

## A Soldier's Life

### Chapter 61: Loyalty

We fell in behind the horses. I thought they would try to lose us by increasing their pace, but the horses only moved steadily, causing us to move at regular march to keep up. I was happy Kolm had repaired the sole of my boot. I was in the back row of our marching block with Brutus to my left and Firth to my right. Firth, the old veteran muttered, "This is going to be a miserable night march. Good thing we have those glow stones. You will need to charge mine."

He passed it to me, and soon, I had a cycle of glowstones coming at me. They were the glowstones they had 'requisitioned' from me. I kept the remaining four stones in my dimensional space, fearing they would also be 'requisitioned.' As I finished charging the glowstones, more riders came racing up behind us. Firth barked, "Shields to the rear! Spears and archers at the ready!"

Four men who had acquired body shields in the army camp cycled to form the wall, and two men with round shields took the ends of the shield line. Four spearmen were behind the six shieldmen, and four archers were behind them. Adrian and Delmar stood in the rear, and I was with them. Konstantin and a few others darted off the road into the brush to flank the possible attackers. All this was well practiced and happened in heartbeats. Delmar yelled, "Hold! Break and reform ranks! It is just the Hounds."

Nine riders led by Cornelius came up on us and settled into a walk with their mounts. Cornelius smiled in the waning light. "Konstantin, I am surprised you did not steal horses for your company."

Konstantin laughed, "I am sure Octavian was waiting for me to try so he could shackle all of us!"

Cornelius laughed with him, "Probably. He sent us off to track down two regulars in the woods who thought better of rushing the walls of Macha. No need to worry, Konstantin. We will make sure your mage gets to the capital in one piece. Since you are walking in that direction, I am sure you will see to the capital—eventually." He laughed at our predicament.

Konstantin asked seriously, "What is the pulse of her chances before a Tribunal?"

Cornelius frowned while his men rode forward at a hand signal from him. He frowned, "Octavian will worm himself onto the Tribunal with Duchess Veronica. The Emperor will appoint the third based on the highest bidder for the judgment seat. Unfortunately, I do not think he is invested at all in Mage Castile's fate."

Firth asked Cornelius, "Isn't Octavian the Emperor's son? Doesn't that mean he will get his way?"

"The Emperor doesn't favor any of his children. Quite the opposite. He is always on guard against them. I doubt it will work in Castile's favor, though." He spurred his horse forward to catch up to his men, leaving us.

We kept our formation and kept the riders in sight. They were kicking up a significant amount of road dust. The dust soon coated everyone. As the sun set, the glowstones appeared on the men on the outside of the block as we marched. Larita had done an amazing job healing everyone. My only issue was that my feet had no calluses, just pink new skin. I could feel the blisters forming already just a few miles into the march. As the night set in, the blue moon was hidden by heavy clouds, causing a heavy darkness. Our men on the edge of our formation had fixed the glow stones to their shields. The shifting shadows the glowstones generated from the trees and shrubs created a spooky and eerie feeling. Especially since I knew my new world had dozens of horrors that could rush out of the darkness.

The contingent of mounted legionaries in front of us brought their own light. Heavy directional beams of light bounced around far in front of us as they served as the vanguard. It made me think I could do the same with my glowstone. Make a simple flashlight with a polished metal funnel.

As the night wore on, the horses kept opening distance on us. The bouncing lights got further and further away. Delmar and Adrian paced us at the front. They knew our best speed in the dark on the dirt road to not wear us out. At least with the open distance, we did not have to deal with the horses' heavy dust cloud any longer.

Hours into the March, Brutus spoke, "Well, this is not all bad. At least we are not being sent to assault the walls of Macha to retake the city."

Firth said, "There is that, but from what I heard, they do not plan to assault the city. They have some powerful earth mages with them and plan to tear down the outer walls. Probably take half the lower city as well."

Wylie turned, "What about the citizens that remained?"

"They should have fled. I talked with an acquaintance in Master Mage Dacian's company. Dacian is tasked with bringing down the western wall and then rebuilding it after the city is taken," Firth said calmly.

"So they are just going to destroy the city and then rebuild it?" I asked incredulously.

"It will take a few months, but yes," Firth said. "It was the plan all along. They needed the Bartiradians inside the city."

"Then why is Castile going to a Tribunal?" Wylie asked from the row in front of us.

"Her orders were to hold the city until Duke Tiberius arrived," Firth replied. I was dumbstruck. In other words, Castile, Gregor, and Durandus were going to fail no matter what. The only way they could have survived the Bartiradians and succeeded in the plan would have been to hold the inner city walls until the Duke's army felt like showing up.

Everyone was too tired to talk after that as Adrian ordered a slight increase in pace, just short of a jog. It seemed ridiculous that we could keep up with horses. At least Cornelius said he would make sure Castile would reach the capital. We passed through three towns throughout the night, and when we could no longer see the lights of Octavian horses. We reached a small bridge, and Delmar called, "Thirty minutes for water and food!"

Konstantin barked, "No one removes their boots! I know your feet hurt like your first march in training, but it will only be worse if you take them off. We have about fifty-five miles to Caranhagan. Fill your canteens by the spring and saturate your bellies!" Damn, hours of marching, and we were only a third of the way there. Men rushed to drink, eat, shit and piss.

Lucien, our company horse master, tried to cheer everyone up, "Most likely, they will have to rest their horses twice before they reach the city. Maybe we will pass them while they are watering them."

I was with Brutus, Felix, and Mateo, shoveling down food. I noted, "I can not believe how dry and cool the air is. It was humid daily in Macha, and we are not far from the city."

"One of the larger ley lines runs under this road. It plays with the weather above it," Brutus answered.

Felix asked, "Don't they have ley lines in Tsinga?"

I replied slowly, "We do, but I didn't grow up near one, and my education was lacking."

"Rest is over!" came a shout from Adrian, saving me from having to explain further. I needed to be careful when referencing Tsinga. With my recent luck, we would have another legionnaire from the distant Kingdom join our company.

I sent some healing aether to my feet to keep them in good condition. I was one of the few men moving without wincing or grunting. It did not take long for everyone's training to kick in and ignore the foot pain. We were going to do 80 miles in heavy boots with over sixty pounds of armor and gear. Some men who had geared up in camp with shields, spears, and arrows probably regretted their decision. We entered into a fast walk, and silence rained among the scuffing of boots on the dirt road.

When the sun began to rise, it was not salvation, though. Down in a valley, a river cut into a town. Octavian's legionaries' silver armor sparkled on the new day's light. We had caught up to them. We kept on the road and continued our march instead of turning off into the town below. The mood brightened some as Castile was down there somewhere, and it looked like we were going to reach Carahagan and make the portal.

By midmorning, we passed a sign that indicated we were forty-one miles from Caranhagan. I was surprised that Octavian's men had not ridden up behind us yet. Just before the sun reached its midday zenith, we were called to halt again. Not even Konstantin looked great after fifty miles of forced marching.

I worked my stiff and sore shoulders out with a touch of healing. It almost felt like I was cheating. Men collapsed to the ground, trying to find the energy to consume food, but many preferred a quick nap. I drank and ate from my pack as well. The more I consumed, the lighter it would be. With the company spread on the side of the road, Octavian's column rode up behind us. As they

passed, they increased to a light gallop. Their faces were smug as there was no way we could cover the last thirty miles before them. Castile was still stoic and riding in the center of their formation.

After they passed, Firth nearby swore, “Harpies tits. If the Duke orders the Displacement Mage to send him as soon as they get there, we might have to wait two or three days before the next portal opening to the capital.”

Adrian snapped, frustrated, “What do you suggest we do, Firth? We have no stamina potions, and I am pushing the pace as much as is safe. If we are denied healing in Caranhagan or Telha, we will be laid up for a week of healing!” I had never seen our leader’s nerves so frayed before. And Adrian had pushed through serious injuries just a day ago to escape the city.

“Send men on. There are a few of us who can push harder. If the Dukes rush the Tribunal, Castile will have no witnesses to defend her. She deserves a few of us to try, at least,” Firth muttered aggressively. I had not known he cared enough to defend Castile, especially since he worked for one of the Praetorian Guard.

“Who is willing to jog thirty miles to the city? My best guess is you need to make it in about five hours to catch the portal opening?” Adrian asked almost as a plea.

Konstantin dropped his pack and pulled his canteen, “Fill my canteen, and I will go. Benito, Linus, Pavel, and Eryk are the only other ones who look like they can make it.” Benito nodded and dropped his pack. Pavel did as well, albeit reluctantly. Linus looked like he was not happy being volunteered but slowly dropped his pack.

Well, shit. Getting volunteered again, “Give me more full canteens. I can squeeze five in my dimensional box,” I offered. Everyone quickly shuffled in their packs, and I shoved the canteens and some food into the box in my space, filling it.

The five of us left our packs to lighten our load. The only weapon we each took was our short swords and belt knives. We jogged after Konstantin in a line. The five of us were mismatched body types. Konstantin was squat and barrel-chested, Benito was short and thick, Pavel was almost as tall as me and wiry, and Linus was the only person in our company who did not look like he was layered in muscle. Then there was me; I was both tall and thick with muscles.

As we started our jog, Konstantin paced us from the front. It was a light run, and maybe we were making ten-minute miles. Konstantin had selected our group well. Only Pavel was struggling visibly when we reached a road sign at a town noting eleven miles to Caranhagan. Pavel had a limp that was growing more pronounced with every mile.

Konstantin noticed, "Come on, Pavel. You have all that gold waiting for you in the Adventurer's Guild! You just have to earn it with a little pain!"

Konstantin was referring to the gold we were promised for discovering the lost dungeon. That was over seventy gold. It motivated Pavel as he did not waver until the city walls of Caranhagan came into sight. Konstantin swore, "Thought we would have caught sight of them before the walls."

The tall stone walls of the city did not have a sprawl of farms or buildings outside of it as Macha did. The last mile of the road became paved with stone as we approached. It was late evening, but there was still plenty of light. The city guards at the gate stopped us, and Konstantin rasped, "How long ago did the Duke ride through?"

The gate captain spent a moment looking us over. We were covered in dirty sweat and general filth, and Pavel had trouble standing on his right leg. "The Duke passed just under an hour ago."

"Thank you," Konstantin tried to move past. The guard blocked him.

"Legionnaire, you must enter your men in the Registry," the guard said seriously, pointing to the guard house.

"Did the Duke register his company?" Konstantin snapped.

The guard looked uncomfortable, "No, he flew his flag, and we counted his men as they rode through."

"Good, add five more to that count," Konstantin said, pushing past. The guard was sputtering, but I did not hear as I followed Konstantin. I did not have time to admire the city as Konstantin moved quickly through the streets, dragging us along. The citizens gave us a wide berth, probably due to both our state of filth and displayed urgency.

We arrived at a large courtyard with a familiar stone arch, and the Duke's horses and men were waiting. Castile was dismounted in the center of the

group and talking with Cornelius. Cornelius spotted us and pointed to a small stone building. Konstantin barked, "Frigging paperwork. Wait here. If the Displacement Mage arrives and opens the portal, go through, do not wait for me. Do not let anyone stop you. I will go register our travel with the clerk." Konstantin stomped away, finding energy in his anger.

Pavel found a barrel to sit on and peeled off his boot on his right leg. As he removed his blood-soaked sock, it was apparent the flesh on his heel had split, and the heel bone was showing. Linus and Benito were not as bad. They still had bloody socks but just from blood blisters. I left my boots on as I had kept my feet in good shape with touches of my healing ability.

Cornelius approached us as we checked ourselves and waited on Konstantin, who was getting vocal inside the clerk's building. "Impressive feat, getting here on foot. I could use men like you in the Hounds. Do any of you have a spell form?" I knew a spell form was required to join the Hounds, but none of us answered him. After a pause, he asked, "Is this all that made it?" Cornelius indicated our group.

Pavel answered non-committantly while delicately inspecting his heel, "They should be here soon."

Konstantin joined us, his face red from yelling. He barked at us, "We are fine to enter the portal to the capital."

Cornelius eyed him, "You were always a tough bastard, Konstantin. Good thing, too. Octavian sent a message to have a Truthseeker lined up to expedite the Tribunal. If you had not made it, they would have proceeded without your testimony."

My limbs suddenly got very cold. We were going to be questioned by Truthseekers? A procession of legionaries in metal armor approached. They were escorting the Displacement Mage. Fifteen minutes later, the portal opened, and the Duke's procession started entering. "Do not bother putting your boots on; just move through," Konstantin barked, and we all shuffled to the portal to follow. I had a thought about falling to the back and missing the portal by accident, but Konstantin was behind me and pushing me forward. I entered the portal and emerged in the capital of the Telhian Empire.

## Chapter 62: Telha, the Capital of the Telhian Empire

I walked out of the portal prepared, not stumbling, and quickly took in my surroundings. The Duke's horses were being led away in an opening in a wall to the right. We were in a box-shaped stone pit about forty feet across. On each side of the thirty-foot stone wall were six archers and a person in mage robes. The archers had steel legion armor reflecting in the sun. The Displacement Mage was behind us by the portal arc we had exited in the pit and had a dozen legionaries around him.

Konstantin broke my gawking, "You four get to the East Legion Hall. Find a healer. I am going to the Magistrates Hall. Do not leave the Legion Hall no matter what. I will find you there later." Konstantin hurried off, not explaining any further.

"Does anyone know how to get to the lower East Legion Hall?" I asked. My companions had boots in their arms and bloody bare feet or bloodied socks.

Linus spoke, wincing as he put on his socks, "The city was designed to be easy to navigate. I have been there before."

Paval groaned, "I know where it is, too. Probably almost a mile walk from here." He did not want to wear his socks and boots again but started doing so.

Benito noted, "It is the smallest of the three Legion Halls in the Telha. The Imperial Legion Hall houses the Emperor's personal guard. It is actually close by," he indicated the passage the horses were led into. "The Western Legion Hall is outside of the western walls and near the Perfectus Legionis. That is where they train the men who volunteer for the Legion."

"Brutus mentioned that. He trained there," I added as we began to walk. I was the only one not struggling with each step. We did over eighty miles in about 18 hours. It probably would not have been as bad for them if Mage Larita had not healed their feet. The newly healed skin could not take the abuse of the march. I had learned on the march how to heal my feet and not lose the calluses as they built up again.



“That is where the loyalist legionaries train,” Linus muttered. “They get paid as soon as they start and spend twice as long training as us conscripts.”

“Not twice as long, just a full year, but better training, too,” Paval painfully grunted out between steps. “I think Adrian was a volunteer, but I don’t know how he got assigned to our company.”

We reached the top of the ramp, and the city spread before us. The roads were made from immaculate large granite pavers. The buildings all looked uniform and neatly arranged along the road. Everything was made from a white stone with highlights using black marble. Arches and columns were used heavily in the construction. It was beautiful. The most impressive feat was the height of the stone buildings. Some had ten floors when I counted the windows. The windows were also massive, easily ten feet tall and half that in width.

The men and women walking the road wore thin, colorful fabrics in dozens of styles. We reached an intersection, and I paused. The road we entered was the main thoroughfare for the capital. I could tell because to our left was a massive structure, easily five hundred feet in height, a shining white and silver beacon in the late afternoon sun. “Never seen the Emperor’s Palace, Eryk? It boggles the mind. Something so big for just one man to live in,” Linus said.

Paval looked and noted, “There are probably a thousand men of the Legion inside and another thousand in the building to the right. It is the Imperial Legion Hall, and the Emperor has what? A hundred consorts and hundreds of servants? I am sure the palace is full.” His tone was indifferent.

“How many consorts?” I asked, imagining a massive harem. “Does he have hundreds of children as well?” I added.

“It is seven consorts,” Linus scoffed at Paval’s misinformation. “And he can only name seven of his children First Citizens by law. The rest he marries off of sending them abroad.”

Paval gripped quietly, “I doubt he limits himself to his seven wives. He is known for taking what he wants.”

We turned away from the palace and started walking in the opposite direction. The wide road was busy as evening was approaching. Pairs of legionaries patrolled in metal armor. It felt like we were the scrubs with just auroch leather armor. But I guess leather armor was lighter, cheaper to make, and easier to

maintain. I would hate to have to spend every evening polishing my metal chest piece. My helmet took enough effort to keep the rust at bay.

We finally encountered food carts, and I bought everyone skewered meat. The vendor called it pork, but it tasted like spicy chicken to me. The pause in our walk was short, and we were on the move. Everyone was eager to get the healing. We tossed the skewers into a trash barrel on a corner. The city was extremely clean, and sanitation was much higher here than in my previous stays. The civilians got thicker and thicker on the street as we went further and further from the palace.

Some intersections had large fountains with mural mosaics tiled in the bottoms of the pools. We did not stop to look, but it looked like legionaries battling various beasts.

My head snapped around, and my jaw fell open. A leopard man was being led by a cable with a collar around his neck.

"That is a Tabaxi, one of the catfolk." Linus seemed confused, "I thought they were common in the jungles near Tsinga?"

I scrambled to think of a response, "It was not the catfolk but the fact it was collared like a pet."

He nodded sadly, "The beast races are not allowed freedom in the Empire. They are a rare sight and usually too feral to tame." I watched as the catfolk disappeared on its leash in the crowd.

"What are the beast races?" I asked, looking for more in the crowd of humans.

Linus was willing to answer, "There is a zoo in the upper city. I went once. Let me see...minotaurs are the bullmen. Tabaxi are the catfolk. Satyrs are the goatmen. Centaurs are the horse men. Aarakocra are the birdmen. Yuan-ti are the snake men....there was one more," he said, trying to think of it.

"The lizardfolk," Paval supplied. "But all the beast races are about as welcome in the Telhian Empire as elves and dwarves."

"Where do the orcs fit in?" I asked.

Linus answered, "They group them with the goblinoid races, but do not ever call them a goblinoid if you meet an orc. They are as intelligent as you are me."

Well, maybe not Benito.” Linus waited for Benito to remark on the jab, but he walked on oblivious. Linus continued, smirking at Benito, “The goblinoids are the bugbears, goblins, hobgoblins, kobolds, gnolls, ogres, and trolls.”

Paval grunted as he stepped, “I am no scholar, but that is a very general classification. I have never met an orc before, but if you call him a goblin, I would not be surprised if he swore a blood oath to kill you for it on the spot.”

We took a left turn, and the city buildings off the main road were not as opulent. They were still stone constructions, but instead of being homogeneous, it became a mixture of various stones. Also, the buildings were only three stories tall now. We were within sight of the outer wall, at least I think it was the outer wall, as it was twice the height of the buildings when Linus said, “We are here.”

Linus was walking down a side street that lacked a heavy flow of people. A small park with trees was at the end of the road, and a large black stone building was beyond. The large entrance had a pair of legion guards on either side in leather armor. The building looked like an imposing structure with a single large statue on top. Paval sighed in relief at having arrived.

Linus said, “We are in the old city. This building was built by and used by the First Legion. Now, it is not as impressive as the Imperial Legion Hall or the Western Legion Hall, but it is the nicest Legion Hall you are likely to see in your service as a volunteer.”

The black archway entrance was guarded by two men in leather legionnaire armor and led to a courtyard with an open sky above. Legionaries in the courtyard were in and out of leather armor, milled about on stone benches. They looked up at us as we entered. We were still a mess. Linus stepped forward, “Is there a Healing Mage on duty?”

One of the men in leather armor stood and approached, “You four look like you just came out of the arse of an ogre.” He introduced himself, “I am Severus, the baths are over there,” he pointed to an archway to our left, “I will go and bring a healer. We use the healer from the clinic down the street. The only company Healing Mage we had is off to the assault on Macha.”

We gratefully made our way into the baths. The stone inside was the same onyx black as the building, but the space was well-lit with glowstones. Four boys came and took our clothes and armor as we stripped. We entered the

showers with brushes and fresh soap. As we washed, Paval noted, "Damn, Eryk, your feet do not look bad at all."

"Yeah, Larita did not heal them. I still had my calluses, and my socks dried in the sun," I responded calmly. He just huffed and did comment again. I was in the heated bath first. This bath was actually a lot nicer than the upper baths in Macha. The seating under the water formed to your ass, and the water was hotter.

I waited almost half an hour for the others. They had waited for the healer to arrive before joining me in the soaking pool. Linus asked, "Do you want the healer, Eryk?" I shook my head no, and he waved off the man in the other room. He settled into the pool, "He only had a spell form, but he was good. Paval is digging through his pack to tip him some coin."

Benito came and just jumped into the pool like a kid, causing a splash and waves of water. The center of the pool was much deeper, and he appeared to know that in advance. When he came up, he laughed, "Damn, this almost makes me forget the last three days."

He joined us, and then a happy Paval joined us as well. His feet were pink with new skin, but the bone was no longer exposed. We soaked in silence, and Benito started snoring. It was an hour before a naked and clean Konstantin joined us in the pool. He sighed as he entered and kicked Benito awake.

With all our attention, he started, "The Tribunal starts tomorrow. We were lucky we made it before the Displacement Mage opened the portal. It is going to be at least a week before it will open again."

Linus asked, "So what do you need us to do?"

Konstantin nodded, "I was at the Magistrate's Hall where the Tribunal will be held. Tonight, we will all head back and give statements to the Truthseekers. They will use the transcript for the trial in the morning in defense of Castile. We will wait outside and may be called to clarify our statements."

"Did Castile get a good Advocate?" Paval asked.

Konstantin shrugged, "I do not know who is counseling her. The Tribunal is Duchess Veronica, Duke Octavian, and Duke Vito. I do not know Vito other

than he was visiting the Emperor from his province. The only good news is the Emperor did not appoint the Duke that Octavian had wanted as the third."

Konstantin stood, having only been in the pool for ten minutes, "We will go and get fresh clothes and sandals from the Legion Hall quartermaster while our clothes are being cleaned. The sooner we talk to the Truthseekers, the better." I was left in no position to object. I noted a little sourly the cost of the linens and sandals was being added to my legion debt. Even Benito was smart enough to see we were being charged twice what they were worth.

We soon walked in the fading sun and followed Konstantin to the Magistrate's Hall. Konstantin had us leave our weapons behind. I was extremely nervous as I had no idea what this encounter with the Truthseekers would entail, but I had no other choice.

## Chapter 63: Truthseeker

Konstantin led us back toward the upper city where the portal stone was located. Paval said, "They may have been expensive, but they are comfortable." He was fingering his new linen shirt. "It is also new. Most of the clothes we requisition at other legion halls may be free, but they are also used. Sometimes, with a hole in it that you need to sew shut."

Konstantin got us focused, "When you are questioned, you need to answer questions truthfully and use as few words as possible. They will ask you for an opening statement. Say that Castile could not prevent the fall of Macha. Remember the facts. Master Mage Durandus got himself killed, so he was not available to anchor the defense. The Displacement Mage was assassinated days before the Bartiradians arrived. The army surrendered after the lower city fell, which was why we fled."

"I don't know about the last one, Konstantin. We left the city before they surrendered. We only heard they were going to surrender," I said after considering what I remembered. I did not want a Truthseeker to call me on a lie.

Konstantin grunted, "Fine. Just tell them the Bartiradians were cutting through the barricades quickly and were going to reach the inner city walls less than a day after breaching the outer walls."

Linus asked thoughtfully, "Will they just question us about the siege?"

Konstantin walked a little slower, "They are the Imperial Truthseekers, not the lowly ones you find in a town or city. They can ask about anything. Most likely, they will only ask questions about Castile as that is who you are giving a statement for. Her Tribunal starts soon, so we need to do this now so copies can be distributed to each Duke on the Tribunal."

I was extremely nervous now. "Can we refuse to answer questions?" I asked.

"If you do, they will just dig deeper," Konstantin responded with a glare. I felt trapped but made an effort to keep my mind sharp. I knew body language was important from watching cop shows. I needed to look calm and respond calmly. I focused on getting into that state of mind for the rest of the walk.

We reached a building with two beautiful giant marble statues of a woman holding scales and a man holding a sword flanking the entrance. "Who are they?" I asked, marveling at the artistry of the statues. The detail was amazing, and I thought they could come alive at any moment.

"They represent Justica and Ultio, the gods of justice and vengeance," Konstantin said, pushing the doors open and not looking at the statues. Maybe he had seen them before.

A man in white robes came rushing forward, "All business will be handed on the morrow."

"We are here to give statements for the Ducal Tribunal starting in the morning concerning Mage Castile. I already talked with Magistrate Aurelia. She approved statements to be given to a Truthseeker." Konstantin said with annoyance.

The man stuttered for a moment in thought, "Magistrate Aurelia...I-I c-can do that. There are two Truthseekers still in the north wing. I will set up the rooms. Please wait here."

We were standing in the lobby. Above us, on the ceiling, was a massive mural. The painting showed legionaries fighting back what appeared to be a giant black demon. "What is that depicting," I asked, pointing up.

Konstantin and the others looked up. Konstantin took in the whole scale of the mural, "It is the arrival of the First Legion during the Abyssal War. They

managed to turn the tide and banish the demons. It is probably more myth than truth. To my knowledge, no greater demon has ever been seen outside a dungeon. The mural is more likely showing the First Legion battling the demon in a dungeon.”

The man in white robes returned, “The rooms are ready. The Truthseekers are being pulled from their studies. Which two of you will go first?”

Konstantin gave me a slight push in the back. Shit, I would have preferred to go last. I was soon walking down the hall with Konstantin and following the man who was walking with long, hurried strides. We proceeded through the maze-like building. Many of the walls and ceilings had massive murals of creatures and battles. They seemed out of place in a building that was the court of law in the Empire.

We reached a series of doors made from a bright blue wood. Two men in white and gold robes approached us. One was a graying man with haggard eyes, and the other was a young man, no older than fifteen, with black hair and a bowl cut. Our guide introduced the two, “Truthseeker Nico,” he indicated to the older man. “And the newest Imperial Truthseeker, Yanis,” he pointed at the younger man.

Konstantin looked at both and pointed to the older man, “Truthseeker Nico can take my statement. Eryk, you can have the boy.” Yanis pursed his lips in distaste at being called a boy. I did not appreciate Konstatin angering someone who would be questioning me.

The young Truthseeker opened a blue door and motioned me inside. The room was not what I expected. Two comfortable-looking plush chairs faced each other in the center of the room. The walls were painted an off-orange, and the floor was light yellow stone. “You can take either chair,” Yanis said while retrieving a notebook from a small shelf. “Forgive me, but what is this statement concerning? I was summoned from studies just minutes ago.”

This was a relief. Maybe I could keep everything focused on Castile. “Our company mage commander is being accused of abandoning her mission to defend the city of Macha.” I tried to make idle conversation, “The blue wood is interesting. Is it stained, or is that its natural color?”

He looked at the blue door, “That is Tace wood from Tsinga. It absorbs sounds so people outside the door can not listen in.” Damn it. I hope he didn’t

learn I was from Tsinga, otherwise my question would be suspicious. I decided not to try for further idle talk.

He seated himself across from me and wrote for a few minutes before looking up. He focused on me, "The crime is quite serious." He turned the page and concentrated, "Please limit your next answers to yes or no. Are you planning to do harm to the Empire or Emperor?"

My jaw would not work for a second, "I thought I was giving a statement for Mage Castile?"

"Yes. Well, I just finished my training, and we are always supposed to ask three questions whenever we do a reading. Not all Truthseekers do it, but like I said, I just began my training and was told it is standard practice. My teachers would be upset if I did not follow protocol." He impatiently asked, "Now, Are you planning to harm the Empire or Emperor?"

"No," he scribbled something quickly. I did not feel anything, so I was not sure how his truth ability worked.

He asked his next question, "Have you done harm to the Empire or Emperor in the past?"

"No," I answered calmly, and he wrote again in his book.

"And the final opening question. Do you have magics on your person to deceive a Truthseeker?" he was turning a small black ball in his hands, waiting for me to answer.

"No," I said more slowly than I probably should have, focused on the ball. He scribbled, and the young Truthseeker looked up after disappearing the ball into his pocket.

"Excellent; please give your statement slowly so I can record it. I will ask questions if relevant." He looked up, waiting, appearing patient.

I tried to remain as relaxed as possible. "Our company was to defend Macha until the Bartiradians arrived and surrounded the city. Then, the Duke was supposed to come and kill the Bartiradians outside the walls. Instead, one of the three mages sent to defend the city was killed, making the defense impossible. Then the Displacement Mage was assassinated with all his legionnaire guards."



I waited while he wrote. Then, I continued, "Without the portal, we had no resupply. The outer walls fell in the first assault, even though Castile put in a valiant effort to defend the Trader's Gate. The inner walls were about to fall, and we were told the army was going to surrender. We escaped on the aqueduct and lost a third of our company, and another third were seriously injured during our evacuation."

He finished writing and waited for me. When I did not add more, he read what he wrote about five times before asking a question. "What was the name of the mage, and how did he die? Did the Bartiradians kill him?"

I used his title, "Master Mage Durandus. A shambling mound monster in the swamp killed him. The Bartiradians were not responsible." He studied me as I spoke and then wrote in his book.

"I thought he was sent to defend a city. Why was he in a swamp?" he looked up, waiting for my answer to clear up his confusion.

"We were helping with patrols outside the city. A storm giant was digging in the swamp." I paused, ordering my thoughts carefully, "But we didn't know it was a storm giant at the time. Durandus went to explore to see if it was a threat, and I was sent with his company to help. When we found out it was a storm giant and Durandus attacked it." I stopped there.

He wrote furiously, "And the shambling mound was under the control of the storm giant?"

"Um, no. We killed the storm giant. But most of Durandus' company was killed in the effort. On the way back to the city, the shambling mound killed him." I replied.

He tapped his writing implement, thinking, "Did you or any of his company play a role in Master Mage Durandus' death?" he asked, studying me too intently for my liking.

I answered carefully, "No, Mage Durdandus was collecting essence from a frozen shambling mound. It broke free and threw him into the swamp. When we found him, he was dead."

He paused before writing. He spent a long time considering his next question. "Why did Durandus attack the storm giant? They are formidable foes. Was it threatening the city?"

“He didn’t tell me, but I am fairly certain he wanted the giant’s essence. He consumed it as soon as he collected it. He was also interested in what the giant was digging for. But I think he ordered the attack for the essence,” I replied truthfully.

Yanis wrote slowly, thinking on another question. I guessed by his fatigue that each answer took his aether to verify. “What was the storm giant digging for?”

“I don’t know. Durandus said there was a city for the giants buried under the swamp.” I replied.

“There was a what?” Yanis replied quickly.

I realized this bit of information had only been told to me. Castile has not been interested in this detail. “A city where the giants used to live, buried with time. Durandus seemed obsessed with trying to find out what the storm giant was digging for. He couldn’t delve deep enough with his senses, so we were returning to the Macha when he was killed.” The young Truthseeker scribbled furiously.

“And do you know where this dig site is?” he looked up and asked.

“Sure. It is not difficult to spot. There is a massive crater where he was digging in the swamp south of Macha.” The Truthseeker finished his writing, he reviewed everything he had written, and it was a good thirty minutes before he focused on me. The giant city seemed important to him, so I was expecting more questions concerning it.

He was distracted when he asked, “Um, yes. You said the Displacement Mage was assassinated with his guards. How did this happen?” returning to my statement and the purpose of this session.

I spent the next hour telling how we found the first Bartiradian infiltrators and knew others were in the city. Konstantin had warned the Displacement Mage, but they attacked him through the sewer wall in his basement, taking him by surprise. He asked about Mage Castile’s pursuit of the air mage that had killed the Displacement Mage and how he escaped the city and destroyed the aqueduct. Unfortunately, my knowledge was limited in this part of the story.

Then he started to ask questions about our flight from the city. My heart was pounding, just waiting for him to get a sniff of my abilities. I was lucky as the Truthseeker was distracted as he asked questions, and I gave short answers.

I assumed he was still thinking about the giant city under the swamp. I didn't know why, though, he was so young. Why would he be interested in an ancient city that was inaccessible? It looked like he was getting fatigued as well from the aether expenditure.

"I think we are done," he finally said. It had been almost three hours. "Your statement and all relevant information will be transcribed for the Ducal Tribunal in the morning. Where can you be reached if the Dukes seek to question you further?"

"I will be waiting outside the chamber. At least that is what I was told I would be doing," I answered.

He nodded, tapping his stylus on the pad. Somehow, I had never had to reveal that I had a dimensional space or anything else about myself. He thought I was just a regular legionnaire. I walked into the hallway and found Konstantin, Paval, and Benito. "Who is next?" I asked.

Konstantin, "Next? We finished two hours ago. All of us!" He motioned all of us to walk away. After a good distance, "What did the young Truthseeker ask? I gave him to you because he looked green. All you had to do was offer a statement he could verify."

"He asked a lot of questions about Durandus' death and the Displacement Mage's assassination. A lot of questions. Then he focused on our escape from the city," I said, throwing up my hands.

Konstantin studied me, "Did you insinuate Castile was responsible for either of the deaths?" Konstantin was calm but looked concerned.

"No!" I chirped at the accusatory comment. "He was more interested in Durandus' fight with the storm giant and Castile's pursuit of the air mage who destroyed the aqueduct."

"Was he trying to tie the air mage to Castile? That they might be working together?" Konstantin said insistently.

"I don't think so. I wasn't there, so I could not give him any information. I think he was just trying to confirm Castile didn't let him go on purpose," I said hastily.

Konstantin seemed to think. “Okay, we are heading back for just a few hours of sleep, and then we will come and camp outside the Tribunal chamber. We need to make sure the Advocate received our statements. They can make sure the Dukes read them.” Konstantin took off, and we followed.

## **Chapter 64: Raelia the Griffin Rider-flashback (POV Chapter voted on by Patreon readers)**

Raelia walked the camp, looking for the meal tent for the riders. She had seen it from up in the air before she landed, and it should be near this abandoned farmhouse. There, she spotted it. The tent flaps were green and not black this time. She walked inside to the smell of food being cooked.

The cook plated her some food with a smile, and she took the plate to a table to sit opposite Zyila, her commander. The tall, lean elf woman smiled, “Raelia, the food is good tonight. A sweet pepper sauce over brown rice and shredded venison.”

“You took down the deer, didn’t you,” Raelia smiled back. “You are always telling us never to risk combat from our mounts, yet you do it every flight!”

Zyila smirked, “Well, I answer to your brother. You answer to me.”

“I am sure you answer to him a lot in his tent—privately,” Raelia retorted and quickly received a kick to her shin from her commander.

“Not when we are on a campaign,” she scolded Raelia. However, it was not a well-kept secret. “The other generals on the campaign would frown on me distracting him.”

Raelia tasted the food, “Ugh, too sweet. They must have added honey again.” Her commander tried to hide a smile, “It was you? You asked for it.”

“When you are the one who brings in a three-hundred-pound fresh game animal for the table, the cooks tend to honor your requests,” Zyila said, shoveling the food into her mouth with a smile.

After they both finished the meal, Raelia asked, “What are my orders?”

Zyila rolled her eyes, "The postings are twenty feet away on the tent wall. Fine! You lazy elf. You are circling the city from two miles above with Nessa, Elanor, Daena, and Yavanna. We are attacking tonight as planned. I will fly out and ensure the Duke's army has been delayed."

"By yourself?" Raelia asked, knowing that doctrine did not allow Riders to operate alone.

"Rina is coming with me. And no, I am not taking you! You would probably try to fly too low and count the Duke's army or something else foolish," Zyila said seriously. "We have thirty minutes before we exchange flights."

They left the tent together and went to where the griffins were stabled. The attendants had fed them raw horse meat while they had been getting their own dinner. Moonclaw saw his rider approaching and nipped two other griffons, Monsoon and Sunflare, out of his way to get to Raelia. The griffin's head nuzzled her chest, lifting her off the ground with its powerful neck.

"Moonclaw, be nicer to the others," Raelia scolded weakly. He continued nudging her until she rubbed the feathers around his ear holes. He started clicking his tongue in appreciation. Finished with the affectionate beast, she started to prepare.

Raelia checked the harness twice, inspecting it for wear and fit. When griffins were used in rapid rotation like this siege, they would lose weight rapidly, and you needed to adjust the straps constantly. It was for your own safety and the comfort of the griffin. Nessa, Elanor, Daena, and Yavanna were already in their saddles.

Raelia swung her small frame up into the saddle. She scanned the skies, waiting. A few minutes later, a griffin started to land. Raelia and her patrol took to the air one at a time, blowing dead leaves into small cyclones from the force of taking off. The wind blasted through her face and hair before she activated her air spell form to shield the rush of wind in her face. She circled the camp once to inspect the army. Thousands of men were below her like little ants scurrying about. She was glad she was a Rider.

She soared high into the sky before starting her dull circle patrol. She pulled her spyglass and watched the defenders of Macha prepare for the inevitable. She had nothing against the people of the city. Their Emperor and his hatred of non-humans was the rot of the Telhians.

They had killed many Bartiradians on Bartiradian soil in the last two years. This assault was their own fault. The Telhian plan was also painfully obvious. They would put up a token resistance and let the Bartiradians take the city. Then, they would trap the Bartiradians in the city.

Her brother and the other generals were smarter than that, though. They had killed the Displacement Mage in Macha, and they planned to reinforce the city themselves through the portal after taking control of the city tonight. Then, they would let the Telhians waste their men and legionaries trying to retake the city. Her brother, General Clayln Glavien, would ensure the Telhians were much weaker after this battle. Returning Macha to Bartiradian hands was sure to be a bloody endeavor.

Three flight rotations later, Moonclaw was exhausted as he flapped his wings and glided over the night battle below. It was dark, and the fog had allowed the army to reach the walls and gates. It would not be long now before they broke the defenders on the wall. Then, a huge gust of wind ripped from the city. Raelia had to let the wind take Moonclaw and her away. She saw the battlefield revealed below, the fog eliminated. The Bartiradian attackers were suddenly exposed. Arrows pelted them from the walls, and men were falling by the scores.

Raelia felt helpless. She was not supposed to do anything but observe and report. Maybe she could help, though. The defenders were focused on her brother's army. She could possibly prepare a fireball, swoop down, and release it before they tracked her.

She started to guide Moonclaw with her legs, guiding him with the stirrups and squeezes of her thighs. He was sensitive to her body movements and understood what she wanted. The important thing she needed to do was shield the fireball as she formed it. Otherwise, it would be like a beacon in the sky to the defenders.

She mentally worked the weave of her aether into the spell forms. Layering the aether in a well-practiced action. She would have to dive to get into range to release the ball of fire, though. She needed to remain unseen. The glowing ball of destructive heat twisted between her cupped hands as she squeezed her knees and dug her heels in. Moonclaw dove at the unspoken command.

The range of her magic fire was one hundred and twenty feet. She needed to get about a hundred feet away and release on the dive. Moonclaw knew this as well and would rise after the fireball was released. She was focused on the

tower on the left. There was definitely a mage there. She revealed the light of her prepared spell and was about to throw it when the spell forms dissolved in her hand. She grabbed the reigns and pulled hard. The mage in the tower had seen her and disrupted her spell form. She needed to...

Moonclaw shrieked in pain as an arrow protruded from his wing, with wispy black tendrils wrapping his wing. He could not flap to turn away from the city. There was no time as she tried to get him to land on a rooftop in the city. Moonclaw came up short and crashed hard into the building. As they fell between two buildings, the griffin did his best to spare his chosen rider.

The ground came fast, and she never had time to activate her featherfall device. It would have minimized her own body mass and made the crash less impactful. Instead, Moonclaw bounced on the ground, and the impact tossed Raelia out of her saddle and into a building, breaking ribs and wrenching her knee. She must have hit her head because she was dazed as well.

When she got senses, and back to her feet, Moonclaw was protecting the alley from a squad of legionaries. Moonclaw was injured and overmatched. She tried to form a fireball, but her head hurt too much, and she could not focus. Moonclaw shrieked in pain. She couldn't help him. She cried as she limped away into the alley, looking for a place to hide. Moonclaw, her friend that she had raised from an egg, would buy her time. She wiped the tears and focused on escape.

She took a simple healing potion on her belt. As its effects spread, her mind started to clear as she hobbled away. The potion was not enough to heal her ribs or knee, but it did give her back enough sense of mind to cast magic. A shifting light came up behind her. The legionaries were already on her. Fucking legionaries! Anger welled in her as they killed her mount and friend. It was not the first friend she had lost to the Telhian legionnaires either.

She timed the approaching light, spun with her daggers drawn, parried the sword strike, went into a roll, and came up in a crouch, grimacing from partially healed injuries. The legionnaire looked surprised she had evaded his attack. He was just staring at her like an idiot. "I will kill you, legionnaire." She rasped in his own tongue. Blood trickled from her lips as she spoke. At least her ribs felt slightly better from the potion, but she probably had a damaged lung, as breathing was difficult.

As she waited for the legionnaire to attack, loud booms came from the outer wall. She smirked, knowing her brother was probably sending all three assault

elements at the wall in an attempt to save his stupid sister, who had crashed into the city. She just needed to hide until he got his forces inside the city. She thought Zylia would scream at her for this, and her brother would probably have her exiled from the Riders. First, she needed to survive long enough.

The large booms had the young human legionnaire nervous. His long black hair was matted with sweat under his metal legionarie helm. He held his short sword with skill but seemed reluctant to attack. She needed to stall him while her mind worked the spell forms for a fireball, "Your city will return to us, and the duke's army will not save you!" She said with as wicked a smile as she could conjure through the pain.

He relaxed in his defensive stance, underestimating her. He started to talk, "Can you just..." She finished her spell form and ignited her fireball...