

A Soldier's Life

Chapter 51: The Outer Wall

I remained on the wall as the cool night air helped the sweat evaporate from my skin. The coldness caused goosebumps to appear on my exposed skin, and I shivered slightly. I studied the field of fog and could see lights appearing in the enemy's camp through the rising haze. The activity was increasing and soon was completely obscured by the thickness of the fog. Konstantin barked, "Eryk, get below in the tower."

I looked around me, and a dozen of the regulars were on the wall; eight had simple longbows. These were not the expensive composite short bows the legion used. As I walked by the regulars, I could sense their tension. Most of these men would be dead if the outer wall fell tonight.

I descended the steps on the wall, and the city looked eerie as the buildings were fading away in the fog. I entered the tower to find everyone spread out in the room, catching some nap time. Konstantin threw me a heavy blanket from a crate with a mirthful smile, "I think it is going to be an exciting night. Get some rest."

I moved to a wall and used the blanket as a pillow. My head missed the comforting embrace of my griffin-down pillow. Brutus sat next to me and did the same with his balled-up blanket. Konstantin sat on my other side, but he had brought his bedroll.

With my eyes closed, I asked the air, "So how bad is it going to get?" I knew it was Konstantin who was going to answer and waited.

He did speak after a moment. "We are outnumbered three to one. If they breach in their assault tonight, they will run rampant through the city."

I nodded. I decided to consume a minor dexterity essence. I pulled the dark yellow ball from my space and popped it into my mouth. It should have been long enough since I consumed the apex healing essence not to have any essence indigestion.

Konstantin rasped, "You are just taking that now?"

I came up with an excuse, “I was thinking of selling it.” My nerves in my hands and feet started tingling with electricity. “But with the coming battle, I thought it best to use it now,” I added but never opened my eyes.

Konstantin decided to give me advice, “I told you earlier about fortifying attributes. I do not know if you have consumed a dexterity before, but you are young and fit right now. Try and get at least one essence for each physical attribute before you get too lazy.” His voice was laced with wisdom and mirth at the same time.

Brutus asked, “How long does an essence fortify an attribute?”

Konstantin answered on my other side, “Years—at least a decade from my experience. Castile’s last lieutenant, Donte, who retired, saved a dozen minor essences of the constitution in his time. He thought he could hold off old age if he took one every six years.”

Brutus had some disbelief in his voice, “Would that actually work, stay young forever with essences?”

Konstantin laughed, “No, but it does help you fight off disease and illness. You still age normally, but Donte thought otherwise.”

The conversation continued between Brutus and Konstantin but focused on spear tactics. It was an information exchange about techniques employed when fighting multiple foes. I tried to pay attention, but my eyes had been shut, and I fell asleep.

The tower rocked and woke me to dust drifting down. “Catapult!” was sounded from above. A shout came down the stairs, “Ten bundles of waste arrows!” It was Delmar’s voice, and I jumped up to grab two of the imperfect arrow bundles. Six of us responded, and we brought twelve bundles up the stone stairs.

In the tower, our company archers were blindly firing into the fog. The tower rocked again as I went to fill Regis and Pavel’s arrow barrels. Castile was standing and focused out into the fog. I was heading back down the stairs when Gregor’s voice from the neighboring tower bellowed, “Now, Castile!”

Castile looked agitated at the order but pulled a scroll from her duster. I was behind her, and the scroll was layered with spell forms in silver metallic ink. It was way too complex for me to even begin to fathom. Castile channeled her

aether into the scroll, and a stiff breeze formed from behind us. It began to increase to a massive gale as Castile's hair whipped around her. The archers' hair under their helmets also blew in a mess, but they did not stop firing.

I looked, and the fog was rolling back toward the army camp like a wave of white. The land below us was being revealed, with the strong light of the blue moon now visible in the sky. There were dozens of enemies with scaling ladders revealed. Delmar yelled down the stairs, "Switch arrows, bring up the good stock!" I heard activity and waited for the men to rush up with the better arrows before descending.

Our archers started targeting men one hundred and fifty yards from the wall. Blaze, our best archer, was just pulling and releasing. Although I lost the arrows in the low light, I could see the lead men carrying ladders stumble and break their stride. Adrian hissed, "We used our trick too early."

A sweating Castile rasped back, "I know, Gregor is a fool. Get what kills we can before the fog returns." Castile was focused on something else with her magic, but I could not tell what it was.

The tower shook, and Delamr announced, "No need to fear the stoneworks is reinforced with aether. But if you see one of those rocks coming at you, duck!" This got some chuckles from the archers. Adrian was directing his best archers at certain targets to slow the advance.

In the other tower, Gregor yelled again, "I have a mage! Straight away from the gate, Castile."

"I can not help; I have two mages sneaking up on my left with the ladders!" Castile barked back, irritated at her mage partner's whiny tone.

"Griffin, a shout rang from the right," and all eyes scanned the sky. I could see it, a milky black shape flying high above, out of arrow range. Now, it was diving on us, approaching quickly.

Blaze yelled, "Castile! Give me a boost. It will be within range soon." Castile paused her actions to cast her wispy black tendrils around an arrow Blaze was notching.

A ball of fire appeared, highlighting the griffin and the rider as it dove toward the tower. Castile quickly waved her hands and clapped them, the light vanished. "I dispelled the fireball. Now Blaze!" He aimed for a pair of

heartbeats, following the griffin that was trying to escape after its failed attack. He unleashed the arrow, and the large dark shape let out a piercing cry and began to plummet rapidly.

"It is going to crash into the city," Blaze announced and returned to firing out onto the advancing scaling ladders. Delmar swung around and noticed me standing there watching the action. I thought I was going to get yelled at. Instead, I received orders.

"Eryk, take two others and make sure the griffin and rider are finished," he barked, returning his attention to the approaching army. I turned to obey, and just before I descended the stairs, a three-foot boulder slammed into Regis, crushing him and continuing into the city with him plastered on it. A lightning bolt struck Gregor's tower, causing everyone to be blinded momentarily. I blinked and followed the griffin as it spiraled into the city. Getting an idea of where it was landing, then I rushed down the stairs.

I quickly looked and picked two men with spears next to them, "Brutus and Felix! With me! We have to confirm a griffin and its rider are dead." I rushed out the door, and the two made to catch up with me. Exiting the tower, I oriented myself and waited for the two. I moved at a light jog, figuring the quicker we got there, the more disoriented the beast and rider would be from the hard landing.

Felix was next to me, "If it landed on a roof, it would be a pain to get up there!"

Brutus got next to me on the other side, "Did Blaze shoot it down?"

"Why are you asking? What does it matter?" I asked with my eyes focused ahead, figuring out where to go. The streets were empty, but large wooden barriers in alleys were ready to be deployed, which hindered us from taking shortcuts.

"We have a large silver waged on whether or not he would shoot one down," Brutus admitted.

"You owe him the silver. There!" I pointed. A large creature struggled in the dark shadows of a narrow side street. "Glowstones out!" I said, racing forward.

The griffin was trying to stand, but its wing bent downward, and a bone protruded from its front right leg as well. "I do not see the rider," Felix commented as we approached swiftly. The beak of the griffin snapped at us

as we approached. Brutus and Felix flanked the creature with spears in hand. I noticed a figure in the alley behind the griffin. The figure was wrapped in a dark cloak and was using the wall of the building to stand.

“I see the rider. The griffin is blocking the alley to protect it. See if you can distract it long enough for me to get past.” Brutus lunged at my comment, and I moved in the opposite direction. Felix added in his own spear work, and they slowly pulled the griffin away from the alley opening into the street. The rider, seeing this, started hobbling away down the alley. I moved to take advantage of the gap and raced forward.

The griffin lunged at me, clawing with its talons and snapping with its beak. I managed to get past it because the beast could not move well with the broken leg. Brutus drove his spear into the beast’s neck. It went deep, and Brutus yelled, “We got it! Get the rider!”

I sprinted into the alley to catch up with the rider. The smell of urine was prevalent. I thought, for being injured, the rider was moving decently fast. I caught up to the rider and hacked into their back with my short sword. Just before my sword connected, she spun, parried my blade with a dagger, and rolled away into a crouch.

My glowstone was out, and I could see her features now with her cloak in disarray. They were right; the riders of the griffins were small, elven women. The elf woman was maybe 5’8” but with a small frame outlined with tight black clothing under her dark cloak. Konstantin was right about their beauty as well. Large emerald eyes were on a heart-shaped face. Golden-brown hair graced her head, and it was pulled back into a tight ponytail. Her fierce and determined visage marred her beauty on seeing me. “I will kill you, legionnaire!” She spat threateningly.

Some blood trickled from her lips after her threat, and I wondered how badly she was injured from her crash. My training told me all her weight was on her right leg as her left was injured. Large booms sounded toward the outer wall, and she smiled wickedly at me, “Your city will return to us, and the duke’s army will not save you!” She taunted me and slid a step back in retreat.

I was finding it hard to attack her. She looked like a female teenager, albeit with pointy ears. My past life instincts told me this was just a girl. I relaxed slightly and stood. Maybe she would be okay with being taken prisoner? “Can you just...” She dropped her dagger and pressed her hands together. A large ball of fire formed between her hands. Fuck.

I stepped forward to get her within the ten-foot range of my dimensional space. I had to angle the cube down to get her into an open portion of the cube. My mind churned what to do—remove her head? Her heart? In an instant, I had outlined a box around where her heart was. I saw her as a young woman, not an enemy, and it felt wrong, so I enlarged the box to her entire body and sent her into storage. There was a brief tug-of-war moment as she resisted going into the space, but she vanished.

As expected, my aether bottomed out, and I got slightly lightheaded from emptying all my aether. Well, it worked, but what was I going to do with an elf girl trapped in my dimensional space? I turned and returned to Brutus and Felix, who were stabbing the griffin. It was almost dead, barely moving and bleeding out. “I got her! Let’s get back to the tower. Those explosions do not sound good.”

Injured men were already retreating from the outer wall as we entered the main thoroughfare from the Trader’s Gate. We went against the crowd but quickly found our company carrying Castile away from the tower. Konstantin spotted us, “Back to the Legion Hall. The enemy has too many mages!” We fell in with our company, but I noticed we were three men short as we ran from the outer wall.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: This is not or will ever be a harem tale. The MC will have relationships (most likely not with this elf). That being said, I was debating back and forth on the elf. Kill her and take the fire essence? Keep her in his dimensional space with no one knowing, and somewhere down the line, release her to some utility....she casts her formed fireball at an enemy. Her brother is threatening to kill the MC... “Oh? Did we kill your sister? You mean this one?” Or even just release her eventually and let her go. I don’t know....lots of options. He mainly imprisoned her because of his reluctance to kill a young woman. Let me know in the comments if an edit is needed (this is the third edit so far on this chapter). I mean, the MC has a griffin egg...a dungeon essence collector...a magical pendant from a dungeon...he basically likes to collect things. Sorry, I am rambling. Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Chapter 52: Bad News

I quickly found out Castile was being carried, not because she was injured, but because she was exhausted. The only glimpse I got of her was of sunken

eyes that were a struggle for her to keep open. I tried to figure out who was missing as we moved to the Legion Hall.

I went through the archers in my head and did not see Caius, one of the archer specialists in our company. That made sense since he was on the wall. The other person was...Lysander, our backup cook. Was it wrong that my first thought was joy that I would never have to eat his cooking again?

The Legion Hall was lit with oil lamps as we all rushed inside. Delmar ordered, "Those packs and weapons there," he pointed at one wall stacked with dozens of packs and weapons. I moved with others to shoulder one of the burdens. It was a pack full of quivers and packets of rations. I assumed they had been stored here in case we needed them on the outer wall. Now that it had fallen, we would use them at the inner city wall.

Castile was placed on the table as Adrian added, "Everyone eats and drinks. We move on in fifteen minutes."

I moved to sit next to Pavel, one of the archers. "What happened in the tower?" I said while eating some thick, salty, sweet crackers on one of the tables.

Pavel was dripping with sweat. He sounded tired as he repeatedly flexed his forearm, probably exhausted after firing dozens of arrows. "We managed to halt the flood of scaling ladders. As the fog started to return, Blaze shot down one of the griffin riders." Pavel took a long pull from his canteen in a pause.

"Regis and Caius were hit with attacks. Killed on impact," Pavel's voice sounded hollow as he had been paired with Regis. They bunked together and shared a lot of patrols together.

After giving him some time, I asked, "So, how did the outer wall fall?"

He brought out one of the wrapped meals Lirkin had made us. I left my satchel in the tower when I went to find the griffin. He handed his meal to me, and I unwrapped it. Thick-cut glazed bacon chunks were between a dense bread smothered in butter and thin strips of red marinated bell pepper strips. I ate it while he started to open another one for himself.

"After the griffin went down in the city, the Bartirdians pressed forward with all their men. The fog enveloped them as they advanced, and we started firing blindly into the fog. I guess our mages did not have any more spells to push

away the fog. Their archers got in range, and Castile and Gregor screened us from their arrows for a while, but Gregor's aether ran out first," he shook his head. "When the enemy realized it, they attacked his tower with explosive magic."

Adrian sat down on the other side of me, and picked up the tale, "The tower that Gregor was in was quickly overwhelmed by the attacking mages. Castile did her best to thwart their casting, but there were too many for her to defend our tower and dispel their magic."

I guessed, "And she probably could not see well in the fog either."

Adrian smiled tightly, "No, Castile had no trouble seeing in fog. There were just too many spells being cast at us. She exhausted herself trying to protect Gregor before his tower collapsed." While chewing on something, he continued, "When Castile was swaying on her feet, Delmar and I picked her up and carried her away. The fog was thick enough that the regulars did not see us pull out of the tower. We really had no choice with the state Castile was in."

Pavel put his food down, "How many mages do the Bartiradians have?"

"At least nine assaulted the walls at our position," Adrian said, standing and finishing his food. Lysander barged into the common room. I was happy to see him—as long as he never cooked for me again.

He shouted, "They have formed beyond the gate already and attacked the first barricade."

Adrian swore softly, "They are moving too fast!"

Delmar had gotten a stretcher to carry Castile, but she sat up and waived him off. She swung her legs down and stood unsteadily. She spoke with command, "They are moving recklessly into the city. The regulars will inflict heavy losses on them. We will spend our time getting ready for them on the inner wall with the city guard."

Delmar looked across the room, "Eryk and Brutus! Flank Castile and make sure she makes it to the villa!"

I shrugged on the heavy pack and moved to Castile, “I can walk!” she rasped as she moved outside into the foggy streets. The fog was clearing, though, and I was not the only one to notice.

“They stopped fucking with the weather,” someone shouted.

Adrian shouted, “Do not tarry! Move to the inner city! Once that fog clears, the rest of their griffin riders will see us from above the city.”

We shuffled off, and even though Castile did not want the help, we still crutch-carried her to speed up her progress. Castile weighed almost nothing between us. Castile started talking to herself as we moved, her anger flaring. “Defend an entire city with three mages! Duke Octavian is going to pay for this ridiculous assignment.”

I decided to tell her what the rider said, “Castile, the griffin rider I took care of—she said the Duke was not going to save us. They know what the plan was.”

Castile barked at me angrily, “Of course they do! It was a stupid plan!” I sensed her anger and thought it better than to add any more input from me. We hustled through the misty streets lit dimly by the blue moon and oil lamps.

I noticed a few groups of soldiers and city guards starting to pull out more barricades. Brutus noticed as well, “Well, that is a good sign.”

Castile looked up, “No, the outer wall fell too quickly. The city guards were to have all the barricades in place for the regulars to retreat through the city while bleeding the Bartiriadian’s advance. If too many regulars fall on the outer wall, their retreat will fast through the city.”

We reached the familiar inner gate with the orchards beyond, and Delmar ordered us to take Castile to the villa and guard her. I dropped my pack, and Brutus did likewise. The orchards seemed eerily quiet as we practically dragged Castile between us. My back ached a bit when we finally reached the door, “Not upstairs. Put me on a cot in the ballroom,” Castile ordered.

The legionnaire cots were still set up, and most were messy. Castile selected the nearest one and collapsed onto it, asleep in moments. I motioned Brutus to the large entryway into the room. I closed the door, and we both stood on one side so we could whisper to each other while Castile slept.

“How long will it take her to recover her aether?” Brutus asked me.

“I am not sure. It takes me more than half a day, but I am guessing my aether pool is much smaller than hers,” I whispered while using the wall for support.

We watched Castile sleep and waited in silence. I felt the need to get some rest myself and hoped we would be relieved soon. Konstantin and Orson, our two company scouts, came after about six hours. Konstantin informed us, “The enemy has secured the lower city, and they are pushing through the streets rapidly. Delmar expects them to reach us in less than a day.”

“Do we head back to the gate?” I asked.

“No, you can get a few hours of sleep. Lirkin is preparing meals. I will wake you two, and you can bring the meals to the gate,” Konstantin said. I started to head toward my small room, and Konstantin grabbed my arm, “Sleep in here, Eryk. I don’t want to be yelling for you if I need you.”

I found one of the cots with some seemingly clean bedding. It even had a pillow, unlike most of the others. I started to remove my armor, and Brutus tapped my shoulder and shook his head, no. I guess we were sleeping in armor. The pad was thin and smelled like grass mixed with wet socks. I put my head at the other end, and it was only mildly better smelling. I missed my soft mattress with its faint floral perfume smell, and griffin-down pillow.

I thought about dragging the mattress from the small room out here, but instead, I tried to get comfortable on the tiny cot, but the looming threat of the Bartiradians tearing through the city made it difficult. Tossing and turning, I tried to find something to think about to distract my mind from the threat.

My mind kept turning to the body in my dimensional storage. The elf woman I had placed there because I was reluctant to kill her. How was I going to remove her from the space? She would tell other people what I did to her—but then again, she was in stasis. She was also forming a fire spell in her hands when I placed her there. Would that spell still be forming when I removed her from the space?

Then there was also the possibility that if I killed her and then used the collector on her, I could get another essence with a magic affinity—possibly fire. Castile had told me I had consumed an earth essence. I had zero affinity before consuming the essence, and the pain of adding the new affinity to my core was unpleasant and painful. Consuming another affinity essence that I

had an attribute of zero in was not something I was ready to do again at the moment.

I do not know when I fell asleep, but it was not enough for how long I slept. Orson shook me awake, "Help Lirkin bring meals out to the men at the gate. Send back four me to get some rest."

Lirkin had baskets filled with meals. Each basket had two straps, making them an ad-hoc backpack. Lirkin noted, "There are about forty meals. Give the extra to the city guards at the gates. The hard apples should be saved for later." That was all he said as he kept preparing food. He was using the cooking to distract himself from the impending fight.

We walked through the orchards, and the clear morning sky had trickles of smoke from the lower city. I was expecting more destruction and commented, "There is not much smoke; maybe the enemy is not pressing."

Brutus shrugged, "Their mages are probably keeping any fires under control. They want to capture the city as intact as possible. The less damage they do, the happier the civilians will be when they assert their rule." That made sense.

We brought the food into the tiny gatehouse room. A half dozen of our company were sleeping in here. Our entry woke them, and they decided fresh, cooked food was more important than their sleep. As the men took the food, I went to the gate. Two barricades were in front of the gate, and most of our men were behind the second one. Looking up to the top of the wall, the parapets on the inner city wall were narrow, just a few feet wide, and four of our archers were up there.

Adrian was nearby, so I informed him, "Orson said to send four men in to rest. Castile is still sleeping." He nodded and sent Mateo, Felix, Kolm, and Lysander to the villa.

"Where do you want me and Brutus?" I asked, looking out into the quiet city streets. A barricade was about 200 yards down the main street, with men in city guard uniforms standing behind it.

"Second barricade here is fine. Once the Bartiradians reach this position, we will hold the gate to let the regulars and city guard retreat into the orchards. We will fall back to the Citadel ourselves. I do not think we are going to be able to use the aqueduct to escape," he said with heavy words.

“Why?” My voice cracked a little from being dry and surprised.

He pointed up, and I saw five griffins circling high above. “They probably only have scouts on the route, but as soon as the griffins see us, they will send their cavalry to intercept us.”

“Can we not leave in the cover of darkness?” I asked hopefully.

“Most likely, one or two of those riders has an artifact or spell to see in darkness. The word from the regular army general is they are scouring the city for the downed griffin rider you killed. Where did you leave the body? I am surprised they have not found it,” Adrian asked with interest.

“Huh,” I said heavily. “Why was the elf someone important?”

“One of their general’s sisters. Or at least that is what the cryptic message from the regular soldier indicated when he reported a few hours ago. Don’t worry; once they find the body, they will calm down a bit before pressing forward. Hopefully, the Duke’s army gets here quickly.”

Of course, the elf I had trapped in my dimensional storage was the sister of the general scouring the city to find her and seek vengeance against the soldier who killed her.

Chapter 53: The General

A tall, muscled elf walked through the partially destroyed Trader’s Gate. A mithril helm of his ancestors framed his stern face. General Clalyn Glavien paused and watched his men search the lower city’s houses. A mixture of men, elves, and dwarf soldiers entered each house and pulled out any occupants. After questioning them, they were allowed to return inside and bar the door. His men were checking the civilian’s hands for calluses and confirmed they were not soldiers. They would be brought to the camp outside the walls if there was doubt. It was imperfect but much quicker than bringing in a Truthseeker for each suspect.

Macha City was going to be secured long before the Talhian Duke arrived. Clalyn’s mages were already fortifying the outer walls to welcome the Duke when he arrived with his army. He walked further into the city, smelling the faint odor of smoke and ozone laced heavily with the dampness. His three

personal guards trailed behind him, alert for any threats. A human male soldier raced to the General, causing his guards to tense. He gave them a hand sign to relax as he knew the soldier, "General Glavien. The downed griffin is not far. If you follow me, I will bring you to it."

His heart ached, and he ignored the sweat that had been sitting in his eyes and followed. The walk was short as promised, and he quickly came to the corpse of the griffin called Moonclaw by his sister. He knelt and petted the soft feathers along the neck of the beast as he had done a hundred times before when he visited his sister in the rookery for the griffins. Moonclaw had been the runt of the clutch but had grown into an impressive mount for his sister. He had been incredibly docile for his species, easily the friendliest griffin he had ever known.

The guards and soldier let him pet the flying mount and waited for him to grieve. His elven clan, the Glavien, had left the Elven Kingdom of Esenhem almost a thousand years ago. The Esenhem elves did not see the threat of the Telhians. His father did, and the Telhians were prejudiced against all non-human races. So his father migrated to the Bartiradian Kingdom, and his descendants have served in the military ever since, fighting the Telhians. For those with the Glavien name, it was considered a right of passage to fight the expansionist Telhians.

He objected to his younger sister joining the Skyriders. Raelia should have served as a minor mage or assisted at the war college. The front lines were not for her. But Raelia wanted to fly, follow her brother, and contribute to the Neverending War. She had amazing empathy and some small skill with magic; air, and fire being her strongest attributes. "Clalyn?" One of his guards, who had been inspecting the scene, broke his focus on petting the dead creature.

General Clalyn Glavien stood sternly, "Have they found her body yet?"

His guard, an old elf and friend named Alhar, shook his head no, "Her blood trail went into this ally and further up the street and just disappeared."

"So there is still a chance?" The general let his voice crack slightly, licked his lips and swallowed.

Alhar gave an indecisive look, "The legionnaire we captured told us they were without a healing mage, and we cut off their access to resupply before more healing potions could be sent." He inhaled, "The griffin clipped that building

there,” he pointed. “And crashed hard into the street. The hard landing would have seriously wounded her. She carried some healing potions,” he offered hopefully.

Clalyn finished, “If they took her prisoner, they would have seized her potions, and then she probably would not last long and would be in serious pain based on the blood trail.”

One of the griffins scouting above landed not far away, and the rider dismounted and moved to the General, “The fog has cleared, and it is going to be a difficult path through the city with the barricades. No signs of your sister, but the remaining legionnaires are at the inner city wall.”

The General nodded sharply, “So there is only one mage remaining?”

“For the legion, yes. We have seven non-combatant mages from the civilians rounded up already,” Alhar answered next to him.

The griffin rider added, “The weather mages have inconvenienced the Duke, and we surprised them with how quickly we took the city. They should be able to slow the Duke’s army and give you at least two days to secure the city for its defense.”

The rider waited for an order. Clalyn nodded, still distracted, “After your mount is rested, pass word, keep an eye out for the remaining mage. That is our last true threat in the city. She managed to frustrate our contingent of spell-slingers during the assault.” He gave it a brief thought, “I prefer to see her captured for public execution, but if she endangers our mages, end her.”

The griffin rider nodded and returned to her mount. “Alhar, show me where the trail stopped.” Alhar nodded and led the General, trailed by the other two personal guards, to the small street.

“It was here,” the guard, who was a master tracker, said. “I searched the area, and not a trace of blood anywhere past this point. Mage Finnius has been summoned, General.”

Mage Finnius? The illusionist could replay whatever happened here. Did he really want to see his sister’s fate played out before him? He had lost two brothers to the Neverending War. He nodded slowly and waited for the mage. He began to inspect the likely place where his sister had been killed. He

noticed squads of his soldiers protecting his position by stationing themselves at the intersections.

Mage Finnius arrived. He was a balding middle-aged human with a slight stutter, but he also had excellent illusionist skills and some clairvoyant affinity. When combined, he could replay scenes that happened in a particular area less than three days past. Alhar instructed him, "Set the area of your spell here to here."

Finnius began his work of chaulking out the boundaries of the spell with the silvery chalk. The larger the area, the more aether the mage would take to cast his spell of viewing the past. It was a good hour of setting up the containment area. When he finished, he addressed the General, "C-Clalyn. I have enough a-aether for about f-five minutes. I can adjust the s-speed and replay the image as you d-direct within that time." The mage was sweating from his work and was still tired from the assault last night.

"Proceed," Clalyn directed. The spell forms on the ground glowed in the blue aetheric light, and Finnius sped through the images till a flash of movement occurred. Clalyn had sorted the images even at high speed and already knew what had happened; his throat tightened, and his skin went cold. The mage rewound till the start of the action and played it at normal speed.

Raelia was fleeing down the street. Her leg was broken, and she was bleeding from a head wound and her mouth. She either had bitten her tongue or had internal bleeding. Alhar offered unhelpfully, "She must have bit her tongue on the landing." A look silenced his friend as the General no longer needed his input. The fate of his sister was known to him.

Finnius slowed the play of the image and watched as a legionnaire entered the area and attempted to slash Raelia in the back. Raelia spun and defended herself masterfully. She had one of the best combat senses of any soldier he had ever seen and smiled. Raelia stood and began speaking to the legionnaire who had pursued her. Finnius' magic did not give sound, just images. But Clalyn smiled, knowing the vehemence his sister would have yelled at the legionnaire. Even with her dying breath, she would oppose the Telhian Empire.

The images were clear and life-like, "Freeze it, mage!" Clalyn ordered. He moved into the spell's area, carefully stepping over the silver chalk lines, and studied his sister's face, frozen in time. Rage on her face directed at the legionnaire and probably from losing Moonclaw. She loved that griffin more

than anything else in this world. She had been reckless as the fog cleared was cleared by the enemy mages. Griffin riders were never to engage the enemy, only scout and deliver messages when magic sending was not available. She had flown too low to the Gate Tower to give reconnaissance against orders or maybe to attack. Foolish Raelia, always trying to prove herself. He studied her face—remembering every detail as it was probably the last time he would have the chance.

“Play it slowly,” he ordered, and the illusion moved in front of him. Raelia was fighting the pain and cupped her hands to create a spell form for a fireball. Clalyn smiled, remembering how proud she had been when she cast that spell for the first time. And then she was gone. He spun on the mage about to ask him to rewind the spell, but the legionnaire was still there with a pained look on his face. Finnius paused the spell again so the General could study the image of his sister’s executioner.

He stepped in front of the legionnaire, a tall human with sweaty black hair peeking out of his steel legion helm. He had brown eyes, a square jawline, and a look of disbelief on his face. “Rewind and replay again, mage,” he ordered Finnius.

The mage obeyed, and Clalyn studied the legionnaire as his sister repeatedly disappeared behind him. Replaying the actions of the killer in front of him. Finally, the spell expired, Finnius exhausted of aether. He turned to Alhar and his other two personal guards, “We have a very dangerous enemy. A Legion soldier with a spell form from the void magic affinity.” His voice was hard. Void magic had erased his sister from existence, and he would have his vengeance.

Alhar understood as he had also watched the legionnaire not create a true spell to vanish Raelia. He turned and announced to the dozen captains around the General, “His range should be limited, so when your men find him, do not get within twenty feet.” The other two bodyguards nodded as did the captains of the other units nearby. Alhar asked the General, “Do you want me to handle this?”

Clalyn considered the request. Alhar had been a Ranger, assassin, and scout for nearly three hundred years. He could have commanded his own forces, but instead chose to serve and protect the son of Alliston Glavien, Clalyn’s father. Alhar could be sent and seek vengeance for Raelia. Alhar had also trained Raelia and been like a father figure to her. He assumed the stern Alhar was probably eager to do just that.

“No, I want to see the look in his eyes when he joins my sister in oblivion.” He murmured.

Chapter 54: Escape

My eyes kept wandering to the sky and the griffins. After five hours of studying the flyers, I think there were nine total. They patrolled in a team of five and then in a team of four, switching every two hours. I assumed the team of four was missing one member. Did I feel guilt at being responsible in part for the missing griffin? No, we were at war and fighting for our lives. The fact that I could not kill the young-looking elf-woman weighed on me. I knew elves were much older than they appeared, but I still related her to a young woman from my past life, and my instinct was to protect her.

A few hours into my post, Konstantin was standing next to me at the barricade. Brutus and Felix were at the other end of our barricade. Konstantin asked, “Eryk, do you remember when I took you around the city when we arrived?” He was talking quietly, so only I could hear.

“Yes, you showed me the weaknesses of the city’s defense,” I replied in a whisper, wondering where he was going with this.

“If you had to leave the city by one of those weak points, which would it be?” Konstantin questioned me. It was his typical teaching moment question.

I gave it some hard thought; the perimeter of the outer city wall was miles long. The south and east had the invading army. The aqueduct to the northwest headed into the rocky hills was probably my choice as the ground in that area was covered in large scattered and quarried stones, making it difficult terrain. Calvary could not move, and many of the stones were large enough to hide among. The original escape plan was to walk along the aqueduct into the hills. The aqueduct was about forty feet above the rocky terrain below and about ten feet wide, meaning the griffins would easily spot us. It was not the best route since we were concerned with the flyers spotting us. “Still the aqueduct. Drop from it and move under it to escape into the hills,” was my answer.

Konstantin nodded, “Not bad. They will have scouts on the ground, but probably only a few, as their efforts will be focused on securing the city.”

Konstantin was silent for a while before asking, "What do you think about the washout from the sewer?"

"You never showed that to me, and you said it was full of slimes," I noted. Also, the idea of trudging through shit and piss again was not my first choice. But I would do it if it was a guarantee to save our lives.

"It actually empties about two miles south into the swamp, but you would have to submerge and swim under the water for almost a hundred yards from what I have been told. The army encampment is also close to the exit. There will be scouts on the ground near the aqueduct, but I agree the aqueduct is still our best option." Konstantin seemed to be thinking, and some commotion behind me had me turn.

Castile was in full legionnaire garb and walking among the men. Her face was slightly more gaunt, but her stoicism had returned after a long recovery sleep. The metal legion helmet looked odd on her, and Konstantin explained, "She does not want to be targeted by the enemy, so she is blending in." As if in response to Castile's appearance, a griffin flew lower, and some archers responded on the wall above to chase it away. The arrows fell well short of the griffin, but it gained altitude anyway.

Castile, Adrian, and Delmar moved to the first barricade to look down the street and into the city beyond. Adrian explained the situation to Castile, "The enemy has paused their advance. They will attack the barricades again in force tonight."

Castile asked, "Why are they waiting? The regulars and city guard are outnumbered."

Delmar answered, "They are slowed down because they are searching every house as they go. I think they found the body of the griffin rider they were searching for because they stopped pressing through the city. They did take heavy losses in their haste to get past the barricades. I believe they will attack at night because their elves and dwarves have excellent low-light vision, giving them an advantage. The messengers say the humans in the Bartiradian ranks are just harassing the barricades to wear out the defenders while the elves and dwarves are resting."

Castile nodded and went into a focused state I now understood was her sending out her all-seeing-eye. We all waited for her to return from her scouting. She was sweating a little bit, and it was not from the sun. Using her

aether seemed to stress her. From Damian, I knew a mage was limited in how much aether they could use in a day based on their aether tolerance. Castile seemed to be close to her limit.

She suddenly blinked like she had something in her eye and breathed heavily, "They are still bringing their army into the city. They are fortifying the outer wall as well and rebuilding the Trader's Gate with their mages. We can not get trapped in the city with them. We will leave tonight; we have already failed the assignment."

Adrian seemed shocked, "Are you sure, Castile? You might be named a coward if we leave before the inner city walls fall. Duke Octavian will use that against you."

"As soon as Durandus got himself killed, this assignment was doomed to fail," Castile said sharply. "What are our options for leaving the city tonight?" Castile asked the men present.

Adrian called for Orson, the other scout, to join them at the barricade. Brutus, Felix, and I were in the background while Castile, Adrian, Delmar, Konstantin, and Orson discussed the company's options but were close enough to overhear.

Orson offered the first suggestion, "We could go over the north wall and head northeast and then circle north to west. The woods are thick, and it looks like the enemy has avoided them due to the pixies. Also, their griffin spotters would be useless to find us in the trees."

Delmar disagreed, "It would take us too close to their outriders. They would surely spot us and send cavalry to pursue us. I do not want to be running on foot through those woods at night. The pixies are bad enough, but running on foot from men on horseback would make it a terrible flight."

Konstantin offered, "I think the best plan is still the aqueduct. Eryk suggested we get outside the city wall and then make our way through the boulder field under the aqueduct as cover." Castile briefly turned to look at me. "It would be much slower movement, but we would have some cover from the griffins."

Adrian added his thoughts, "Maybe during the height of their attack on the barricades tonight, the griffins will be too distracted to notice us. How many scouts do you think they have in the boulder fields and on the aqueduct?"

Orson answered, "None on the aqueduct unless they are invisible. We can see out to maybe two miles from the Citadel's tallest tower. Among the boulders? Maybe as many as a dozen. But best guess, half that."

Konstantin offered another option, "We could hide in the sewers and hope the Duke retakes the city. At least it will be defensible." Castile had a sour look, and no one else looked thrilled at the prospect either. Whether that was because we would be in the sewers, being essentially cornered, or relying on the Duke to rescue us was not voiced.

I couldn't hold my tongue any longer and asked, "What about the regulars and the city guard? Are we just leaving them to defend themselves?" A half dozen upper city guards were at the gates behind us, mixed with our company but out of earshot.

The group all turned hard eyes on me. I guess my input was not welcome. Castile explained it to me, "The regulars will be taken prisoner and sent back to work camps in the Bartiradian Kingdom. City guards will be made to work in the city doing repairs but will eventually earn their freedom after a few years. That has been the Bartiradian policy."

Castile stepped close to me and looked up into my eyes with a hard stare, "The captured legionnaires and legion mages of the Empire will be executed publicly." Castile let that sink in before adding, "We are a symbol of the Telhian Emperor and need to be made an example of by showing our defeat publicly."

"That was not something they mentioned in the brochure when I signed up," I griped softly. I had thought the absolute worst-case scenario would be we would surrender and be prisoners of war.

Castile ignored my comment and asked the others, "How many of Gregor's men reached us?"

Adrian pulled out a slip of paper, "Eleven, seven combat capable and two in rough shape. They are all in the Citadel now recovering."

Castile nodded. "Leave them there for now. If we use the aqueduct escape route, we will collect them then. Can the two injured men move?"

"No," Delmar answered, "One has a shattered leg, and the other has some head trauma. They brought a few of the simple healing salves with them but

used all their healing potions. We would need stretchers to get them out.” Castille pursed her lips at the news. She seemed to be considering her options, looking down the street.

“The aqueduct it is. At the peak of the fighting tonight, we will move to the Citadel and climb down to it. I can screen us for a few minutes from the griffin riders while we descend to the boulders. Make sure the men are well rested.” Castile turned and went into the orchards, with Delmar following her.

Adrian ordered Brutus, Felix, and I to the tiny room in the gatehouse. Inside, we found nine men trying to sleep. I found my way to an open spot on the floor with some blankets and tried to get some rest. The small room was a mix of sweat, body odor, and mildew. The smells did not bother me. The heavy breathing, loud snoring, and whispered conversations made it difficult to fall asleep.

I closed my eyes, but all I could think about was getting captured and hung for being a legionnaire. Somehow, I drifted off. It felt like I had just shut my eyes when I was woken to eat and take my next watch. The meal was bread, hard sausage, and cheese. All washed down with lemon water.

Brutus sat next to me as we ate. “She is just like Durandus.”

I asked, “Who, Castile? Why do you say that?”

He chewed while he talked, “All mages are alike, I guess. She is planning to leave the regulars and the city guard to defend the city themselves,” he answered.

I defended Castile, “What can thirty legionnaires and one mage do against an army? Besides, I think Durandus, Gregar, and Castile were sent here to die anyway. Living through this clusterfuck would be an accomplishment.”

“Clusterfuck...” He tested the word. “You have some unique sayings in Tsingia.” We ate our food in silence for a while before Brutus added, “I changed my mind. Castile is not like Durandus. He would have been only concerned with getting himself out of this clusterfuck. Castile seems to want to get her entire company out with her.”

Adrian called for us to come to gate duty. As I exited the small room, a steady stream of injured regulars passed through the gate into the orchard. Delmar was talking with a city guard captain not far away. The look of concern on his

face told me something was up. The sun was starting to set, and it looked like the Bartiradians were increasing their activity in the lower city.

We were positioned at the gate, behind the first of the two barricades, and Delmar was now talking with Adrian, and they both started to talk with legionnaires. When Adrian reached us, I could tell the news was not good. He talked to us quietly, "Word has reached us that the regular army plans to surrender tonight if the Duke has not arrived by sunset. The general knows he can not hold the city against so many enemy mages. The Bartiradians control the entire lower city and will quickly run through the upper city if the army capitulates. At first dark, we are moving to the Citadel." He looked at the disappearing sun, "About thirty minutes from now."

Adrian left us to talk to Felix and Mateo on the other end of our barricade. Brutus whispered, "Okay, maybe Castile saw this coming." He turned around and looked into the orchard where dozens of wounded soldiers lay. He looked back at the city, "The Bartiradian mages will have recovered their aether as well. I do not blame them for surrendering." He was forgiving the regular soldiers.

As twilight faded, flashes of light and thunder roiled from within the city below us. Adrian turned and studied the flashes in the waning light. They were much closer than I expected, less than half a mile away. Thunderous booms echoed with the flashes. Adrian motioned some city guards forward to replace Felix and Mateo, and they left to head back into the orchards. He did the same for us. I could also see our archers on top of the wall heading down as well, with no one replacing them.

Konstantin waved us inside the gates, "Move to the Citadel. We are regrouping there with Castile."

Brutus and I walked past the soldiers in the orchards who gave us spiteful looks. It was obvious we were retreating, giving up on the city. I felt guilty about it myself. But knowing the army was likely to surrender soon, I let the guilt wash off. These men would be taken prisoner, according to Castile. If I was captured, I would be hung publicly.

We entered the Citadel and followed others up the stairs into the large audience chamber. A raised throne dominated one end of the room. Massive glow stones lit the chamber in silver sconces. Castile was walking slowly around the chamber with Delmar on her hip.

The remainder of Gregor's men were stirring from their bedrolls, getting ready to leave. I recognized a few faces from Durandus' men who had joined them. Castile moved to check on two men who had not risen. She gave the one with a bloody headwrap a potion from her robes.

Even from this distance, I knew it was a lesser healing potion. She must have been saving it for herself. Everyone was assembled after thirty minutes. Men were bringing in our packs and setting them against the far wall.

As the legionnaire to whom Castile had given the potion stood, Castile turned to everyone. "We are going to move to the aqueduct and make our way out of the city. I will be able to screen us from above for a few minutes. The goal will be to move to the damaged section of the aqueduct outside the walls and descend the ropes. We will follow the aqueduct to the reservoir and then make haste to connect with the Duke's army."

Delmar stepped forward, "We expect the army to surrender shortly, which means the city guard will follow shortly after. Haste is important. Strip Artorius of his legion gear and bring him to one of the chambers. We can not carry him. He will have to tell the Bartiradians he is a baron's son," he indicated to the man with the shattered leg.

One of the men quipped, "See Artorious. You have a tower fall on you, and before you know it, you are a First Citizen and telling us what to do!" A few of the men chuckled to make him feel better, but we were leaving him behind, and it would not take much for the enemy to figure out he was legion. It was a death sentence.

I managed to find my pack in the jumble on the wall and shouldered it. Adrian and Delmar were giving orders to the new men. We were soon moving through the Citadel in pairs, Brutus being mine. We entered a dimly lit ballroom and went to a balcony overlooking the aqueduct going into the city. The blue moon lit the expanse before us. The rocky, difficult-to-pass hillside ran miles into the distance, the aqueduct looking like a narrow raised road cutting through the hills in the quickly fading light.

The northern forest was to the right, and I could see a number of lights on the edge of the massive trees. The Bartiradians clearly had a number of men at the edge of the forest, and I was glad we had not chosen that route. We were expecting some scouts in the rocky terrain, but hopefully not too many.

It was a good thirty-foot drop to reach the aqueduct from the balcony, and Konstantin was already directing men down ropes. From my understanding, this was the easiest access point to the aqueduct. If we took to the aqueduct further into the city, then the griffins would spot us more easily. Castile was on the balcony scanning the skies for griffins as we made our way down. We were shielded from them for now, but they would easily spot us as soon as we moved away from the Citadel.

After I descended myself, I was directed to remain close to the Citadel wall by Adrian. Soon, all thirty-five of us were on the aqueduct under the balcony. The night air was humid and hot and added to the sweat from our anxiety. Castile seemed indecisive and spent a brief moment using her all-seeing-eye spell. She was whispering with Delmar and Adrian about what she saw.

Adrian passed the message to my group, "The sky is clear. We will move tightly under Castile's shadows. Ten palace guards guard the aqueduct gate. Be wary, as they may be the enemy in disguise."

Castile nodded, and her shadow smoke oozed from her body, forming a large disc above us. The blue-lit moon was blocked out of our sight, and we all moved around the mage and moved with haste along the ten-foot wide channel in the aqueduct toward the outer wall. The aqueduct was like a raised road that brought water from a reservoir high in the hills.

A large gate was over the aqueduct at the outer wall. Only five guards were at the gate, not the ten we expected. Konstantin moved forward cautiously and talked to them, and they opened the gates for us to pass. Adrian was at my side and said, "We followed the Bartiradian mage here. He killed all the guards and escaped along the aqueduct."

As I passed the palace guards at the gate, they nodded to us in respect. It was confusing to me because we were abandoning the city. I thought we would get the same hard stares that the regular army gave us when we passed through the orchards.

It was not far as we moved past the gate to the collapsed section. There were large planks here to bridge the twenty-foot gap and a steady stream of water falling on the rocks below. The original plan was to cross the gap and move quickly along the aqueduct. Now, we were dropping ropes and moving down to the ground to avoid being spotted by the griffins.

Orson was asking Castile how much longer we had for her screen as I passed. I did not catch her response before I was repelling. A heavy mist was in the air at the bottom of the splashing waterfall of the damaged aqueduct. We moved away quickly so our clothes did not get too damp from the spray.

Castile was the last one down, and I heard Konstantin talking to her, “Flavius, Orson, and I will scout ahead. They must have scouts among the rocks, hopefully not many.”

The three scouts moved forward into the darkness. We followed shortly after. Spirits were high as we moved under the cover of the aqueduct, as it seemed we had not been spotted so far. Our feet crunched on stone, and we weaved between large boulders in the moonlight. The ground was uneven with large chunks of stone, and many men stumbled in the low light.

Konstantin’s clear voice cut the night from the far left, “Enemy scouts!” Arrows started flying among us. A few men were hit as we moved for cover. Grunts of pain, but no screams came from the men who were hit.

Our archers started to respond, but I could not see anyone in the distance among the boulders. Then I remembered the enemy had elves and dwarves with excellent low-light vision. We were at a huge disadvantage. Konstantin came rushing back to us and took cover with us. “There are at least four.”

Flavius arrived shortly after as well, “Orson is hit. He is twenty yards out.”

Adrian barked loudly at everyone, “We can not stay here. They will get reinforcements. We have to move!”

As if in response to the urgency, a bright white pyrotechnic burst in the night sky above our position under the aqueduct. This was a clear signal to the Bartiradians in the city of our position. Brutus rasped, “I hope they are too busy in the city to give a clusterfuck about us.” I did not take time to correct his usage of the new word I had taught him. We had other things to worry about.

Chapter 55: Desperation

The flash in the sky was definitely a signal. It made it bright enough for me to see we had three men with arrows in their torsos. Delmar was pulling everyone together with Konstantin to launch an attack to break through, “We

need to rush the archer's position. Everyone with a shield will lead the charge, followed by spearmen. Blaze, try and pick them off as we advance." Blaze was our best archer and looked eager for the challenge.

We were hiding behind one of the arch supports for the aqueduct. Konstantin added a new element to the plan, "I will take Eryk, Firth, and Wylie wide right to flank them."

We only spent moments dropping our packs to ready ourselves, and I asked Konstantin, "Why do you want me?"

"You are one of the fastest runners in the company, Eryk," he said quickly, but I did not think that was the case. I was among the tallest, but I did not think that made me one of the fastest.

As we prepared, Linus, the company medic, was using the healing salve he must have gotten from Gregor's men to close arrow wounds after extracting the arrow from the wounded. It would not heal internal damage but would at least prevent them from bleeding out. The main force with shields moved out as I disappeared around the corner of the aqueduct support with Konstantin and the other men.

As we heard arrows hitting shields, signaling our main force charge, Konstantin picked up into a run. In the moonlight, I noticed Orson in the open, his body at an awkward angle. I moved away from our group and paused to check on him, letting the other three get ahead. Orson had three arrows in him, two to the chest and one to the neck. He was definitely dead; another comrade lost.

I raced to catch Konstantin as the direction of the fight was easy to discern. An arrow whizzed by my face from the right. I took cover behind a rock. Even with the blue moon's brightness, I could not see further than fifty feet.

I waited and listened behind the boulder. Our men had reached the archers, and the sounds of swords contacting armor and flesh could be heard fifty yards away. A twang of a bow told me the archer that attacked me had fired an arrow toward the scrum. I had a general idea of the location of the archer now and sprinted right to circle behind him. A steady cadence of arrows came from the archer, so I located him quickly. He was on top of a waist-high boulder and focused on the fight a good distance away. I rushed over the rocky terrain and up onto the rock in an impressive leap. He sensed my approach and pivoted to fire his next arrow at me, but I closed on him too fast.

My blade pressed into his stomach and out his back as I used my momentum to pierce his leather armor. He shouted in pain and surprise as I drove him off the rock and onto the ground below. I landed on top of the archer with my full body weight, stunning him and giving me time to draw a dagger and press it up, under his chin, and into his brain. I was breathing heavily from the effort and adrenaline. I stood and swore. My left hand on the short sword was sprained badly, maybe broken, from the landing. I flexed it and started to heal the injury. As I calmed, my senses were suddenly flooded with the sound of battle, the smell of the elf, and the taste of salt from my sweat.

In the low light, I bent over and identified it as a male elf. I stood over him for moments, healing my wrist. The dead, glassy eyes of the elf were barely visible in the moonlight but still creeped me out. I considered taking his essence, but I didn't have time. The fighting had already ended, and Konstantin was already yelling for me.

I made a decision: I moved the entire body, with all of his gear, to storage. I was happy to note my aether did not bottom out. If he yielded an essence when I removed the body, it would be a good way to preserve a body in the future. I focused and pulled the sword embedded in the archer back into my hand from his body and rushed to join the company.

Adrian asked, "Did you get the other archer, Eryk?"

I nodded and then voiced, "Yes. And Orson is dead; he took three arrows."

Castile swore, "Damn, five more injured. Delmar, do you think we should leave behind a screen?"

There was silence as Castile was asking if we should leave men behind to slow pursuit. Konstantin answered for Delmar, "Not yet, Castile. Even though the flash told them where we were, they might be too busy in the city to send pursuit. Most likely, the five we killed were all the men they had in the area. If there are more, we should not give them time to form together for an ambush ahead of us."

Adrian picked up the call, and I noticed in the moonlight he was holding his arm in a sling with a broken-off arrow in his forearm, "Let us move out now!" He rallied everyone.

Castile added, "A griffin has already spotted us. I agree. They may not bother sending pursuit if we can get far enough away from the city. Blaze, stay close

to me. If a flyer gets close, I may have just enough aether to infuse one arrow.”

Someone handed me my pack, and I shouldered it. We were soon jogging parallel to the aqueduct, weaving again among the boulders. Someone tripped and fell hard every few minutes as the terrain was unforgiving, with sharp, pointed rocks difficult to see in the darkness. I fell once, banging my knee and cutting my palm. I healed both injuries as we proceeded forward away from the city.

“Now, Blaze!” Castile shouted. Blaze drew an arrow ahead of me and aimed it toward the sky. An unhappy squawk and a shadowy shape sailing away told us Blaze hit the griffin but did not down it. Blaze received compliments on his shot as we moved on. Hopefully, that was the only griffin following us. Our route was obvious, though, as we were following the aqueduct overhead.

As our run in the night progressed, a lot of men were starting to flag. Delmar called, “Short rest! Scouts to check out our trail behind!” Flavius and Konstantin moved away from the group to check behind us.

I sat heavily on a rock, took my canteen from my pack, and drained it. Firth scolded me, “Eryk, you should have saved some of that. We have hours of running left.” I nodded but knew I had plenty of water in my dimensional space.

Castile, Adrian, and Delmar discussed whether we should take time to climb the aqueduct. The stone was generally smooth, but two of our men carried a rope with them.

While I rested, I looked into the sky. “They are up there,” Firth said, watching with me. I could see a shadow blocking the stars, barely lit by the waning moon high above. Then, a second shape. “Yeah, they are not letting us go. Most likely, if the griffins are tracking us, they sent a sizable force after us,” Firth added heavily.

Konstantin returned first and went to talk with Castile and Delmar. Adrian was in discomfort but listened in. I was too far away to hear or see their faces clearly. Castile abruptly announced after their conversation, “Rest is over! We are moving now!”

Flavius caught up with us as we moved out, and I asked, “What did you see behind us?”

“Flashes of metal in the moonlight over a mile behind us. A hundred men, all on foot by Konstantin’s estimation,” Flavius said as he moved past me.

No rest was called for the next three hours, and I got a turn helping to carry Lirkin’s stretcher. There were four of us, and it was painful work as you were forced on a path through the stone field because you were tied to the other three men. My body took the abuse, stubbed toes, partial stumbles, and the uneven load caused severe spinal pain. No one complained, though. Lirkin had gotten an arrow in his hip and could not walk. There had been no discussion about leaving him behind.

We rotated our carrying positions every fifteen minutes, giving me a full hour on the task. I was not tired, but other men, especially those who only had their wounds closed and not healed, were starting to fail. Wylie was first. He stopped and knelt and spit thick flem. He had taken an arrow in the shoulder and could not use his left arm.

As Wylie knelt, so did Mateo to check in on him. Konstantin was in the back and called, “Halt and rest! Castile, I will check on our pursuers.”

I looked up and could no longer find the griffin shadows above us. I had not noticed the moon’s blue light leaving us as the night progressed, and we only had starlight now. Sitting, I studied a large boulder. Maybe I could hollow it out with my ability and hide inside? I could make a tiny access at the bottom. It would bottom out my aether and leave me corned if found. But I also did not want to abandon my comrades.

My ponderings stopped as Konstantin returned, and I made sure I was close enough to overhear the conversation, “...are trying to run us ragged. When we reach the reservoir, they will probably close in to finish us off. We should slow down and rest while they give us a chance.”

Adrian grimaced, holding his arm, as he asked, “Do you think they have men already ahead of us?”

Konstantin did not answer for a moment, thinking. “Unlikely but possible. The terrain is the same throughout these hills. I do not see how they could have gotten ahead of us at our pace.”

“Could the griffins have ferried men ahead of us?” Delmar asked.

"I have never seen a griffin carry two riders before," Castile noted. "But it is a possibility. If I am quick, I have enough aether to scout behind and ahead of us."

Delmar grunted heavily, "Castile, it would be nice to know if we can hold positions and stand a chance of fighting them."

Castile nodded, and we waited for her to return from using her spell. I looked at the men around me; maybe twenty were uninjured and fully capable of fighting. And those twenty were tired. Fifteen minutes later, Castile returned from her scouting, "There is an elven general and thirty men in light armor about half a mile back with him. They are resting like we are and leading the pursuit. There are another hundred or so men in heavy armor and at least two mages another two miles behind them but moving slowly. I managed to check the reservoir as well. No Bartiradians are waiting for us, but there is a long, narrow climb to the stone caldera."

"They must really want us badly to pull so many from the city. Is that the general who was searching for his sister, the griffin rider? Maybe they know Blaze shot her down," Delmar pieced together.

"Maybe the regulars and city guard already surrendered, allowing the general to pursue us," Castile added bitterly. "If he wants vengeance, he will not stop chasing us until he has it."

I mulled over this information. Would the general let us go if I gave him back his sister? It seemed like a farfetched idea. Maybe I could just fall back and release her from my space, and the confusion of finding her would give us more time to get away. It was probably a stupid plan.

I missed the conversation as I debated what to do. Castile announced to everyone, "We are almost to the reservoir! There is a narrow set of carved stone stairs that can be easily defended. There is a difficult path around the reservoir, but our best chance will be to use the aqueduct to give us the high ground. We will make our stand there."

I think the company was happy that an end was in sight. "The quicker we get there, the more rest we will get before the fun begins!" An energetic Konstantin yelled before moving off first. His bravado motivating everyone to pick up the pace.

We reached the narrow stone stair, and Castile had not been kidding. It was extremely steep, and the steps were narrow, no wider than a foot. "Is this the only access to the reservoir?" Delmar asked.

Konstantin replied, "There used to be a wooden tower here, but it collapsed centuries ago."

"How do you know that?" Delmar asked, perplexed.

"I like history," Konstantin replied. "Did you know this reservoir was formed when Constantine of the First Legion destroyed the stone mountain that once stood here? The rocks we have been navigating are the debris from that explosion. They were used to build the city and the aqueduct."

Castile was exasperated, "We can talk history later, but it was Titus, not Constantine of the First Legion, who destroyed the stone mountain," she schooled Konstantin.

Konstantin smiled at Castile's retort, and the mood lightened slightly. Adrian barked, "Injured up the steps first!"

Lirkin was first, using his arms and forcing himself up quickly. He paused and addressed the group below him, "These steps are treacherous. Eryk, do you still have the butter?"

Castile put it together quickly, "That is a good plan. You can be the last one up and grease the steps."

Delmar turned to Brutus. "Eryk is going to grease the steps. Hang back with him and let him know if you see anyone coming while he works."

Still in pain, Adrain announced, "Archers, get to the aqueduct to help cover Eryk while he works!"

Somehow, I had just been made rear guard. Brutus voiced his displeasure as everyone climbed the narrow, smooth steps, saying, "Be quick, Eryk. The steps are fairly exposed, and enemy archers will have an easy time of targeting us."

I dumped the contents of my backpack on the ground and filled it with the butter from my dimensional space while cursing Lirkin for remembering I had butter in my dimensional space. I knew it would work as the steps were

smooth with time, but I did not appreciate being the one who had to do it. "Brutus, stay a dozen steps ahead of me, and let me know if you see the enemy approaching."

"Clusterfuck, Eryk. I can barely see fifty feet in the starlight," Brutus replied.

I waved him up the steps as everyone had climbed, not bothering to correct his use of the term. The quicker I buttered the steps, the quicker I could climb. This was definitely a clusterfuck, though.

I scooped the butter and started with the fourth step up, quickly spreading the soft mixture at both ends of the narrow step. I proceeded to the next step, and Brutus called down, "How are you going to climb yourself?"

"I am leaving the very center of the step clear as I go," I muttered, quickly covering my hand with filthy, oily butter again. I was making quick progress and could still see the tail of the company climbing ahead. Brutus remained a few steps ahead of me and kept on the lookout.

I was halfway up the hundred-foot climb when Brutus warned me, "I can see someone. Forget about it, just climb, he has a line of sight on you, Eryk!"

An arrow penetrated my thigh, and I tried to stabilize myself with my free hand...which was coated in butter. An arrow shattered between Brutus' legs, but I could not concern myself with him. My hand slipped, and my foot in the center of the stairs moved to left, connecting with the patch of butter I had laid. I lost my footing and fell down the steps. The arrow in my thigh was painfully twisted around as my body banged down the steep steps. I tried to arrest my momentum but failed and lost a few fingernails in the effort. I had done too good a job of coating the steps.

Brutus was swearing as I reached the bottom of the stone stairs in a messy heap. My body was bruised, but I managed to avoid breaking any bones. I grabbed the arrow and yanked it out. It had done a lot of damage, twisting in my thigh during the fall. I hobbled to a boulder for cover and focused my healing on closing the wound.

At the top of the steps, I could hear voices, and the company archers were firing arrows into the dark, but I doubted they could see my assailant. Sitting with my back to the boulder, I focused on healing as I watched Brutus scramble up the steps and out of sight around a bend. The pain in my leg was slowly ebbing away, and I realized my healing would require more aether than

I had. I stopped the healing with less than half my aether remaining. I could hear the company far above preparing.

I tested my leg, and I could move it, albeit stiffly. Now, this was truly a clusterfuck of epic proportions. The only good news was I could hear Konstantin's voice from the aqueduct, "There is only one advance scout, Eryk. Take him out and climb the steps!" It was more bravado and false hope on his part.

I drew my sword, and I was facing the cliff with the stairs and trying to listen, but my heart was beating too loudly in my ears in adrenaline overdrive. The cliff was twenty feet away, and in shadow, a figure emerged from the shadow with an arrow notched. I swore as he was shielded from my companion's line of sight. I needed him to lure him within ten feet of me to kill him with my dimensional space. I had no ranged weapons accessible.

The shadow spoke, surprised in heavily accented Latin, "You are the void mage."

I was confused with his pronouncement, "I am not a mage."

The shadow spoke again, "I think General Glavien is going to want to finish you himself for killing his sister. Just wait patiently, legionnaire. He will be here soon."

"I am sorry, but I actually have somewhere to be," I joked, and I think the shadow smiled. I focused my effort on the one possible ranged weapon I had. I did something I had never done before and moved an object in my dimensional space, turning the elf girl around to face away from me. It took a small amount of aether to manipulate her position in the space. I now knew I could rearrange items without removing them.

I rasped like I was still injured and asked, "Was the general's sister the griffin rider?"

"Yes..." the elf shadow said as I materialized her right in front of him. The light of the fireball she had been forming lit the area brightly.

The elf girl released the fireball she had made and exploded between the two elves. The elf scout was thrown into the cliff face and the elf girl toward me.

The elf girl was dead or unconscious at my feet. Her face was badly burned, and her hair was smoldering. Not so innocent-looking now. I could stay here and try to use the elf as a hostage or climb the greased stairs and join my companions. I stood and hobbled to the stairs and began to climb carefully.

Chapter 56: You Got Some Explaining to Do

My climb up the steps was not easy. I used my hands liberally to brace myself as I climbed. I think most of the butter ended up plastered on my pants, sleeves, and armor. When I cleared the buttered section of steps, I increased my pace, almost falling twice as the bottom of my boots still had significant butter residue. The hundred-foot climb felt like a thousand feet. My knuckles were bleeding, and pebbles were embedded into cuts on my hands.

When I reached the top step, my heart was pounding, and I was breathing heavily. Flavius had his bow aimed at me, and Brutus and Mateo had spears leveled at me. I put my hands up, “I surrender!”

Brutus asked with shock on his face, “How did you? I mean, you were bouncing down those steps after getting hit by the arrow...”

Konstantin came from my right, “Castile wants to see you, Eryk. Now!” He emphasized urgency. “She is on the aqueduct,” he said, pointing past the sluice controlling the flow of water from the lake.

I left the six men guarding the top of the stairs and went to the aqueduct. My mind was spinning with ideas on how to explain my escape. I stepped onto the aqueduct. It was twelve feet wide with a one-foot curb on the edge to channel the water. The water was only an inch deep, and the flow was not too strong. I walked in the water, not wanting to risk walking on the lip. I moved out to the aqueduct to join the rest of the legion.

Castile, Adrian, and Delmar were near the lip but standing in the flow of water. They were staring out onto the rocky terrain below. I was able to look down at the stairs as I approached. I could see the top half of the stairs, but rocks and curvature obscured the bottom half. The bodies of the two elves were not in sight, and I wondered if they lived.

The commanders eyed me appraisingly. Castile spoke first, "You continue to surprise, Eryk. We thought we lost you. You can thank Blaze that we did not put an arrow in your back during your climb."

Since my jaw didn't work, Delmar explained, "We could not see who was climbing the steps in the low light. Blaze was certain the person was wearing legion armor, so we held fire."

I looked at the archers further down and said, "Thanks for not shooting me in the back."

Blaze's voice came back in, but I could not identify who was speaking as they were all facing away from me, "You owe me, Eryk. I will let you know when you can repay me."

Adrian looked me up and down, and I noticed that the sky was starting to get lighter. The sun was coming. Adrian said, "Brutus said an arrow struck you and then fell down the steps? Yet you look relatively unharmed."

As I thought about what to say, Castile answered for me, "I gave Eryk a lesser healing potion. He was to heal me if I became incapacitated." She was covering for me and had obviously not revealed to Adrian or Delmar that I could heal myself. She focused on what had happened below, "What was the flash and explosion? Are their mages already below?"

"Mages?" I asked, "Yes, there was a mage." I started to tell the events in order to give me time to think. "I fell down the steps after getting shot. Well, I guess bounced and slid is a better way to describe my inglorious descent," I tried to smile, but their serious faces had me end my attempt at humor.

I paused, getting my thoughts together as they waited. "At the bottom, I got to cover to hide from the archer. I was sitting against a rock and...healed myself." I was unsure why Castile was helping me keep my healing spell form secret, but I appreciated it.

Delmar asked, a little impatient, "What was the flash of light and explosion?"

I nodded, continuing, "The archer approached me from the shadows. He must have circled around while I was falling. I think he planned to take me prisoner. Then the mage appeared and was casting a fireball spell, I think... I surprised her with a vial of lamp oil I took from the villa. I was just trying to stop her from casting the fireball. It was the only thing I thought might help in my

dimensional space. The vial exploded, and it tossed both of them away from me. They were not moving, so I hobbled up the steps to rejoin the company,” I finished triumphantly.

Delmar looked skeptical, and Castile was hiding a smirk. I hoped she had been out of aether and did not have her all-seeing-eye watching me. Adrian was still nursing his arm, and there was more discomfort at his injury on his face than interest in how I escaped.

Castile asked, “So you did make sure they were dead? The mage and the archer?”

“I...I...I did not. The healing potion was still doing its work, and I was not sure how much time I had before more advanced scouts arrived,” I explained, but I thought that would have been a good idea. If the griffin rider lived, she might figure out what happened to her. But then again, she was on the other side of this battle, so I should be fine.

“Can you swing a sword?” Delmar asked, and I nodded sharply. “Good, go reinforce the six men at the top of the stairs.” I heard them whispering behind me as I walked away, splashing lightly in the water.

As I walked back to the stairs, I realized my boot’s waterproofing was starting to fail. The warm water had penetrated my sock. My left foot was making a squelching sound as I walked. The six men were there, and I sat on a stone twenty feet from the top of the stairs to rest near the pile of backpacks. My own backpack, half full of butter, was at the bottom of the stairs. I picked up a random canteen and, finding it empty, turned my sight to the reservoir.

There was enough light to see now. It was a large circular lake surrounded by rocky, cragily, cliffs. The glass surface would have been picturesque if not for the fact that it looked like we were trapped up here. It would be difficult to circumnavigate the lake. Lirkin hobbled over to me. He had received an arrow in his hip and could barely walk but seemed intent on doing his duty as company cook. He handed me a wrapped meal, “Thanks for helping carry me, Eryk.” He hobbled away, dragging his left leg.

“I am going to fill the canteen,” I announced, holding up the empty canteen.

Mateo responded, “Fill all them, Eryk.”

I gathered up seven empty canteens and walked the short distance to the water. I took off my left boot to wring out my sock. I left it off to let my wet foot air dry while filling the canteens. The water was clear and cool. I drained the first canteen I had filled before filling all seven. I remained seated on the rock on the shore, just watching the sunrise. I was ready to respond if I heard the sound of combat, but I felt I needed a moment.

Felix came to the water with his empty canteen. He looked at my barefoot, "Eryk, you are not seriously thinking about taking a bath at this moment?" He looked at me in the early day's light, "Although you could use it. You are a mess of grease, blood, and dirt."

I looked at my hand and all the scraps, cuts, dirt, two missing fingernails, and dried blood. I shook my head, "No, my boot is no longer waterproof." I kicked it lightly to emphasize it.

Felix picked it up and inspected it. The sole had come detached near the toe. He was able to wiggle his finger into it. "Kolm can fix this. He is not just a good blacksmith." He handed me the boot. I sighed and put on the damp sock and boot. Felix asked, "So what was the flash of light?"

I kept with my story, "Elf mage. I surprised her casting and managed to get away from her and the archer."

Felix shook his head in disbelief, "You have to be the luckiest legionnaire in the Empire. You have escaped a bulette, survived a bite of a death dog, and now escaped a Bartiradian mage. Satis gladio is not a fitting nickname. Maybe felicem (lucky man) or infelicis (unlucky)." He smiled, "Because you have to be unlucky to get yourself into all these situations." I grunted in response because I definitely felt unlucky.

Felix looked up, and I followed his gaze. One of the griffins was overhead, well out of range of the bow. It circled our position and then the lake. It landed about half a mile away on the shore, and the griffin was taking a drink while the rider dismounted and stared at us from a distance. A second griffin landed next to the first. They were taunting us, letting us know death was coming.

Felix grunted, "Not long now. We should get back to the steps." He picked up all the canteens I had filled and hauled them back.

I knelt by the edge of the water and washed my hands and arms. The filth in the water was quickly diluted as I washed. I kept an eye on the resting griffins

as I moved to wash my face. I realized I had lost my helmet in my fall. I also found a glob of butter in my hair. I made a point to wash my hair and face, scrubbing out the dirt.

Finished, I stood and looked at my abused hands. I did not have much aether but used my healing spell form anyway. The missing nails grew back in slowly, black dirt and tiny pebbles pushed out of the wounds as they closed. I only healed my hands so it would be easier to swing a sword. I was also now out of aether. A shriek from another griffin in the skies was a call to the two resting griffin riders. They mounted and took to the air. The three griffins were soon circling high above like vultures over a carcass.

I heard the twang of bows from the aqueduct and left to join my companions to guard the stairs. The enemy forces had arrived.

Chapter 57: Battle at the Aqueduct

The morning air quickly became humid as I walked over to the stairs. I only had one canteen as Felix had taken the rest. I sipped it and sat near the backpacks, just a few feet from the others. I was not worried about the fight coming anytime soon as I knew how narrow and treacherous the steps were. I was only twenty feet away and could quickly support the others guarding the top of the ascent. My seat also gave me a view of the aqueduct where most of our company was positioned.

I looked up into the sky, and four griffins circled well outside of bow shot range. The clear, pale blue morning sky gave them a nice backdrop. The morning was too picturesque. Besides the twang of the single bow on the aqueduct, it did not feel like we were going to be fighting for our lives. A second archer joined the first on the aqueduct. My guess was Delmar was conserving arrows until the men had better targets.

Flavius fired a single arrow from the top of the stairs. He was the only legionnaire at our position with a bow. I had three bows in my dimensional space, well, four if you included the elf bow. But that was a long bow compared to the legion composite short bow.

All eyes were turned away from me, so I produced the quiver with seventeen arrows and the minor essence of power from my dimensional space. My aether had barely recovered, and it took nearly all my aether to bring out the

two objects. It was a risk as they may have counted all the arrows when they got up here. It had been dark then, so it could be said someone overlooked a single quiver. They were going to be more useful to the archers than to me.

I should have stockpiled arrows in my dimensional space. Next opportunity, I would do a better job. I put the essence into my mouth, savoring the euphoria of the minor power essence. Strength was the only physical trait I had not taken an essence for now. I had a major essence for strength in my dimensional space but figured the minor essence was all I could handle so soon after the dexterity essence. Just some minor indigestion followed in the few minutes after.

A third Bowman on the aqueduct was now firing, and a few return arrows were starting to appear from below. The aqueduct was almost 90 feet off the ground where they were positioned. The fifteen archers of the company were patient, standing and firing, and then kneeling out of visual range of the Bartiradians below. Behind the row of archers were men in the center of the aqueduct waiting with our leaders for orders. On the other side of the aqueduct were two archers and three spotters looking for enemy movement.

Brutus stepped back to talk with me, "Once they see the men climbing the stairs, they will send others to reinforce our position." He paused, inhaled, and continued, "Eryk, I am sorry for leaving you. I did not know how many scouts they sent forward. After your fall, I thought it would be suicide to come to you, especially after you greased the steps."

I looked Brutus in his eyes, "There was nothing you could have done to help me after I fell. In your situation, I would have done the same thing." I looked at the archers firing and asked, "How many arrows do they have?"

"Not many. I think they counted three hundred and fifty-something before they went out there. Twenty arrows each, I think they said. Flavius has another thirty," Brutus said gloomily. As we watched, one of the men took an arrow in the eye and tumbled forward off the structure. "That was Cathius from my old company. He had three children," Brutus announced softly.

I could hear echoes of metal from below. That meant the heavier armored men had reached our position. Delmar had the men sliding before standing and quickly firing now. An archer took an arrow in the chest, and two men pulled him back from the edge to help him. One of the archers on the other side fired an arrow below and turned and said something to Castile.

“Bastards,” Brutus muttered and pointed in the distance. Maybe half a mile down the aqueduct, the enemy was climbing up ropes, like little ants trying to swarm a picnic table. “If the general is smart, he will form up men there and rush the aqueduct and stairs simultaneously.”

Adrian was not going to let this happen. Even with only one good arm, he drew a sword and pulled five men to him, all from Gregor’s company, I think, and they splashed down the aqueduct with shields forward to stop the climbing Bartiradians. They might have a chance if he could cut the ropes quickly enough.

The enemy arrows suddenly picked up, causing everyone to crouch low for cover. A griffin swooped down and lifted one of the men running with Durandus. It only carried him far enough to drop him to the rocks. Two of our archers fired arrows, and one struck the griffin on the wing at two hundred yards. The griffin flapped its wings in pain and did not rise. It glided to the ground.

“At least they shouldn’t try that again,” I muttered.

I picked up a spear from the gear pile and sheathed my sword. I moved behind the other men on the stairs as the shouts from below were increasing in intensity. Maybe they found the general’s sister and would withdraw to figure out how she got there. I hoped she had not died after I left her. Not because I cared for her life, but if she lived, the general might be less hell-bent on our decimation.

Adrian had reached the climbing Bartiradians, and it was too far to see clearly what was happening. The rope that two men were climbing suddenly let go, and they fell to the ground. My group cheered as the second and third ropes were cut. Still, Adrian and the men were slightly outnumbered.

As the battle a half mile away raged in the water of the aqueduct, the arrows from below suddenly increased. Flavius turned to us, “They are going to be coming soon at the stair soon.” He moved to the right, and I stood behind our two men with round shields with my spear ready. We could hold this position easily with the seven men we had, with the stairs being so narrow.

Flavius seemed a little unsure. “They should be here by now...”

The racket of metal and a foreign tongue below was extreme, and Brutus started laughing. “Do you know what they are saying?” I asked him gripping my spear tightly.

“Your butter trick seemed to work. They think the steps are spelled with a grease spell. They are calling for a mage to burn it away,” he continued laughing, and everyone joined with him. It was a very small victory.

Flavius looked around and ordered, “Brutus and Eryk, gather some rocks. About the size of a head. You will need to go to the water to get them, but we can roll them down the steps to slow them.”

I looked around with Brutus, and all the close stones were massive. Along the shoreline, there were numerous stones. I leaned my spear against a rock, grabbed the first stone, and rushed back. On my return trip, I could see Adrian and just two men returning with him. All three were struggling to get back, obviously injured. It also looked like our archers had also thinned some, but I did not know if they were injured or dead.

On my third trip with a stone, an intense heat washed up the steps. Causing everyone to step back. Their mage was burning the butter away. “Eryk and Brutus get your spears ready.”

My spear was by the water, and I raced to grab it. It only took seconds, but as I returned, arrows were flying everywhere from below. The Bartiradians were firing blindly as they could not see us. The men on the aqueduct and the men at the top of the stairs were seeking cover from the barrage. This was the Bartiradian push. A lucky arrow took Flavius in the chest as he stood and returned fire. It did not look bad as he continued to draw and shoot with the arrow in him.

Lirkin, on his knees, was rolling the six rocks we had gathered down the steps. To my ears, it sounded like there were a thousand men below from the cacophony of sounds. I could not find fear, though, just—anticipation. As the arrows paused on our position, the aqueduct men were not as lucky. I saw another archer fall off the aqueduct from an arrow strike. The heavy storm of arrows continued to pin them down. The first Bartiradian came up the steps with a shield in front of him. Spears pushed him and hacked at him. He did not last long before Brutus speared his groin, and Mateo slashed his neck.

I was focused on the steps but noticed men coming back from the aqueduct. Konstantin reached us first. He had lost his helm and was bleeding from a

long gash on the side of his scalp, "We are out of arrows! But a few men are climbing the bloody cliffs to flank us! We need to get ready; they are over halfway up!"

"There is a quiver by the packs, and Flavius' quiver is still half full," I told Konstantin, who paused, grabbed both quivers, and tossed them to Blaze, who had arrived. Blaze was soaked but uninjured as he smirked at more ammunition. Flavius was now sitting as he was attending to his arrow wound.

Adrian appeared and sat heavily among the packs, bleeding from numerous wounds. I gave him a canteen and started to help the others arriving. From the our left, Konstantin yelled, "I am going to need help over here."

Delmar, who was uninjured, looked around, "Felix, Kolm, Eryk, and Antonio; go help, Konstantin." I scrambled up the rocks with the others who were all free of serious injury. Kolm was bleeding from his knee, but that was from falling and not an enemy. Antonio was from Gregor's men, and he had a thigh wound from an arrow but still moved fairly well. We scrambled up the rocks together for higher ground and to join Konstantin.

Konstantin nodded as we came. "They were almost up in this area; maybe a dozen were brave enough to attempt the climb." The cliff was steep and not a climb I would have tried myself.

"How do our chances look?" I asked Konstantin, knowing he would tell me the truth.

"As long as they do not have more men coming from the city, we can hold. Adrian thinks they used all their grapples in their first attempt to climb the aqueduct. A griffin can get them more in an hour or two if they think of it, but we should be able to hold." Konstantin said reassuringly.

Felix offered with a smile, "The archers took down maybe fifty men and Adrian's squad another dozen. Besides, Firth took an arrow in the ass. We have to survive this just so we can mock him about it."

The first Bartiradion scrambled up over the edge of the cliff, and Antonio went to engage him near the edge. As he approached, a dozen arrows came at him from below, all fired blindly, four connecting. One went through his throat, and he fell to his knees, struggling to breathe. Without healing potions, there was nothing we could do for Antonio.

Konstantin voiced the obvious, “Stay away from the edge. We will engage them here. They will be tired from the climb and only come at us in pairs at most. Work together, and this will be easy.” The Bartiradians signaled when a climber was about to reach the top by sending a flight of arrows to cover the last part of his climb. We were out of the path and not endangered at all.

The next hour was a bloodbath for the climbers. We killed fifteen on our side, and another group killed eight on the other. The attack slowed, and we waited. A griffin high above shrieked, and we all looked up. “Look!” Konstantin pointed over the lake. A single flyer was streaking toward us. It was not a griffin but the silhouette of drake.

Konstantin whispered, “That is fire drake.” We watched as the griffin tried to flee, but the drake was like an arrow and closed too fast. Glinting in the sun, the metallic red scales passed high above us as a small ball of flame belched from its mouth. It struck the panicked griffin in a flare of fire. The griffin and rider were both smoking and had flames trailing their burning bodies as they quickly fell from the skies.

The drake circled, looking for other prey, but the other two griffins had already retreated toward the city. The drake circled above our position, and Konstantin announced, “Let’s go join the others. I think the Duke’s army is close.”

The massive reptile landed near the lake, and a tall man dismounted and let the drake drink its fill while he walked toward our group. Castile stood to meet him. The drake rider wore black and red leathers and had a black cape with the markings of a mage.

Castile greeted him, “Master Mage Sebastian, thank you for your timely arrival.” Castile’s voice sounded relieved but cautious.

“The forces below are retreating, Mage Castile, but do not thank me yet. Duke Tiberius is still a day away, and Duke Octavian is with him,” Sebastian stated coldly. Castile jerked like she had been slapped, and I knew Duke Octavian had sent her to defend the city of Macha on this apparent suicide assignment.

“I am only here to hear what happened to my brother, Durandus.” His words were icy and angry. It did not feel like we were being saved.

Chapter 58: False Salvation

It was obvious that Master Mage Sebastian and Mage Castile were not friends. As our wounded company watched the interaction, Sebastian was in charge and talking down to Castile. Sebastian turned to face the lake and lowered his tone. Their conversation turned private as they faced the lake and talked too low for anyone to hear.

Delmar looked at everyone and started giving orders. "Eryk and Blaze go to the aqueduct to maintain a watch. Benito, Wylie, and Felix. I want you to help Linus get all the wounded together for treatment. Bring them near the lake. Konstantin..." I was out of earshot as he continued to give orders.

Blaze and I walked out on the aqueduct, and I was quickly reminded that my sole was becoming detached as my sock was soaked again. Blaze looked to have come out relatively unscathed in the battle. "That was pretty close. How did you manage on the aqueduct?"

Blaze started to get animated with words and hand gestures, "Craziest fight I have ever been in," he indicated the aqueduct. "Shoot, duck. Shoot, duck. Lay flat in the water while protecting the bowstring. Get up, shoot."

As we reached the position, there were five dead men, their blood still turning the water flow red. I recognized two men from our company, Malcolm and Fidel. I did not know Fidel at all, and I do not ever remember hearing him talk to anyone. The other three men were from Gregor's company.

Blaze was doing a better job than me at not being affected by the death. He immediately kneeled in the water at the edge, and scanned the rocks below. I joined him and looked down on the carnage below. Dozens of bodies were scattered among the rocks. Blaze must have caught movement because he drew an arrow and fired. A Bartiradian who had been sitting in the shadow of a boulder groaned as he now had an arrow in his heart.

Blaze commented without remorse, "I was just speeding him on his way. He was in a lot of pain."

A few minutes later, Brutus walked down the aqueduct with Pavel. Pavel had a serious limp but carried his bow. Brutus announced, "I have to drag the bodies back. Pavel is here to help watch for the enemy." Brutus tied a rope to the first body and started to drag it through the water.

Pavel knelt painfully next to Blaze. I had remained standing, not wanting to get my pants wet. Pavel said, "You will want to kneel. If enemy archers are still out there, you are a bigger target standing."

I did as advised and knelt between them, quickly soaking my linen pants. I asked, "Why does Duke Octavian have it out for our company?"

Blaze and Pavel looked at each other and Blaze answered, "Duke Octavian is one of the sons of the Emperor. He controls the Sacegoes Province. After the Telha Imperial Province of the Emperor, it is the most profitable region in the Empire."

Pavel picked up the explanation, "There are six cities in his province. Castile grew up in one of them. We do not know which one. When she was tested and was found strong enough to go to the Mage College, Duke Octavian sponsored her. When she graduated, she did the only thing she could to forgo her debt to Duke Octavian. She joined the Legion of the Lion in service of the Emperor."

"I thought all mages joined the Legion after they graduated?" I asked the pair of archers.

Blaze smirked, "You are asking the wrong people, Eryk. But as I understand it, only those who can not pay for the schooling at the college have to serve in the Legion. That is why you do not see First Citizens or wealthy merchant mages leading companies."

"So, instead of paying off her debt to Octavian, she is working for the Emperor? For how long?" I asked, curious as to Castile's motivation.

"Twenty years is the term for mages. I think Castile is seventeen or eighteen years in. Duke Octavian is getting desperate for his revenge on her before she leaves the Legion," Blaze noted.

Pavel added, "And that is not her only enemy among the First Citizens. There is Baron..." Blaze stopped Pavel from talking by slapping him with his bow.

Blaze said seriously, "The less you know, Eryk, the better you can sleep at night. I have been with Castile for almost six years. I hold her in higher esteem than any First Citizen." His statement quieted the young Pavel, who was still anxious to reveal Castile's other enemies.

Brutus returned for a second body and said, "Master Mage Sebastian is leaving soon. I think we are going to make our way around the lake soon. Castile purchased a few simple healing potions from the mage for the more heavily wounded men." Brutus tied a rope and hauled another body away.

Donte and Lysander walked past us. They were headed to drop the bodies off the aqueduct where Adrian had fought. Blaze noted, "Even though we do not control the city, Castile does not want the water fouled for the citizens. The Bartiradians will repair the aqueduct if they keep the city."

Brutus had finished with the bodies and came to sit with us. "Flavius is going with Sebastian to look for the collector."

"What? Out in the swamps?" I asked louder than I had wanted.

"Yeah, he is going to direct him to the island where Durandus lost it. After they find it, they will probably fly back to the Duke's army. We are going to have to walk around the lake." Brutus said while studying the dead bodies below.

"What if they do not find the collector?" I asked conversationally.

"Oh, Sebastian is a powerful mage. He specializes in dominating the minds of creatures. He will probably dominate a fish, frog or something to find it for him," Brutus replied before kneeling with us, having finished his inspection of the dead Bartiradians below.

"He can do that?" Pavel asked in disbelief.

Brutus frowned as his pants got wet. Then he responded, "Yes. He has dozens of creatures on his estate." He heaved a heavy sigh, "Once, Durandus and Sebastian were tasked with killing a Baron. Sebastian brought ten dire wolves to attack the baron and his family's carriage in the countryside. I have never seen anything so brutal in my time as a legionnaire. The entire time the wolves were tearing the family apart, the high mage was just smiling at his pet's ferocity." Brutus shivered at the memory.

A small roar from the lake had us all turn to see the red drake take to the sky with two passengers. I watched them speed south, and I think I had just condemned Flavius to death. If Sebastian did not find the essence collector, he would kill Flavius in anger.

While watching the drake, Pavel asked, "Does he command any legionaries?"

Brutus shook his head clear of his thoughts, “What? Yes. He has two dozen or so. They take care of his pets. He actually breeds the drakes for the Dragon Legion on his estate. The brothers were close. I do not think he is going to take kindly to his death. My guess is we will not see Flavius again. If that does satiate his revenge, he will track me down.”

Blaze offered unhelpfully, “Eryk was there too.”

“Yes, but he was not assigned to protect him.” Brutus looked at the reservoir lake where our company was getting ready to move out, “I think just Flavius, Quentin, and myself are left. And Quentin was left at the road to guard the gear and was not on the island when Durdandus got himself killed.”

Konstantin came trotting out to us, “We are moving out. Once we get to the other side of the lake, it should just be a few miles to meet up with the Duke’s army.”

We abandoned our post on the aqueduct and went to the backpacks. There were twelve backpacks left for me to choose from—twelve men did not survive the assault. My gear was scattered at the bottom of the stairs, and my backpack was also full of melted butter from the heat of the day. Brutus pointed, “You should take Flavius’ pack.”

I nodded, picked it up, and checked the contents. It had the standard legion traveling gear with six wrapped meals. I shouldered the pack and looked at the bodies all lined up, eyes closed, and their hands crossed on their chest.

Delmar stood over the men, and we circled around them. Delmar spoke loud and clear,

“Oh mighty Pluto, we beseech you on this solemn day to remember the fallen warriors who have valiantly fought for justice in the Empire. Their courage and sacrifice will forever be etched in our hearts and minds.

Grant them peace and rest in your realm. May their spirits find solace and tranquility in the celestial lands. Guide them to eternal glory as they join the ranks of heroes who have gone before them. We humbly ask their next life be better than this one.”

It was a warrior’s prayer, and we all turned and left. Normally, the bodies would have been burned, but we lacked a way to start a fire. Whoever cleaned up the bodies below would have to take care of it.

We waded into the waters on the shore and started to move around the lake. Everyone was capable of walking, though a number of men still had upper body wounds. I was sure that Linus had stretched the potions that Castile had paid for from Sebastian. When the water got too deep, we had to scramble over the large rocks on the shore. It was easy to see why we had not tried to flee this route. Progress was painfully slow—literally for our wounded. The enemy would have rolled up behind us while we were trapped and exposed.

It took hours to make our way around the lake. Then we climbed to the lip of the crater and had to make a treacherous climb down to the woodlands below. It looked like when the mountain had exploded, the blast was directional toward where Macha was built. The forest below only had a few boulders near the edge that must have fallen from the cliff we were currently descending.

Adrian fell fifteen feet on the descent and broke his ankle. This fall was due to still only having the use of one arm. Other than that, we all made it to the forest floor. Konstantin was our only remaining scout. If he was correct, the road was about five miles north through the woodlands.

Konstantin warned everyone, “The next five miles will be difficult. These are wild, untamed woods. There could be any number of possible deadly and horrific creatures and plants inside.”

A man walked out of the woods, “Now, Konstantin, do not try and scare the children.”

Konstantin’s eyes went wide in disbelief. He moved and shook his wrists with the man, “Cornelius! How did you ever find your way all the way out here from your stacks of books?”

Cornelius looked fit but old with snow-white hair. “I still like to travel now and then. Especially in an emergency.” He turned to address Castile, “By order of the Emperor Maximus Augustus. Mage Castile, you are hereby remanded to my custody for the failure to hold the city of Macha from the Bartiradian barbarians. You are to come with me to sit judgment before a Tribunal of Dukes.”

Everyone in the company tensed, and a number put hands to their hilts. The forest stirred, and a dozen men showed themselves. Castile had a hard look but did not look surprised and announced, “Stand down! It is the Emperor’s order. We will go willingly.”

I heard a number of men cursing under their breath, and Konstantin was arguing with Cornelius. All of it mattered little as soon our company was being escorted through the woods to the waiting Duke's Army.

END OF BOOK ONE

Chapter 59: Politics of the Empire

Cornelius' men moved out to serve as a screen as we moved into the woodlands. I moved close enough to overhear Cornelius and Konstantin talking at the rear. "...can not seriously think this failure is the fault of Castile. The Duke's army was to attack as soon as the Bartiradians set up camp outside the gates."

Cornelius had a softer voice than Konstantin, and I strained to hear, "That is why I was sent, as a favor, Konstantin. My three best squads of Legion Hounds are here, and Duchess Veronica has called a Ducal Tribunal so Octavian can not hand out punishment to Castile on the spot."

Konstantin argued, "That makes no sense! The city only fell a day ago! How could a Tribunal have been called and your Legion Hounds be here already..." His voice had started loudly and faded at the end.

Cornelius confirmed Konstantin's thoughts, "The Duke's army was never going to reach Macha until it fell into Bartiradian hands. That is why Baron Hephestus abandoned the city to join the army. He is in Duke Tiberious's pocket and was aware of the plan."

"And Gregor and Durandus?" Konstantin asked softly, seeing the bigger picture.

"Gregor is not well-liked but was apparently just a disposable piece on the board. When Durandus insulted Duke Santino by not marrying his daughter and paying for her First Citizenship, he sealed his fate. Before we learned Durandus was killed, Duchess Veronica thought I would also be rescuing him as well." Cornelius walked past me as he moved toward the front of the formation.

I moved back, planning to talk with Konstantin, but Cornelius spun and talked loudly as he walked, "We dispersed a gnoll camp on our trek through the

woods. They should not bother our large group but be on alert. These woods also used to be the home to a herd of centaurs. No sightings in the last two years, but that means very little.” With his warning done, he moved off to join the screen. For an old man, he moved with surprising grace.

I was not the only one seeking explanations from Konstantin. Castile and Delmar had fallen back to walk with him. I ended up in front of the trio. Konstantin started with, “That is Cornelius. He trains the Legion Hounds for the eastern part of the Empire. I was trained by and worked for him as a Hound.”

Castile stated, “Why did he not have me killed immediately?”

It was a moment before Konstantin spoke, “He is here at the direction of Duchess Veronica. I think she is a new duchess, one of the Emperor’s many great-granddaughters.”

It was quiet for a few minutes, and as much as I wanted to ask a question, I remained silent. Delmar asked, “The Ducal Tribunal?”

Castile answered him, “I am assuming the Hounds are here to protect me from Duke Octavian and Duke Tiberius until a formal Tribunal of Dukes.”

Konstantin answered, “Cornelious did not say where or when the Tribunal will be held. If I know him, though, he has a plan to exclude Octavian from the Tribunal. I’m not sure what favors this Duchess Veronica has given for his help. Cornelious’ help is never given freely.”

Castile hissed, “If he can manage to exclude Octavian from the Tribunal, I will give him my firstborn.”

Delmar asked quietly, “So we are just going to go along with this?”

Konstantin answered in a casual tone, “If we attack the Legion Hounds, the Emperor will send ten times this number after us. It is best to follow politely. Besides, almost everyone is injured.” Adrian was meandering back to the group now. He was also in obvious pain, his arm still in a sling and walking on a broken ankle. We were not moving slowly, so you had to admire his pain tolerance.

Castile sounded angry, “They could have given us a few simple healing potions, at least.”

Konstantin barked a loud laugh that had a few heads turn. He said conversationally, "I was a Hound at one point in my service to the Emperor. You never make your quarry stronger. Rest assured, they will get us to our destination even if they need to put their lives on the line."

Castile moved past me with Delmar. Adrian hobbled behind them. It gave me a chance to walk with Konstantin. He opened the conversation, "You look to be in fair condition, Eryk."

I went with Castile's explanation for my healing, "Castile gave me a simple healing potion to hold for her. I was supposed to use it on her if she was incapacitated."

"Did she now? And you used it on yourself?" Konstantin remarked with some skepticism in his voice.

"Yes, after my tumble down the stairs," I responded smoothly. I tried to turn the conversation, "What is a Ducal Tribunal?"

Konstantin grunted, "There are sixteen Dukes who control the sixteen provinces outside of the Imperial Province, which is the Emperor's Seat. The Dukes are the higher law, and three of them can sit in judgment of any mage or First Citizen. The three members of a Ducal Tribunal are assigned by the Emperor himself. Whatever game Duchess Veronica is playing at, it is dangerous. She is in charge of the Sobral Province. The newest and smallest province in the Empire. If I remember correctly, it has a modest city on a river, and that is it."

"Is the Duchess an ally of Castile?" I asked.

"Not that I am aware of. But if she is opposing Octavian, then there will be a reprisal for her action," Konstantin mulled. He then looked at me, "The politics of the Empire are more deadly than the Bartiradian Army. My advice to you is to stay as far away as possible."

We walked for a while. I asked, "Why does Castile not flee the Empire?"

Konstantin grunted and pointed at the men making their way around us in the woods, "The Hounds will always find you."

"How did you become a Hound?" I asked, watching the men flitter among the trees.

“Interested are we?” He chuckled. “Well, two things are needed. You need to complete legionary training, and you have to have a useful spell form.”

“So I qualify?” I asked him. We were approaching a clearing ahead, and Konstantin’s eyes were on it.

“I suppose you do,” he said, distracted. “It is not as plush as you think it is. The Hounds track down beasts, mages, men, and sometimes children. They are the attack dogs of the Emperor. This,” he motioned to our escort, “is out of character for them, and I am curious how Duchess Veronica sent the best of them to secure Castile.”

We entered the clearing, and it looked like a campsite. There were two small shelters, and inside, foul-smelling bodies covered in fur and blood. I walked with Konstantin for a closer look. “These are gnolls. Do you have them in Tsinga?”

“We do, but I have never seen one before,” I replied, inspecting the dead creatures. They had arrow wounds, throats were slit, bellies were cut open, and entrails pulled out. They were vaguely humanoid but definitely most beast-like, hyena men.

Konstantin looked into the other shelter and grunted before walking on. I looked inside as well. Puppies...no, baby gnolls all ruthlessly slaughtered. I moved to catch up with Konstantin. He waved his hand back, “That is what the Legion Hounds do best. I am sure if they were not tasked with bringing in Castile, they would have tracked down the rest of the pack. Gnolls are a scourge.”

“Is that what you did? Hunted monsters?” I asked him. Brutus had moved beside us to listen.

“No, I was the monster. I hunted mostly soldiers for deserting their posts. Some legionaries for failing to do their duty. And a few regular men as well. Highwaymen and other criminals. If a Hound is coming for you, the trial is already over,” he said hollowly.

Brutus asked, “Why did you leave?”

Konstantin smirked, “I didn’t. I was recruited into the service of someone else. There are not many ways to leave the Hounds.” He pointed at Cornelious far

ahead, "To leave, you need to be reassigned by your commander or complete your tenured service. Someone negotiated with Cornelious on my behalf."

The sound of bow shots from deep to the right sounded, and everyone paused to listen. Konstantin unshouldered his bow and went into the woods. We all waited for ten minutes before Konstantin returned. Our group was moving again, but Konstantin was at the front talking with Castile. Word was passed back that the Hounds had encountered a giant spider and dispatched it.

Mateo joined Brutus and I. We broke out some wrapped rations. Mateo had gotten all of his soaked when he tripped in the reservoir. I gave him one of my meals from Flavius' pack. As we finished the meal, we reached another clearing. This time, it was a wide, packed dirt road bisecting the forest.

Cornelius was talking with Castile, and soon, we were walking down the road. The pace had increased, and Adrian was grunting with every step to keep pace. The forest finally faded into open fields of wheat. It was late evening, and a dozen men came charging toward us on the road, their horses raising a cloud of dust behind them.

We had remained at our group's rear and could not hear the exchange with the riders wearing the army's regular uniform. It did not matter as the riders rode away back in the direction they came from after a quick exchange. Delmar turned to us, "Legionnaires! Form ranks four abreast at the front!"

We scrambled to obey, and in a few heartbeats, we had a four-by-five block of men. Castile, Delmar, and Adrian walked into the front as we began a march. I was in the last row, and soon, all twenty of us had synched our steps as we continued down the road. We passed by a few fields, and a neatly arranged tent city appeared over a small hill. Mounted sentries were on top of the surrounding hills.

The tent city was still being formed as they must have recently stopped here for the quickly approaching night. The tent city had flattened a farmer's wheat field, but I doubted the farmer had complained. We held our chins high and walked through the soldiers, getting people to pause and stare. A few larger tents were flying a mage flag above them and surrounded by other men in legion armor. Our Legion Hound escort evaporated into the tent city, leaving us to march alone, their duty to deliver us over.

The rows of tents seemed to go on forever as we marched deeper into the encampment. We finally reached the center of the camp. A large white tent was erected here. Delmar ordered us to halt and wait at attention. I had not expected to wait long.

I was wrong. The sun had set, and we remained at attention in the humid early night. I wanted to ask a question or even just get a drink but was too afraid to be the first person to do so. And that was how we remained throughout the night, statues outside the command tent as the Duke's army continued their business.

The rich blue moon lit the camp, and we soon fought to keep our eyes open. I felt pity for the injured men, especially Adrian, who shifted ever so slowly at the front of our block on his broken ankle.

We were all still standing when the hint of dawn crested the sky. Some of us had swayed during the night, somehow finding the ability to sleep while standing for short periods. But none of us fell. The command tent flap suddenly flew back, and a man in a General's dress exited the tent. He walked past us, not saying a word. Shortly after, another man exited the tent. He was tall with sharp features in the low light and hard jet-black hair. He had on legionnaire armor, only it was not leather but steel. He looked at all of us heavy on our feet, smiled ruefully, and announced, "Castile, so good to see you again. You look well. Why don't you come in so we can talk." I immediately did not like the man; he just had that air about him.

Castile stumbled on her first step before gaining her balance. She told Delmar, "Get everyone to the legion healers." And then she was gone inside to confront Duke Octavian.

Chapter 60: Recovery

My legs were unsteady for a few steps, and my boots were still damp from wearing them through the reservoir. All I wanted to do was sleep, but as the army and small encampments of legion companies waking and packing. I feared I would not have that opportunity to rest. If it was possible, our marching block was more haggard than when we entered the camp, but we still followed Delmar and a severely limping Adrian to our destination. Delmar seemed to be scanning the flags of the legion companies, looking for something.

I asked Brutus, "Are all these flags for different mage companies? Do we have a flag?"

Brutus looked up and studied a few flags, "Most are mage companies. You can tell if a flag has a solid background. If there is a horizontal stripe in the background, it is a duke's legionare company with no mage. Dukes can not command mages, and they need to pay the Emperor a tax for legionaries under their command. Legion units without a duke or mage in charge do not have flags. I assume Castile has a flag, but I do not know what it is."

Felix was in the back row of the marching block and answered tiredly, "Castile has a black flag with an orange bull on it. I do not know if she chose it or inherited it. I have not seen the flag since we marched in the New Year parade in the capital a few years back."

Delmar found what he was seeking and increased his pace to a gray flag with a red serpent on it. Outside the tent entrance, he announced himself to two legionaries in pristine leather armor. "Mage Larita, Mage Castile's company seeks your healing skills. Please grant us your favor!" His tone was very respectful, and an older woman with mostly gray hair in blue robes exited the tent with a steaming cup in her hand.

She looked over our group and sighed, "Very well. Strip to your undergarments before entering my tent." She turned to one of her legion guards, "Do we have orders for moving out yet?"

He responded sharply, "No orders yet. The army will advance after the midday meal. I expect us to follow."

The old mage turned to Delmar, "We have time then, Delmar. You may enter and send in your men in threes. No armor or filthy clothes." She wrinkled her nose, turned, and went inside the tent. Delmar relaxed visibly.

He turned to us and spoke loudly, "We are fortunate! The best healer in the legion is going to see to our ailments. Everyone strip and keep as much of your body stink out of her tent as possible!"

We all stripped, and as I took off my boots, some of my calloused skin went with it. My heels were bleeding freely, and I did not feel the sting until the air hit the exposed flesh. My feet were not the only ones in dire need of attention. Everyone had gotten their feet wet getting through the reservoir, and the hard-earned callouses were puckered with water and peeling away from everyone.

The first few men were stripping to just their boxers, so I copied them. Adrian had protested being one of the first men in, but Delmar yelled at him, and he went in with the first group. Looking around at our remaining company, we were filthy, and about half had unhealed upper body wounds.

Brutus fell on the grass and laid back. Delmar snapped, "You fall asleep, Brutus, and we will not wake you when your turn comes."

I sat cross-legged next to him to wait. Brutus had his eyes closed as he spoke, "This is the largest benefit to being in the legion, Eryk—the healing. The regular army might see a magic healer in their infirmary who was looking to practice their craft, but that would be it. As a legionnaire, you can walk into any large city and find magical healing without paying for it."

I nodded, and it made sense why people would volunteer or fight to be in the legion over the army. I looked down the row of tents, "If all the solid background flags were mages, how come we were defending Macha with just three? There must be been twenty mage company flags in the camp," I asked.

Brutus responded sleepily, "More. Probably close to thirty in the entire camp. Do not ask me why. They never asked for my advice." He chuckled at the absurdity of a Duke asking his advice.

Adrian came out walking stiffly and testing his healed ankle. Lysander was behind him. Delmar turned, "Lysander, you are with me. Let us find a legion supply wagon and get new underclothes and socks for everyone." Lysander did not look thrilled but nodded and followed him. Brutus was snoring in the grass. I let him sleep until we were the last two remaining and kicked him awake to enter.

The tent had three tables in the center, a comfy bed along one side, and a modest dining table. An array of fruits, breads, and sliced meats was on the table. The legionnaire inside seemed to be preparing another teapot for the Mage Larita. I bowed and thanked her, "Mage Larita, thank you for healing us and us company. It is an honor to be healed by the best mage in the legion."

The older woman chuckled softly, "Best mage! I am as close to the best healer as I am to being a virgin. Delmar was just buttering me up to do my best. No fear, boy, I may not be the best, but I am better than most. Up on the table and lay down so I can assess you."

Brutus stood while I lay on the table. Larita moved to my head and placed her hands on my ears. I felt a pressure in my head that suddenly cleared. I felt lightheaded but not nearly as tired. "Some minor trauma there. You should wear your helmet more, boy."

"I lost it falling down forty feet of stone steps," I replied irritably and defensively.

"I am sure there were plenty of men in no longer need of theirs close by," she replied cleverly. She moved to my left arm, and I felt a warmth spread throughout. When she let go, my arm felt cold, and I got goosebumps. She repeated this with my other arm and then my legs. She mentioned, "Your knee has been healed several times somewhat sloppily, probably by healing potions of a bad healer."

I nodded but did not have time to speak as she had moved to my torso. She focused on where the crossbow bolt had penetrated, and I felt a sting. I reflexively reached for it, and she slapped my hand away, "Just some small fragments I am extracting. You probably used a healing potion. They close the wound too quickly to get all the debris out." She felt all across my chest, working her way down. Sometimes, I felt some warmth spreading from her hands, sometimes not.

I remained still as she reached my groin, cupped it, and squeezed a little harder than I thought necessary. "Healthy, unlike some of your fellows," was all she said. "You are the last one?" she asked Brutus. The sleepy Brutus nodded and took my place on the table. Mage Larita quickly started to repeat the process.

I asked cautiously, "When the healing mages healed us during training, they never touched us...all over."

Larita paused on Brutus and looked at me, "They were not healing mages, boy. They were using spell forms. Very inefficient. I use a diagnostic spell form with a very focused range. Then, I heal just what needs to be healed. It conserves aether and is much better healing than a potion or spell form. I fixed a dozen issues you did not even know about."

"Thank you, mage, for your insight and thorough healing," I bowed slightly and stepped back.

She continued her work, and I think Brutus had fallen asleep again. Larita addressed me, "Delmar used to be one of my legionaries. He did a good job for me," she smirked slightly. She looked me up and down, "I could use a large boy like yourself. If Castile survives this mess, I might ask for you as a favor." I noticed she did not grab Brutus' groin as she had mine before finishing with his torso.

The old mage smiled with perfect teeth as I woke Brutus and pulled him out. I felt a little like prey under Mage Larita's gaze. "Thank you," I yelled as I went to our gear and began dressing. My feet were completely healed with new pink skin, and I could not find a single ache in my entire body.

Brutus mumbled, "I think she knocked me out when she started. I was not planning to fall asleep."

"Huh, do not worry, you did not miss anything," I said, dressing quickly.

Felix was waiting for us. While we were dressing, he said, "We are headed to a farmer's house. They have a pond in the back to bathe and wash our clothes. We started walking, following Felix. The army was packing up their tents, and some units were eating from meal carts. The farmer's house was outside the camp's perimeter, and no sentries stopped us.

Firth and Konstantin were already clean and headed back toward the camp. Konstantin paused to talk with Brutus and me, "We are going to see what is churning in the rumor mill among the legion companies. Brutus, do you know a few legionaries in other companies? You trained at the Legion facility outside the capital?"

Brutus nodded, "Yes, I trained with the legion volunteers at the Perfectus Legonis."

"Good, you can head back to the camp after you clean yourself," Konstantin said as he continued on his way.

When we got to the pond by the farmhouse, a dozen ducks were swimming in it, and most of the men had already bathed and were putting on clean underclothes. It was a little surreal as just a few hours ago, we could all barely stand, and now we were healed. Lirkin rushed up to us with some bundles of food, "The healing will have drained your body's stores. Eat all you can for the next two days." He rushed away to continue preparing food from a cart he apparently appropriated.

Mateo motioned at the cart, "He stole it. Best not to ask too many questions."

The pond was a good acre in size, and I think the farmer used it to water his livestock and horses. My bath was quick, and I was glad to put on clean underclothes. I rinsed the dirt and sweat from my canvas clothes and hung them to dry in a tree. I then worked on oiling my armor. Then, I sharpened and oiled my blades. Flavius' pack was well equipped, and I even found a gold and eight silver wrapped at the bottom. I hoped he returned from his adventure with Master Mage Sebastian to reclaim it.

The air was actually dry and not humid for once. The sun was clear, and the company was lounging bare-chested on the grass, happy to be out of armor. The farmer did come out once to talk with Adrian, who looked like he handed him a few coins. Lirkin handed out food as fast as he could prepare it on the meal wagon. It was jarring how fast our fortunes had changed.

I soon fell asleep in the grass. Konstantin kicked me awake well into the afternoon. My pale chest had burned slightly from the sun. "Get up, get dressed; Adrian and Delmar are talking to the company."

My clothes had mostly dried, and I put on some new socks. The boots were still damp but drier than before. As everyone circled around Delmar and Adrian, we were anxious to hear the fate of Castile and ourselves.

Adrian looked gaunt in his face but was completely healed. He had been in too rough of shape to do much leading, but now he looked revitalized. He spoke clearly to our small group, "Castile is going to be transported to Caranhagan. From there, she is going to be portaled back to the capital, Telha. Duchess Veronica has called for a Ducal Tribunal into her actions."

Everyone was quiet. Delmar joined, "We are going with her. Duke Octavian is as well with his fifty legionaries to guard the prisoner. We need to make sure Castile does not meet with an accident under the Duke's care."

Lucien, our horse master, asked, "What happens when we reach the capital?"

Adrian answered, "We will wait in the Legion Hall. The Emperor will name the other two Dukes to sit with Duchess Veronica in the Tribunal. Some of us may be called a witness before a Truthseeker."

"You know Duke Octavian is going to get himself on the Tribunal. Who will be the third?" asked Kolm.

Adrian made a pained face, “I guess we will see if the Emperor favors his son or a peasant mage.”

Delmar added, “Get some rest. Octavian’s company is mounted, and I do not expect them to wait on us. It is eighty miles to Caranhagan. It would not surprise me if they outpaced us and did not wait at the portal for our arrival.”

“Are we going to have to do an eighty-mile jog?” Wylie announced, exasperated.

Adrian snapped, “If I told you to do an eight-hundred-mile run, you would do it with a smile on your face!”

Delmar calmed things, “Lirkin is working with the farmer to get us water and food for the long march. That road,” he pointed behind us, “is the road they will travel past. As soon as we see their horses, we will fall in.”

“Why don’t we start now?” Blaze asked.

Konstantin barked, “Because Duke Octavian would probably have us executed for desertion. He can not do anything about us following our mage commander.”

We all strapped our armor on so we could mobilize quickly. This time, I settled under the shade of a small tree and healed my sunburn under my armor. I rested my head on my pack and drifted off.

It was late evening when Brutus woke me, “News from camp. Duke Octavian is breaking camp. We are to assemble near the road.”

We were soon formed into ranks and waiting. It was nearly dark when a mounted unit came from the mostly dismantled army camp. The fifty legionaries riding all had metal legion armor instead of the leather we wore. At the front of the group was the black-haired man who met Castile. I assumed that was Octavian. He looked fairly young to be the Emperor’s son. The Emperor was hundreds of years old. Guess with magic, aging was not a concern.

Castile was riding in the middle of the group like she was a danger to escape. The Duke sneered at us as he pranced by, and Castile couldn’t hide a small smirk at seeing us. We fell in behind the calvary. This was going to be a long march.

