of this legionnaire. Virgil was a good friend of mine, and I want him avenged. His wife thanks you as well." Konstantin just nodded and went through the gate, and we followed.

With glowstones out, we moved into the sewers. The sewers were about six feet wide, with a two-foot channel of murky water flowing in the center. The smell was rancid and reminded me of urine mixed with acidic vomit. We stopped at the first intersection, and Konstantin used a scarf to cover his mouth and nose. He handed us each one as well. It was coated in something; all I could smell was a strong, minty scent. We now looked like a bunch of bandits trying to rob the sewer.

Konstantin went into teaching mode, "Notice the flow of the sludge. You can follow that to the refuse chamber. There will be four or five city guards there guarding that entrance. If you get separated, head there to get out. Most of the entrances are barred, with no guards to let you out. The only other threat I know down here is the green slimes. They usually stay in the channels and are harmless unless you touch them. They can dissolve your skin after a few minutes. Just leave them alone, and they will not bother you." With those words of wisdom, we followed Konstantin into the winding tunnels.

This did not seem so bad. I had thought we were going to walk through sewer waste. "Look, a slime," Wylie pointed out with his glow stone. An amorphous, murky green blob was crawling along the filthy channel.

Brutus was ready to swing his blade, and Konstantin barked, "Hold, legionnaire! You do not want to lose the silver coating on your blade. Slimes are important to the city as well. They help compost the waste, kill rats, and contain disease. Leave it be."

We continued to follow the flow of the waste and spotted a few more slimes. We came to another intersection. This one is blocked by a gate. On the other side of the grate, the sewer no longer had a channel down the middle. Konstantin produced a key, played with the lock, and the gate swung open. I was not sure he actually used the key as he had shielded us from its use. I guessed it was just for show, as he used his spell form.

He turned to us, "We are going into the lower city sewers. There are a lot of side rooms from basements of the old city before they built the sewers. They should have all been sealed off, but many of the walls have collapsed over time. I believe the wererat is nesting in one of these. Look for small passages, loose bricks, and anything odd."

Konstantin stepped into the passage, and he was ankle-deep in green-brown muck. He started walking, and we all followed reluctantly. Mateo stepped on a submerged slime and slipped backward into the waste. We would have all been laughing at him but were instead spitting and cursing from getting splashed. I had been two men back and was fortunate not to get any on my face. Others were not as lucky.

Konstantin just shook his head, "Slid-step as you go. There are slimes in the sludge and probably a few deep voids in the floor as well." Mateo cursed that the advice was offered a little late.

After a number of turns at intersections, I was thoroughly lost and happy that I knew all I had to do was follow the flow if I got lost. We started encountering the side chambers like Konstantin had mentioned. The first one had cots set up in it, and there was mold growing everywhere. Konstantin spoke, "This has not been used in years. Probably a refuge from the last time the city was taken." We searched the room anyway and only found some cracked pottery.

The next entrance was just a few bricks missing at the bottom of the sealed room. Mateo, already filthy from his fall, was volunteered to check it out. He got a slight scare from a slime on the other side but no other threats. It was a small room on the other side with shelving covered in dust. A few rusted tools, and that was it. These side rooms only flooded during torrential rains, but the slimes cleaned them well. Konstantin seemed sure his quarry was in this part of the sewers, so we continued to search.

We searched over a dozen alcoves, old sealed-off basements, storage rooms, and overflow chambers. We were covered in things I care not to talk about. Even though the muck level never passed my knees, the splashing and wicking action had my pants soaked. The wetness seeped into my underwear as well, and I was ready to be done with this.

We turned at a Y-intersection, and Konstantin rasped, "Found you, you little devil." He turned to us, "Just caught sight of it. It ducked into the side archway ahead!" Even the prospect of a coming fight was welcome as long as we

could get out of the nastiness of the sewers and hours of trudging through other people's shit.

## Chapter 49: Death Dog

Konstantin quickly laid out a plan, "I will go first. Keep silent until I shout and then rush behind me for support." Okay, maybe that was not much of a plan. Konstantin slid forward through the murky brown water toward the arch. It was obvious the creature knew we were coming because of our glowstones casting light and shadow.

The archway looked to be composed of a wall that collapsed inward. Large stones littered the floor as Konstantin stepped up in the entry. At least we would not be fighting in the sewage water. He moved on high alert, scanning the shadows in the room beyond.

I could see wet marks on the stones that definitely did not look human, more like large animal tracks. Konstantin entered, followed by Brutus and then myself. Behind me was Wylie and Mateo. It was another sealed-up basement in the lower city. I watched Konstantin's sight line follow the wet footprints to the far wall. He made no move to follow them and instead gave us the signal to go right while he started left.

There was a lot of debris on our side: broken wood, broken glass, moldy sacks, and cracked ceramic jars. I was looking for a trap as I moved but did not see one. Wylie and Mateo were moving behind Konstantin on the other side, and behind me was Felix. We circled and met Konstantin on the fall wall. Konstantin quickly found a large panel of wood painted to match the stone wall.

We all stood ready as Konstantin and Brutus gripped the edge and pulled hard. The large plank crashed down, stirring up a blinding dust. Brutus tossed his glowstone inside immediately. The passage looked like it ran for a while into the distance. Konstantin swore, "Succubus' tits." He turned to me, "Eryk, go and check the pit trap in the center of the room. I smell something foul from it. Do not fall in." I noticed Konstantin no longer had his bandana covering his lower face.

I turned and confusedly looked for a pit trap. It appeared our wererat was an artist. There was a canvas painted like the floor and covered over. I pulled it

aside and shed light into the pit. The drop was about ten feet, with a dozen rusty spear shafts facing up. A handful of slimes were working on two corpses that I could now smell even through my cloth mask.

I informed everyone, "Konstantin, two dead. They have city guard uniforms on. The slimes are working on them. Not much left." I turned to him, "How did you know about the trap?"

Konstantin was still looking down the corridor. "The footprints. They were not as wet in the light as the ones from the entry. I assumed they were painted on something. Also, the ratman let me see him. He assumed I would race after him. I assumed it was a pit trap."

Everyone was impressed, including me. I guessed the two dead men had pursued in haste on spotting the wererat, falling for the trap. Konstantin had not and approached cautiously, even with his prey in sight. Brutus asked, "Seems awfully smart for a monster. Are we to expect more traps?"

Konstantin stood and looked at everyone, "Remove your masks and pocket them for now. You are going to need all your senses as we go in further. I think this passage connects to another old basement. Our quarry will be there. I have not seen signs of a second ratman." He looked again, "That confuses me for the number of bodies it has taken in the last few days."

That was all he said as he moved in. Was he insinuating there were more creatures or that the threat was larger than anticipated? Somehow, I ended up behind Konstantin as the others had taken a quick look into the pit trap. Without my mask, my nose twitched. Konstantin smelled foul, but so did this passageway—like rotting meat. He held his hand up and activated a trap with his telekinetic skill. A bear trap-like device covered in sand went off.

The cloud of sand it created made me close my eyes and cover my mouth. I got the wrap to my mouth to breathe through it. Konstantin was frozen in front of me. He slowly exhaled as he had held his breath. He started moving forward again and pausing multiple times before continuing. I think he was using his ability to move objects to check for traps.

The corridor opened up, and Konstantin paused at the entrance to a larger room. I could see movement in the room through the shadows. The creature had been crafty so far. Were there more surprises for us? Konstantine gave the hand signals for two left, and two right. I passed them back, meaning whoever was last in line should go forward as Konstantin was right now.

On entering the room, piles of cracked bones were in one corner. Moldy sacks, crates, and bottles were scattered throughout the room. Konstantin was moving toward a hunched-over body. It suddenly stood and hissed, red beady eyes graced a scarred rat face on the body of a man.

It was cornered, and it knew it. I continued left as ordered to flank it. A mound of clothes erupted, and a beast leaped at me. My eyes crossed momentarily as it was a massive black wolf with two heads. The monster closed quickly, and Konstantin yelled, "Do not get bitten, Eryk!"

Foamy red saliva jaws came at me, and I did the only thing I could think of to save my life. I took a chunk out of its chest, and blocked one head with my shield and the other with my short sword. The wolf's head crunched my blade, breaking a few teeth, but its momentum pushed me onto my back. Blood erupted from both mouths as they tried to reach me. I heard the whacks of my companions hitting the beast on top of me, but I knew it was dead already.

Konstantin was yelling, "Get it off him!" The weight was removed, and I got to my feet, ready to fight. The wererat had been decapitated, and I did not see anything else moving. Konstantin was next to me, "Did it bite you!? Eryk! Look at me!" He forced eye contact, "DID. IT. BITE. YOU?"

I was covered in the blood that had leaked from its mouth, but it had not bitten me. I was slightly dazed from my aether bottoming out, getting crushed by a massive wolf, and the adrenaline of combat. Felix talked to Konstantin, "It looks like it was already injured. Missing a chunk of its flank that has scabbed over."

"I don't think it bit me. One head was blocked by the shield, and the other caught my sword. The blood is from its mouths. It must have had internal injuries," I said, wiping the smeared blood off my face and spitting the taste out of my mouth.

Konstantin looked worried and told the others, "See if you can find any access to the old stairs up to the surface. Look for any water. Eryk needs to wash that blood off." His voice was a little panicky, which made me panic. Konstantin never panicked.

"What?" I asked as Konstatin handed me a small flask to wash with.

"That is a death dog. It is not called that because it has two heads but because they are diseased beasts. One bite, and your flesh will rot in days.

The cure poison potions we have will not work on it. We will have to get a cure disease potion from Gregor. If he has one..." His voice trailed off.

I got lightheaded. I realized the foamy blood from the mouths would have washed the saliva onto me and into my eyes, nose, and mouth. I removed my armor to wash better, but I knew it was pointless. Mateo found a barrel that appeared to be water washed down from the streets, and I used the murky water to wash as best as possible.

Konstantin was agitated and voiced his assessment, "The beast must have wandered into the sewers somehow, and the wererat befriended it. It was feeding it the humans it was killing in the streets." He indicated the chewed bones.

Wylie voiced, "Found it. It was bricked over, but it is here."

Konstantin rushed over and swore. "They used a cement. No time to tarry. You all carry Eryk's gear. Eryk, follow me." I was naked from the waist up as I followed a fast-moving Konstantin out of the sewers. He was clearly worried.

As my aether recovered, I focused my healing as we sloshed through the muck. He was right—I could feel a wrongness in my throat when my healing probes touched it. My healing would not eliminate the disease. I could heal the injured tissue it infected. So, all I needed to do was keep healing until the disease exhausted itself. That was a relief! I tripped on a rock or slime and fell into the muck. Konstantin looked back, "Come on, Eryk, no time to rest!"

The next time I was volunteered to go with Konstantin on any mission, I was going to protest. I got up and caught up. The others were falling behind. We got to the gate, and Konstantin waited for the others and ordered them to find and bring Castile to the Legion Hall. I raced after Konstantin through the fog-shrouded city. We entered the Legion Hall minutes later, and a few of Gregor's men told us to get out and wash up before returning. Konstantin just barked, "Get Gregor now!"

A sleepy, bleary-eyed Gregor appeared minutes later. Konstantin did not waste time, "Mage Gregor, if you have any cure disease potions on you, we require one."

He put his hand to his nose, "Did you bring the entire sewer in here, legionnaire? Castile already owes me more for the additional healing potions.

I am not giving up my only cure disease potion,” he growled as he sat down, and someone brought him a hot drink.

Konstantin’s forearms flexed over and over as he balled his fists. He held himself in check as we waited for Castile. It was about fifteen minutes before she came into Hall. She walked up to me and looked at me for a long moment, “Fuck, he is infected. Gregor, give me the cure disease potion,” she said impatiently.

“Castile, we divided the potions equally, and I already gave you more of the healing potions. I may need it for myself,” Gregor said, unconcerned about my fate.

“It was a bloody death dog, Gregor!” He looked sharply at me, eyes going wider. “It got into his eyes. He has very little time before he is permanently blinded! Give me the fucking potion!” While they were having a shouting match, I started to focus, slowly pushing healing aether into my eyes.

Gregor did not budge, and Castile pulled her wand. It was the one that cast blue missiles in the dungeon. She threw it at him. It hit his chest and clattered to the floor. “That is worth twenty potions. Give me the potion!”

Gregor bent over and retrieved the wand from the floor. “I will be back with it.” He did not hurry as he left.

Castile turned to the legionaries in the room, “Prepare him multiple baths in the horse troughs. He will scrub himself clean in each one. Then, he will consume the potion. Hurry!” She ordered, and the half dozen men raced to it.

The three water troughs were barely big enough for me, but I made use of the impromptu bathtubs. The cold water scrub was welcome. The first tub ended a murky brown. The second was a light milky white from all the soap I had used. The third was going to be a rinse. I had just settled into the third and final tub when Castile walked out. It was very early morning, and the cold air was turning to humid air as the Bartiradians switched their weather array.

We were the only two people in the stable area as there were no horses. She sat on the edge of the tub and looked into the water briefly before handing me the potion. I drank it immediately. With my healing sense, I could feel the redness aura of the disease getting washed away. It was a relief as my healing ability was not able to counter the disease. Castile did not leave,

though, and just sat there. I broke the silence and asked, “Why do you think I am an other worlder?”

## Chapter 50: And All is Laid Bare

Castile’s dark gray duster cloak was draped behind as she focused on the far side of the stable yard. I was in the largest trough but suddenly felt confined and trapped as my question hung unanswered. Finally, Castile said, “I am going to tell you a story. I do not wish it repeated.” Still staring straight ahead, her hand graced the top of the water in the tub. Her hand skated across the surface, and I tensed as it passed over my lower body, but she never looked down, just straight ahead. I nodded, as that was what she was waiting for.

She started her tale with a quiet whisper only I could hear, “When I was a little girl, my mother told me of my grandfather. He was from a place called Madridspain. He came into his magic late in life. But he was powerful. He could teleport almost an entire mile. He could draw aether directly from the ley lines and travel along the ley lines with amazing haste by combining both abilities.” She shifted her weight, and I found myself staring up at her stoic profile just above me.

She heaved a sigh, “I never met him, but my mother talked about him and his amazing magic. His most impressive magic was an obliterate spell. He could banish people out of existence. It was from the void sphere of magic, his strongest sphere of magic.” She paused and looked down into my eyes, “He was called to the Emperor’s service. He was to be made a court mage and wed to a duchess, a First Citizen, and my grandmother’s marriage to him was to be annulled. He told my grandmother he would go to the Emperor and reject his offer.”

Her eyes returned to looking in the distance. “My grandmother got a letter a month later saying my grandfather had died fighting the enemies of the Empire.” Her tone was laced with doubt.

She sighed, “When I was tested on my coming-of-age at a tablet I and was found strong enough to attend the Mage Academy, I did so. My mother warned me never to show my true strength, or I might end up like my grandfather. I followed her advice but also spent long nights in the library reading everything I could about other worlders. I never found notes on another one from Madridspain, which surprised me.”

My heart started beating rapidly in my chest. At this moment, I could move Castile's heart into my space and end her. Instead, I tried to remain calm, shifted in the water, and asked, "What else did you learn?"

Still looking forward, I saw her smile, it looked odd on her normally impassive face. "I learned other worlders always arrive in groups according to the Empire records. They always have access to multiple affinities of the rare magics. And that the Emperor always calls any other worlder with void magic as his strongest affinity to his service." She looked at me, "Do you know what happens when you use an essence collector on a mage with a primary magic affinity over fifty?"

"No. What happens?" I asked as innocently as I could.

"An essence is always formed in relation to that affinity—always formed," she stressed. "The Emperor is the most powerful void magic user ever recorded. My grandfather was not the only void mage sent to serve the Emperor who met an unfortunate fate. The public records are stricken and hard to find, but even then, I found over twenty in the last three hundred years of his rule." Castile stood, removing herself from the edge of my tub.

"You never answered my question," I asked stupidly. "Why do you think I am an other worlder?"

She smiled coyly, "You should talk more with your legion mates, Eryk. They would have told you I am famous for three spells. Shadow chains, dispel aether and the all-seeing eye. You have seen me use my shadow chains. My dispel aether is powerful as it allows me to dispel another mage's aether as they try to form a spell. You have also seen me use my all-seeing eye a few times. I summon an invisible aetheric ball that I can send anywhere to scout. My eyes see through it. It can pass through walls and can be sent hundreds of feet away from me. I was using that spell on the wall yesterday," she smiled at the panic in my eyes.

"And what have you seen with your all-seeing-eye that makes you think I am an out-worlder?" I asked weakly.

She snuck a peak in the water again, and I felt myself flushing red for some reason. Her small frame gazed down at me like a colossus, "You did not get the single room by accident, Eryk. I figured you would feel safe inside it to reveal your secrets and asked Linus to tell you first about the move to the villa."

“What? Why would you do that?” I asked as I thought about taking Castile’s heart again.

“It was the dungeon. I sent my eye to check on you and found you bathing in the waters furiously, trying to clean yourself and your armor. I assumed you went into the next chamber and fought another monster. I immediately ordered everyone out of the dungeon as I did not want the First Citizen to take whatever prize you may have recovered from the final monster in the dungeon.”

“So you want that prize for yourself,” I asked a little frostily. I did not even know what the pendant did.

“So you did recover something? Interesting.” Her eyebrows arched in thought, “No, you can keep whatever coin and prize you obtained from the dungeon.”

“Then what do you want?” I asked, thinking there was maybe a way out of this. “Are you going to turn me over to the Emperor?”

She laughed harshly, “Why would I do that? It would gain me nothing but a pat on the back. I want you to know we are on the same side.”

She started to leave, and I asked, “What else did you see with your all-seeing-eye?”

She smiled knowingly, “I know you like the griffin pillow the men gave you. They think you sold it, so keep it hidden. I also know you studied a healing spell form and can now heal yourself of flesh wounds.” My mind raced to all the things I had done in the privacy of my tiny room, with the door locked and the window blocked. She could not have been watching me all the time? Not in the middle of the night, when I...

“Did you get an essence from the elf mage?” She interrupted my thoughts.

“What? The elf from the Bartiradians?” I asked numbly. Castile’s eyes were hard, her smile gone, and stared through me. “Yes,” I admitted. “It was brown with swirls in it.”

Her eyes sparkled at my admission, “Do you still have it, what size was it?”

“No, I consumed it. It was an apex essence,” I admitted.

“Pity, High Mage Dacian would have given a fortune for an apex earth essence—an opportunity lost. Know, Eryk, powerful mages always give an essence. The chance of an essence coalescing rapidly decreases after thirty minutes. Before that tipping point in time, I got to that mage, and no essence formed, so I strongly suspected you had Durandus’ collector. I admit I was confused at the Tribunal Trial. Your control over your dimensional space is exceptional to have brought out that perfect cube of sand.”

She smirked, “It was after the failed essence from the mage that I started to watch you even more closely.” She sized me up in the tub again, “If we escape this city, we can talk again about your other affinities.” She turned and left me in the cold water.

I was stunned. I had been found out—I think. Castile knew about my larger dimensional space. I never confirmed I was an other worlder for her, though. I dunked my head under to feel the cold water one last time. I dressed and drank the cure disease potion before returning to the villa. I used the potion even though my healing spell form worked, as I did not want to take any chances of having my eyes rot out of my skull. The potion was extremely bitter and reminded me of sour grapes without any sweetness. It worked, though, and I could feel remnants of the disease with my healing aether disappear as the potion eliminated all traces.

Walking the streets back to the villa, the hot, humid weather was oppressive, easily past 100 degrees (Fahrenheit). The Bartiradian mages had turned up the temperature again today, so I suspected the fog was going to be much denser tonight, and Konstantin was sure they planned to attack. I entered the villa just before the mid-day meal, and everyone was just waking up from their nap after patrol and getting lunch in the kitchen.

Flavius spotted me first, “Crap, Eryk, Pluto must hate you to keep turning you away from his domain!” Everyone crowded in on me to hear my tale of battle, death, and being revived once again by Castile after trading one of her prized magic artifacts for my cure poison potion. As I wove my tale, I made sure to stress Castile’s sacrifice in front of the men. She deserved that much.

Benito praised, “Just like a story of myth, except in yours, it is the woman that saves the man!” This got a whole bunch of jabs at how unmanly it was for a woman to sacrifice so much to save a plain legionnaire like me. I just wanted to get some sleep in my not-so-private room. Castile was at the Legion Hall—so maybe she could not spy on me from so far away...

Adrian broke up lunch, “Everyone, get some sleep. We are all headed to the Trader’s Gate before sunset. It is likely there will be an attack tonight.”

A few men on punishment details spent their afternoon fortifying the villa under Konstantin’s direction. We were not planning on defending the villa but actually retreating to the Citadel if the inner city wall fell. The three men were being punished for going into the city alone.

I found myself in my tiny room. I decided to send all my possessions into my dimensional space. No one was paying much attention to me, and Castile and Delmar were at the Legion Hall, and Adrian probably was headed there as well. No one would notice my room was clean. Also, Castile already knew my space was larger.

I slept restlessly with dreams that everyone in the company was watching me as I slept. Mateo woke me with loud, continuous banging on my door. “Come on, Eryk. It is time to go and stop the entire Bartiradian army while the regulars watch and sip ale.”

I geared up in my full armor, and sliding on the metal helm felt oddly comforting. I carried a short sword and dagger on my belt and a medium round shield. If I wanted to throw a spear, there would be pilums on the wall. All three of my bows were in my dimensional space as I was tasked with ferrying arrows to the real archers.

I looked over my small room for the last two weeks and felt I might not see it again. I left the room nice and tidy. Brutus, Mateo, and Felix waited for me. Everyone else had left. Brutus handed me a satchel, “Lirkin prepared everyone two days’ rations and two canteens of lemon water.” I checked to find two canteens and seven bundles wrapped with string, “One is your dinner. If we don’t hurry, Adrian will send the Legion Hounds after us.”

We made our way to Trader’s Gate in the oppressive heat of the late day. To distract ourselves, we talked about our favorite foods. Mateo liked something that sounded like pulled chicken smoothed in a spicy, sweet sauce. Felix liked something akin to a corn tortilla with caramelized cheese on it. Brutus was happy with a dessert made from heavy cream and spirits. It needed to be made cold and served cold as the cream was whipped into a thick consistency. My favorite food, sadly enough, was fried chicken—with all 11 herbs and spices.

Adrian eagerly sent all four of us latecomers to the wall to take watch. My friends blamed me for having to spend the last two hours in the miserable heat of the day. As the sun set, it was like a switch had been flicked, and the air conditioning had been started. Almost immediately, wisps of fog began to rise from the fields separating the wall and the enemy encampment. As the temperature plummeted, the enemy was soon obscured by a thickening fog.

Adrian walked over to us, "Get down in the tower. The regulars are coming up now to man the walls. Do not get too comfortable. I have a feeling they are going to test us tonight." We could hear muted horns in the distant army as if Adrian were prophetic.