

A Soldier's Life

- Chapter 65: Tribunal |

Chapter 65: Tribunal

I woke in the middle of the night, not being able to sleep. I wandered around the building. Most rooms were lit softly by a single glowstone embedded in the stone. I found a small, empty, private bathroom with running water and a mirror. It must be for a mage commander, but it was currently barren of personal possessions. Looking in the mirror, my beard had grown in. I decided to access my barber's kit and clean up. The straight-edge razor was new to me, but I could quickly heal the skin even if I nicked myself. Experimenting, I found the key was finding the right angle and using light, short strokes. I applied the face balm and looked much better in the mirror. I put the kit away and continued my wandering of the Eastern Legion Hall.

The complex was huge. There were classrooms, offices, private bedrooms, dining rooms, and a very large kitchen. "Can we get you something?" A pudgy cook who was preparing the morning meals asked.

Since I was here... "Ham steak and scrambled eggs?" I asked hopefully.

The cook motioned for another of the kitchen staff to fill my request as she appeared to be in charge and focused on the dough she was kneading. I asked, "Is this building always so quiet at night?"

"No! This is the quietest it has been since the last Duke's coronation. Back then, the Emperor sent two thousand legionaries to his province's Citadel to show his support," the cook continued to roll the dough with her well-muscled forearms and hands. I sat across from the woman on a stool and waited for my food. The cook cracked five eggs and added a milk, pepper, and salt splash before whisking them. A hand-sized ham steak was placed in a separate pan with bacon fat. It was not long before a plate of heaping scrambled eggs covering a thick ham steak was put in front of me.

As I ate, the head cook asked, "You are one of the men from Castile's company?"

“I am, but I have only been with them for a month,” I replied after swallowing a mouthful. This was just my fifth week which seemed impossible after all the shit I had been through. “How many mage companies are in the city?” I asked before shoveling another forkful of eggs in.

“Normally, we have twenty or so mages and five hundred legionaries in Eastern Legion Hall. Tomorrow morning, we are only cooking for three mages and a hundred or so legionaries,” the cook said while cutting the bread into small chunks to bake the rolls. “The Imperial Legion Hall has over two thousand legionaries and gods knows how many mages. The Mage War College is not far from the Imperial Legion Hall.”

“And the Western Legion Hall?” I asked, finishing my plate. The cook who made it took it away and left a steaming cup of tea in its place.

The head cook slapped each piece of dough hard on a tray to get the shape she wanted and then slid it into the oven. She then answered my question, “The Western Hall has maybe two thousand legionaries as well, but a portion of those are in training and not true legionaries yet.” I did not have time to talk further as Konstantin walked into the kitchen.

“Figures you found your way to a meal,” he said with a light tone. “Eryk, we are leaving soon. Gear up. Smart move getting breakfast. We may not have time to eat all day,” Konstantin advised.

The middle-aged cook addressed the scout, “Konstantin, you old goat. There is a basket of hot meat buns warming in the oven.” I had never seen Konstantin get flustered before as the cook addressed him. But he was shaken as he looked at the cook and processed her words.

“Gilda?” Konstantin showed familiarity with the cook. “What are you doing here?”

“You know why I am here. Take the buns,” the cook said with a slight smile and a wave of her hand.

Konstantin’s eyes hardened slightly at his acquaintance and ordered, “Eryk, get the buns into your space and get your armor on.” He spun and left, shaking his head.

I added a basket of twelve meat buns to my space and returned to our room. I dressed in my clean armor while the others waited in me. We left in the dark, and I had a chance to ask Konstantin, "Old lover?"

"Gilda? Gods mercy, never," Konstantin rasped. "No, we both work for the same woman," he talked low enough so the others did not hear. "If Gilda is here, someone is not long for this world." Realizing he said that a little too loud, he gruffly walked ahead of me. So, the cook was an agent of the Praetorian Guard that Konstantin worked for. She was probably an assassin, by his words. The pudgy woman did not look like a fighter. Knowing the agents could be anywhere was good as I never would have suspected the cook.

We returned to the Magistrate building before the sun had broken the sky. The door between the statues had two legionaries in metal armor. Konstantin noted, "They have the insignia of Duke Octavian. He must already be inside."

We entered the building, and there were a number of men and women in the white robes of the magistrate walking the halls. The place was much busier than in the middle of the night. Konstantin stopped and asked questions while we waited. When he returned, he told us what he had learned, "The Ducal Tribunal will be in the Venus Room. I have directions. They are still waiting on Duke Vito, so have not started."

We followed Konstantin to a corridor with a large double-blue door. There was a mural painting taking up the entire opposite wall. The painting was lifelike and had a woman exiting the ocean's surf. She was naked with long, flowing dark blonde hair and mesmerizing sky-blue eyes that seemed to follow you. I was not the only one staring. "Why is this painting in the magistrates building?" Benito asked.

Konstantin studied the image longer than he needed to, "This building was not always the building for the Imperial Magistrates and for training the Truthseekers. It served some other purpose in the past."

A man in white robes overheard our conversation and informed us, "That is right, legionnaire. This used to be the villa for Duke Latrell when he stayed in the capital. He challenged the Emperor and was beheaded, and all his property seized. This building became the Magistrate's office. All of the amazing artwork has been preserved." He focused on Konstantin, "Are you here for the Ducal Tribunal of Mage Castile?"

Konstantin nodded, “We gave statements last night to Truthseekers. We are here in case our statements are questioned, or further explanation is required.”

The man in white robes nodded in understanding. “Only the accused, her Advocate, the Imperial Truthseeker, and the Tribunal are allowed in the room. If witnesses are requested, they will be summoned.”

Konstantin ground his teeth. He was obviously frustrated at being helpless. A man in purple and gold robes walked down the center of the corridor. He was overweight and had an air of self-importance. The white-robed magistrate met him, “Duke Vito. This way, please.” He opened the blue double door, and immediately, arguing voices spilled out of the room. The doors absorbed sound as the corridor had been silent before they opened.

I only got a brief glimpse into the room. Castile was standing next to a man in yellow robes. Her back was to us, and she was facing a table with three seats. Two seats were filled with Duke Octavian and a young woman who I assumed was Duchess Veronica. The argument that was interrupted was between Octavian and the yellow-robed man. I assumed that was Castile’s Advocate. Nico, the old Truthseeker from last night, walked from a door inside the courtroom to join the proceedings. Duke Vito went to join the other two dukes. The white-robed man shut the blue doors behind Duke Vito, and we were cut off from the scene and all sound.

The white-robed man then stood in front of the door like a guard. Konstantin pulled us to the side. Benito asked, “What is the plan?”

Konstantin said, “We wait.” he leaned against the painting of Venus. The white-robed man frowned, and Konstantin stood away from the painting.

It was almost an hour before Paval asked, “What is going on inside?”

Konstantin started to answer, but the white-robed man surprisingly answered for him, happy to help, “The charges will be read. Each charge will be dealt with one at a time. Each of the Tribunal members will have a turn to ask questions of the accused. The Truthseeker will verify the answers of the defendant. Then, the Advocate has a chance to ask the final questions. Then each Tribunal member votes on the charge.”

“What about our statements?” Benito asked.

The white-robed man nodded, "They were copied and given to the Dukes last night. Duke Octavian was questioning their addition to the formal records when the doors opened." The man had a slight smile, "Do not worry, legionaries. Justice is always based on the evidence presented."

"What about the evidence not presented," I muttered.

The white-robed man focused on me, "You would make a good magistrate legionarie. Yes, missing evidence or questions not asked can lead to verdicts that are undeserved. Have no worries. Your Mage has one of the best Advocates in the Hall. Duchess Veronica personally requested him."

Another hour passed, and the blue doors did not open. "It seems to be taking a long time," Bentio stated to his rumbling stomach.

"Hand out the buns," Konstantin muttered to me.

I produced the basket of buns, and we each took one. I offered one to the white-robed man, and he reluctantly accepted. Benito took possession of the basket, and slowly, the buns were consumed. Hours passed, and even the Magistrate guarding the door seemed to get fidgety.

A man in blue robes, followed by two legionaries in metal armor, came down the corridor to our room. The man was slightly out of breath and addressed everyone, "This is the Tribunal for Mage Castile?"

The white-robed man guarding the door answered, "It is. They are still in deliberation, Chancellor."

He looked at us, "And you are her legionaries?"

Konstantin moved to stand before the blue-robed man, "We are. What does the Collegium Scholarium want with the Tribunal?" Konstantin was both confused and hopeful.

"Truthseeker Yanis came to us this morning with a copy of a testimony. We wish to interview any legionaries who were part of the storm giant slaying," he said, and all my fellow legion mates turned their eyes to me.

The man, who I assumed was a Chancellor, instantly said, "Ah, you must be Eryk. The legionnaire who gave the original statement. Who else was with you

when the mighty storm giant was defeated?” I looked to Konstantin, who nodded.

I was slightly nervous and answered truthfully, “Legionaries Brutus and Flavius are the only two others who have survived. Master Mage Sebastian took Flavius. Brutus—is in Carahagan. He missed the portal to the capital.”

Konstantin stepped forward, intervening, “What does the College of Scholars want with the legionaries?”

“Just to question them. Nothing nefarious. We will take this one,” he pointed at me, “And you can send the others when they arrive.” The man handed Konstantin a wrapped scroll.

Konstantin unrolled it and looked up surprised, “The Emperor’s seal?”

The blue-robed man bowed, “I am Marcel, Counsel to the Emperor and Chancellor of the Collegium Scholarium. Truthseeker Yanis is my nephew. My time is precious to me, and I have already been to Eastern Legion Hall and back today.” He wiped his forehead of sweat.

“Go with him, Eryk. When they finish with you, check here for us first and then the Legion Hall. I will want to talk with you as well,” Konstantin said with a note of curiosity.

It did not feel like this was voluntary. The two legionaries in steel armor flanked me, and we all followed an excited Marcel out of the Magistrate’s Hall. The Chancellor was a little too excited, in my opinion.

Chapter 66: Verdict

I walked behind Marcel, who had a fast pace for a librarian. He smelled of sweet perfume as he pranced before us, and the crowded streets parted before him and his escort. We entered the main road that led to the Imperial Palace. The imposing palace approached rapidly as we followed the confident Chancellor. We reached a gate to the Imperial Grounds. There were four legionaries here with shiny steel armor with gold highlights. I assumed these were the Imperial Legionaries that served the Emperor directly.

Chancellor Marcel did not pause and walked between the guards into the grounds. The legionaries saluted him with their right palm flat on their left collarbone. This was the Emperor's salute. Maybe it was because he was counsel to the Emperor. I was not going to ask. The fewer questions I asked of the man responsible for the College of Scholars, the better.

Instead of heading to the palace, we took a blue-veined marble paved path to the right through expansive and diverse flowering gardens. The kaleidoscope of colors passed rapidly as we got deeper into the Imperial district. I was starting to get nervous but maintained pace. There was a class of nine young children in the gardens. A bald man in blue robes was giving an explanation of one of the flowering trees. He was telling them where the tree normally grew on the continent, and that was all I caught as we were past the class.

We reached a series of modest homes on the other side of the vast gardens. Each home was made of plain gray granite and had a small personal garden out front. Short, white marble stones marked off the garden. Marcel walked up the steps, and I followed. The two legionnaire escorts turned and walked away. I paused to watch them.

Marcel also stopped and explained, "I only have an escort when I leave the grounds. If they thought you were a threat, they would have remained. Come inside; my wife should have lunch ready."

Inside the stone dwelling, large windows dominated the walls, giving it lots of natural light. The spacious room was both a kitchen and dining room. A woman who appeared much older than Marcel smiled, "Ah, I see you found the boy you were looking for."

"Damn near had to be Mercury zipping all across the city," Marcel griped to the woman as he sat heavily at the table.

"You need to get out more anyway, Marcel. Sit, and we can eat. I am Sofia. I assume you are legionnaire Eryk." She smiled as she placed a pot on the table. A tray of flat oval bread was soon added to the table. "Help yourself, Eryk. Consider my cooking payment for your knowledge."

"Don't be bought so cheaply, Eryk. Knowledge is more valuable than gold. Although, Sofia's cooking is as well." Marcel said, smiling at his wife. He took a piece of bread and then scooped a healthy portion of thick sauce with cubed meat and vegetables. I followed his example. Sofia poured wine for everyone and then joined us. The whole friendly atmosphere was a little surprising.

Marcel asked as he ate, "I read the report Yanis submitted for the trial. What do you remember about the storm giant?"

I chewed and swallowed and made a satisfied groan at the taste to earn a smile from Sofia's. "He was big, maybe the height of five men. Much quicker than you would expect," I answered.

"No. What was he wearing? What did he say?" Marcel asked with interest, studying me.

"I do not think he said anything. Mage Durandus just attacked him," I replied and continued taking bites, waiting for questions.

Marcel frowned, "That is unfortunate. Storm giants are one of the few reasonable giants. How old was he?"

"I am sorry you are asking things I have no knowledge of. He had a beard that was light brown, if that helps," I answered and tried the wine. It was flavorful but slightly acidic.

"I am sorry. I will try and direct my questions based on your background. Your accent, are you from Linshania?" He did not wait for an answer before adding, "The length of their beard usually determines a storm giant's age. They would have certain color beads in it for their life's accomplishments."

"I am not from Linshania," I said carefully. I was slightly worried Marcel may have the Truthseeker ability, so I planned not to offer any information. "The giant's beard came to his waist," I remembered. "He did have beads in his beard...but I can not recall the details. We left the body in the crater. I am sure the beads are still there."

"Yes, yes." He nodded. "Waist...at least a few centuries old then." He sucked on his teeth, considering. "We are considering an expedition, but with the Bartiradians so close, it will take time to pull it together. Now, what about the city below the swamp?"

"We did not see it. Just Durandus' saw it with his magic. He told me it was a city for the giants, but his power was not strong enough to explore it." I replied and started eating again, hoping he had forgotten his line of questioning about where I was from.

Marcel went into another room and came back with a long rolled-up parchment. Sofia rolled her eyes at his excitement but cleared the table as he unrolled the map. He unrolled the map, and it looked like the Telhian Empire. Marcel eagerly said, "Now, where was the giant digging."

It took me time to find Macha and the roads we patrolled. I guessed on a spot off the road, "Here. Or about here." They both looked at it, and it was Sofia who spoke.

"It could be the city was submerged and silt built up over time. Look, mountains surround the swamp, making it a perfect bowl," Sofia commented.

Marcel grumbled that he had not noticed first, "Never marry anyone smarter than you, Eryk. Not only will she always point out your mistakes, but she solves riddles before you." He studied the map. "That does fit with the myth of the City of the Titans, Atlantium, being buried by a great flood."

"Titans?" I asked, confused.

"The giants." Marcel answered distractedly, studying the map, "Before elves, dwarves, humans, and orcs, the giants ruled all of Desia. They had one great city that was lost when they challenged the gods."

Sofia chuckled, "He tries to romanticize it. The giant races ruled over all the others. It was not the gods but a great war among the storm, frost, fire, and cloud giants decimated their populations. They are just like us smaller folk but only bigger," she chuckled.

Marcel griped, "That is simplifying the histories, Sofia." He turned to me, "The giants destroyed all their cities in the war. Only the capital, the greatest city in all of Desia, Atlantium, remained. The myth goes all the other giant clans banded together against the storm giants. Having lost the war, the storm giants were exiled from the capital city. In retribution, the remaining storm giants summoned a massive and fierce storm that drowned all the other giant races in Atlantium."

Sofia added, "Marcel believes powerful artificed items were buried with the city. He has been searching for it his entire life. He told all the children he has ever educated in the Scholarium the tale, hoping one day one of them will help find it for him."

“Well, it worked! Yanis found him.” He pointed at me, not taking his eyes off the map. Sophia shook her head and sipped her wine. Marcel kept trying to dig details out of me, but I had very little to offer him, but I answered honestly.

After patiently answering all his questions for two hours and through two more helpings of stew and four glasses of wine, I eventually got bold enough to ask, “Chancellor Marcel, is there anything you can do to help Mage Castile with the Ducal Tribunal?”

“Ducal Tribunals are always political. And I do not become involved in politics,” Sofia nodded at Marcel’s statement. I decided not to press further and answered his questions as he ferreted everything he could from my memory.

He finally stood, “Legionnaire Eryk, thank you for your time. You enjoyed the wine, so Sophia, why do you not give him a bottle?”

As he walked me out, he explained, “At the bottom of the steps, wait for an Imperial Legionnaire to escort you off the grounds. They do not take kindly to strangers wandering the grounds.” He clasped his wrists to mine in a handshake and handed me the bottle of wine. “Is that accent from Gongshuia?”

I had hoped he had forgotten about my accent. I did not get the feeling he had the Truthseeker ability during the questioning. I supplied to ease his curiosity, “I am from a tiny village in Tsinga. I joined a caravan transporting Tace wood. Made the mistake of sleeping in the wrong place and found myself conscripted.”

He nodded, “Ah yes, I can hear it in the undertones. Must be the eastern provinces of Tsinga,” he deduced. I nodded, agreeing with him. “Well, if we have a chance to talk again, I would love to hear your impressions of how the Telhian Empire is perceived further afield. My primary service to the Empire is researching the political climate in all of Desia and advising the Emperor.”

I almost told Marcel I was just an uneducated villager but held back and nodded, “Thank your wife for the wonderful meal.” I turned, and two Imperial Legionaries were waiting for me at the end of the walkway. I was a little spooked as they had not been close a few seconds ago.

Instead of walking me through the gardens, they walked me to a closer access point to the Imperial Grounds. Four Imperial Legionaries guarded this

small door in the wall. I was pushed out into the streets, and the door was barred behind me. It kind of felt like I was the trash being thrown out.

I was in the upper city on a side street. I followed the Imperial Compound wall back to the main street. From there, I was able to get myself back to the Magistrate's Hall. Out of sight of anyone, I moved the bottle of wine into my storage as I walked the halls to the Venus Room. When I arrived, the double-blue doors were open. The hallway and room were empty.

I was stunned for a moment before finding a white-robed magistrate, "Is the Tribunal finished in the Venus Room?"

He nodded immediately, "About an hour ago, the dukes left the building."

He was going to keep going, but I stopped him, holding his arm. He looked at me, waiting patiently, "What was the decision?"

He looked confused, "I believe the mage was found guilty." He sized up my appearance and clean-cut face, "I can bring you to records if you want to know the specifics?"

"Please do," I nodded with a pit in my stomach. I was sure Konstantin would have the details as well. I followed the Magistrate through the building and into the basement, where a sprawling library was located. Dozens of white and yellow robes individuals weaved through the shelves of books and scrolls. My guide stopped a white-robed young man, and he rushed off.

"I will leave you here. Magistrate Marcus went to retrieve the records. He will help you, legionnaire." He bowed and left.

The young Marcus returned a short while later with a scroll. He handed it to me, "Please be careful with it. It has not yet been transcribed into the histories."

I unfurled the scroll and read it.

Ducal Tribunal of Mage Castile Duval

Sitting Dukes: Duke Vito of Camalmia Province, Duchess Victoria of Sobra Province, Duke Octavian of Sacegoes Province

Charge One brought by Duke Octavian: Retreating from the field of battle. Vote: Guilty 3-0, punishment: ten years of additional service without annual wage from the Emperor

Charge Two brought by Duke Octavian: Willful neglect of Empire Resources. Vote: Not Guilty 2-1

Charge Three brought by Duke Octavian: Conspiracy to the death of Mage Gregor. Vote: Not Guilty 2-1

Charge Four brought by Duchess Victoria: Conspiracy to the death of Master Mage Durandus. Vote: Not Guilty 3-0

Charge Five brought by Duke Octavian: Conspiracy to the death of Displacement Mage Santino. Vote: Not Guilty 2-1

Charge Six brought by Duchess Victoria: Improperly holding a Tribunal of Mage Durandus' Death. Vote: Not Guilty 3-0

I read the document twice, and Marcus asked, "This is the summary. I can gather the related documents if you wish, legionnaire."

"No," I rolled up the scroll with the Imperial Seal on it. "Where is Mage Castile then?" I had actually thought when I heard she was guilty, she would be executed.

Marcus turned and found someone I recognized as having stood guard on the door. He went and asked him and then returned. Marcus informed me, "Mage Castile left with her legionaries at the Tribunal's conclusion."

"Thank you, Marcus." I turned and found my way out of the maze-like building. I was soon in the streets and heading toward the Eastern Legion Hall.

Chapter 67

Chapter 67 Announcement if you like the story please like the chapters and follow. it helps increase visibility and motivate me

The capital city of Telha was easy to navigate from the main road. I started the long walk back to the Legion Hall. It was late afternoon, and the streets

were packed. Someone bumped me and searched inside my hardened leather chest armor for a coin purse. The hand was gone before I could grab it, and I had no idea who the hand belonged to in the dense crowd. It did not matter; all my possessions were in my dimensional storage, and my short sword and dagger were at Legion Hall.

My stomach was stuffed, and I was coming down from the minor buzz of the wine. I slowed as I thought about finding the Adventurer's Hall. There was a lot of gold waiting for me there. I decided against it. If Konstantin found out I went before checking in, he would probably lay into me. I paused as I passed a tailor. I was halfway to the Legion Hall, so I was far away from the more expensive shops near the palace and upper city. There were only a few patrons inside when I walked in. It looked like the shop catered only to men. I entered, and no one came to help me, so I walked among the shelves browsing. They sold a mixture of new and used garments in a massive array of designs and colors.

I found cotton clothes for the first time. Everything I had seen so far had been wool, linen, or a heavy linen that was called canvas. This material was definitely cotton. One of the men in the store approached me, "Legionnaire, Can I help you?"

He was middle-aged and balding and wore a fake salesman smile. "Is this cotton?" He replied with the Latin word for cotton and then went into a salesman diatribe about where it was produced and imported from. All I got from his lengthy explanation was that cotton was not grown in the Empire and would cost me a lot. I understood without industrialization, clothing was much more labor-intensive to produce.

"I am newly assigned to the capital. Can you help me put together two sets of clothing for wearing in the upper city? I do not want to feel or look out of place," I asked politely.

The man looked me up and down in an assessment. "You are...quite large. Come into the back room and remove your armor so we can try a few things. Do you want new apparel, or is used manageable?"

I guessed he was judging my ability to pay. I did not want to come off as wealthy, even though I had a large amount of gold and silver. "Probably used, but just bring me whatever you think may fit my frame." He showed me to the back room, which was not private. A short middle-aged man with a pot belly

was trying on clothes. A father was working with his preteen son to find clothes as well.

I removed my armor and my top, revealing my muscled torso. My tailor arrived with a load of used shirts to start. I noticed the pot-bellied man comparing my physique to his, clearly envious. The shirts were mostly too tight. I soon found a deep blue wool shirt that had been mended many times that fit well and smelled clean. "The is merino wool, legionnaire. The finest hairs from a Tegairosian sheep. As you can see, this piece has been mended a few times. You seem to like it. Two silver?"

I felt the long-sleeved shirt again. It was nice, and if I wore a jacket over, it would cover the repairs. "One and a half?" He looked a little upset but nodded. I bought three new snug black cotton shirts for five silver each, which made him quite happy. I learned unlike used clothes, new clothes prices were not negotiable. The cotton material was thick, and they were all long-sleeved.

The next piece to purchase was the pants. He had some thicker cotton pants, something close to denim. They fit like sweatpants with no pockets, slightly loose and requiring a belt. The problem was the colors were atrocious. Purple, red, and orange seemed to be in fashion for the wealthy. I found one black pair, but my muscled thighs were too tight in the pair.

It was a shame we had to move to new pairs because the older pairs had already been broken in and were softer. But at least I had a color choice. In my size, my color choices were red, dark brown, or an undyed off-white. I got the two pairs of dark brown pants for 25 silver each, which was cheaper than the brighter dyed pants. Socks were easy as they came in three sizes, and I was the largest size. I got ten pairs of wool socks, five dyed black and five dark blue. I had ten pairs of Legionarie wool socks in my dimensional space, but I wanted to disassociate myself from wearing Legion markers when I explored the city. All legion stockings were off-white and may be noticeable to those with a keen eye. Plus, you could never have too many socks.

Belts were just a silver each, but I had a number already in my space, and some were not legion belts. I still bought two dark brown belts. The jacket was next, and it took some time for him to bring out his selection of inventory. He had a large number of used jackets. I wanted something used and found something close to my Legion oversized oiled canvas duster made to over my armor. The used jacket was mostly black leather with a dark green cotton lining. It had a few interior pockets as well, and one looked to be for a knife. It

was broken in but still in excellent condition, and he wanted two gold for it. I talked him down to 180 silver.

The last piece in the ensemble was boots. My legion boots were broken in already but easily recognizable. He did not have much in stock as he was not a cobbler. I found some dark brown riding boots in his meager offerings that fit a little loose. But they were broken in and only 50 silver because he had them for so long. Just not a lot of men with my size feet. Good boots were normally very expensive.

My total invoice was just over three gold. That was over half a year's legion pay for me, but I still had thirteen gold coins from the dungeon. For the quality of the clothing, I thought it was worth it. It was comfortable, and I should be able to blend in with the myriad of fashions I had seen on the streets of the capital. It also lacked any bright colors the wealthier people seemed to like, as I did not want to draw attention to myself. I paid the happy man, and he bundled everything together. After I left the tailor, I turned into an alley to be unseen and moved the package to my dimensional space. I hoped to have time to explore the city as a well-off civilian and not as a legionnaire.

As I approached the Legion Hall, I thought maybe I should get Castile something. Congratulations, you are not going to be executed gift. I stopped at a bakery and pastry shop and got a basket of various doughy sweets for a silver. That was a lot of coin for a nine pastries, so I assumed they were good.

When I returned, the Eastern Legion Hall was not very active in the evening. A few men practiced in the central courtyard, but fewer men lounged about like yesterday. I went to the bunk room where we slept last night and found Pavel and Benito lying in the beds. "Guess it went alright?" I said, entering.

Pavel sat up, "Castile is in the private room at the end of the hall. She is sleeping but said to send you in if you returned. Konstantin and Linus are checking to see when the next portal to Caranhagan will be opened." He remembered where I went, "How was the Chancellor? Did you meet the Emperor?"

"We just went and ate lunch at his house with his wife. He asked questions about ruins, and I answered him as best I could," I made the mistake of putting the basket down. Benito snatched and took a sticky bun inside. I should have noticed him eyeing it as the smell of the warm pastries filled the room.

“I actually got those for Castile, Benito.” He ignored me and handed the basket to Pavel.

Pavel said, “Well, we all rushed here to save her, so I am sure she would want us to have one...or two...or three.”

I just shrugged, “Fine, save some for Konstantin and Linus then.” Benito was already on his second, and I doubted any would be left when Konstantin returned. I turned away and went to look for Castile. From my exploration, I knew where the private mage rooms were located. I knocked on a few, and no one answered. Finally, Castile opened her door. It was two back, so she must have gotten up slowly. She looked haggard and tired. Her hair was a mess.

She recognized me, “Eryk? Is Konstantin back?”

“No, Pavel and Benito said you wanted to see me when I returned,” I said.

She studied me, “You look well for having raced across the Empire. You even shaved?” She tried to make it sound complimentary. “Come in, and we can discuss things.”

Castile smelled a little ripe. She had not bathed and still had on the same clothes from when we fled Macha. She sat on the bed while I remained standing. She was quiet, so I opened, “I am glad you escaped the Tribunal.”

She barked a harsh laugh, “Escaped? From one spider web to another. Duchess Veronica may have saved me from Octavian’s planned fate, but now I owe her favors.”

“Better than being dead and you were only found guilty on one count,” I offered, trying to be positive.

She grunted, “Yes, the duchess could not worm me out of that one. She did manage to reduce the penalty from life of servitude to just ten years.” She looked me in the eyes and explained, “The Magistrates review all judgments. They can send it to the Emperor for review if they find something not in line with the evidence the Truthseekers gave. The duchess could not challenge the facts on that charge, but the evidence confirmed by the Truthseekers also allowed her to manage the facts for Duke Vito on the other charges. I would not be surprised if she owes Duke Vito a few favors for his votes. Octavian was definitely livid at how Vito voted.”

I was not sure if I was overstepping by asking, but I did, “Why did the duchess take such an interest in you?”

Castile looked like she had aged in the last few days, “Duchess Veronica is one of the Emperor’s granddaughters. I do not know the lineage, two or three generations, I am guessing. When she was educated in the palace, the Emperor favored her as a child and carved out a province for her to rule when her father named her a First Citizen and paid her tithe. It is a tiny province with one small city. I guess she has higher aspirations than ruling the smallest and weakest province in the Empire.”

“So Octavian is her uncle?” I asked.

“All of the dukes are related in some manner,” Castile stood off the bed. “Enough of my fate, Eryk. Now you.” She eyed me, “I do not know if you are an outworlder. If you are, never tell me. Better yet, give me a false narrative, so if a powerful Truthseeker questions me, I will not have the answers they seek.”

I nodded, relieved. “I am from Tsinga.”

“Really? How did you get here? Why were you naked in the farmer’s barn? Why would you come to the Telhian Empire and not speak the language? I read your transfer card from Commander Silas, Eryk when you were assigned to me. It reads like you fell out of the sky.”

Seeing the worry on my face, she smiled, “Do not worry, Eryk. The only things sent to Imperial Legion Hall were your tablet scores and a few pieces of fabric with your blood. Your background information only came to me. Commander Silas is an idiot and only cared about what bonus you earned him for imprinting your spell form.”

“Blood? Why would they need my blood?” I said, but I already had an idea. I remember the first weeks of training; the trainers had taken our bloody and torn shirts and given us new ones. After that, we were shown how to repair our clothes.

“It is for magical tracking. Only those who graduate into the Legion of Lion are registered in the capital in case of betrayal. After two thousand years, the Empire learned to be prepared to respond and hunt down traitors. It is why all the children of the nobility are educated at the palace under the Emperor’s

teachers.” Castile paused and let me realize the scope and my own predicament.

“If they think I am dead, would they destroy the bloody clothes?” I asked.

“Ha, if they were only that organized. The Legion Hounds maintain the archive in the capital. They probably have tens of thousands of samples from the last thousand years. Not just legionaries but every mage as well. We have it worse than you, though. There are backup archives for just mages and nobles hidden elsewhere in the Empire. We are truly bound to the Empire,” Castile explained.

I was angry and felt a little helpless. “We are you telling me this?” I finally asked.

Castile let a smile creep onto her face, “Because I think we can help each other.”

Chapter 68: First Magic Lesson

Castile smile faded, “It is about survival, Eryk. In that way, I lost the Tribunal. Ten more years without being able to draw replacements over the company minimum? As a mage commander, I have built a loyal following and developed competent men.”

I was confused, “I thought you were just not being paid.”

Castile laughed without holding back, “No. I am being cut off from all resources. No replenishing my ranks beyond the minimum size for a company. No annual payout for service and my existing accounts have been seized. No purchasing of potions from the Imperial Alchemists at the discounted mage company rate. I am sure my new benefactor, Duchess Veronica, has a plan that will bind me to her.” Castile pointed to a sealed letter on the desk, “I will find out her plan for me when I open that.”

I looked at the letter and then back to Castile, “So what do you want from me?” I asked.

“I want you to be invested in everyone’s survival,” she said levelly. Before I could protest, she continued, “I do not need to know your secrets. In fact, it is

better that I do not. Being around me is dangerous. I doubt Duke Octavian is finished with me, but he should be content that I am trapped for another ten years, giving him time to exact revenge.”

I thought about it, “Is the blood tracking real? Can we not just leave the Empire? Seek sanctuary in another kingdom?”

Castile sighed and huffed resignedly, “The Hounds always find you.” She looked me in the eyes, “A legionnaire like you could probably flee. They would not pursue you far outside the borders. I could not say for sure. Maybe they would send a phantasm to hunt you or try to track you with agents in other kingdoms. Myself? They would track me no matter where I went to make an example of me.”

Castile noticed me processing, “Yes, you could flee. But if you are an outworlder, like I believe, you are not prepared. I can help prepare you. If your tablet reading is correct, you can not learn true magic. Your shaping attribute is too abysmal. But maybe you have other spell forms beyond healing and space you need help imprinting? I will help you with that.”

I was thinking, and Castile decided to wait for me to process. Castile picked up the letter and started to open it. As she read with her eyes focused on the parchment, she spoke to me, “If you imprinted self-healing, then I am assuming your second most powerful affinity of time can receive a spell form. Do you want help with that?” I was silent and considering her offer as she read the letter, and a look of distaste formed on her visage as if she had bitten into something sour.

“Why is my poor shaping preventing me from learning true magic?” I asked after she put down the letter. Damian had explained it, but I wanted further clarification from a true mage.

Castile was distracted for a moment but decided to demonstrate. She put her hands about twelve inches apart, and a blue light started to trace out what I recognized as a spell form. It was slow and deliberate. “This is the speed someone with a ten in shaping can mold their aether into runic script.” She spent about five minutes tracing the lines in the air between her hands. “You also need to keep aether running through it at the same time as it will dissipate if not,” she explained. The spell form finished, she dropped it, and the entire thing quickly vanished.

“So I could cast spells then, and it would just take a long time?” I asked.

She smirked like I had fallen for the punch line in a joke, “That was one of four spell forms for a spell. Now watch as I cast the spell with all four forms and a sixty-six attribute in aether shaping.” Light flared between her hands in a blink, and the smokey tendrils I was familiar with oozed from her fingers.

She looked at me, “All magic affinities and traits are exponential; each step of ten is twice as powerful as the last. Twenty is twice as strong as ten, and thirty is four times as strong as ten.”

For the readers:

Magic Affinity	Relative Power
10	1
20	2
30	4
40	8
50	16
60	32
70	64
80	128
90	256
100	512

I stopped her, “I am already aware of this. I did not know it also extended to the five magic attributes on the tablet, though.”

The small woman stood and walked to get water from a pitcher. “Remind me of your magic attributes.”

“Aether pool fourteen, channeling fourteen, shaping eight, tolerance twenty-two, resistance five,” I said from memory.

“Do you have a tablet in your space? That is higher than I remember, closer to your potentials,” she asked curiously.

I shook my head no, “I got a reading in a city after we escorted the First Citizen.” She nodded at my explanation.

She took out a quill and paper, “Write them out for me with your potentials then, it will make things go quicker.”

Aether Pool

Aether Resistance

5/19

I wrote them out, and she reviewed the sheet before continuing her teaching. “So your aether pool is small. Usually, anyone with any of the magic affinities is going to have a potential of at least ten. If you continue using your aether and maximize your pool to twenty-two, your available aether should more than double going from fourteen to twenty-two.”

“What does the potential of fifty-five in channeling and fifty in tolerance mean?” I asked Castile.

“Channeling is how fast you can replenish the aether in your core. There are exercises to help you train that, but it also happens naturally,” Castile said to my nods. Damian had given me a very simple meditation technique. “We can work on those in the future.” She tapped aether tolerance on the paper.

“Your aether tolerance is how much aether you can channel in a day. Your maximum potential is actually quite impressive. If you reached fifty in the attribute, it means you can channel sixteen times your total aether core in a day without burning your channels,” Castile explained. “When we fled along the aqueduct, I was pushing the extreme limit of my thirty-three in aether tolerance. If you exceed your tolerance, you can reduce your aether pool permanently; when that happens, channeling any aether becomes painful. Mages who do this are referred to as ‘burnt.’”

“Is there a way to know if I am getting close to my limit?”

“You just know. It feels like your blood is boiling, and your head is about to explode. It is your body’s way of telling you to stop,” Castile educated me.

“And aether resistance?” I asked about the last attribute.

“It is a person’s natural resistance to magical influences and backlash. For instance, when a mage tries to use a charm spell on you. They need to have an illusion affinity about thirty points higher than the target’s aether resistance to succeed,” she noted. “A normal person’s potential is between ten and thirty. But most people never train their aether resistance, and it is less than five.”

She asked, “Have you tried to move a living creature into your dimensional storage?”

I nodded but did not offer that I had succeeded. Castile explained, "Then you already know about backlash. When a creature resists an imprinted spell form, it reflects back on your aether core. Backlash does not happen when you use a true spell, as it is not anchored on your core. You were probably slightly ill or lightheaded for a few hours from the backlash."

I thought carefully and said, "I have moved a live rat into my dimensional space before. But two rats..." I let the question hang.

"So you must have a space affinity in the sixties to be able to move a small creature with a small aether resistance. That is actually quite impressive and makes me wonder how big you are," she smirked before continuing. "But yes, two creatures at once is exponentially more difficult as their resistance is multiplicative."

Curious, she looked at me, "I would ask your space affinity, but it is better that I do not know." I could see the burning desire to know in her eyes, though.

I was still thinking, and Castile asked, "So, do you want help learning a spell form for the time affinity?"

"No," I started. Castile looked surprised and a little hurt. "I actually want to learn a spell form for protection first. I pulled the spell form reference book from my dimensional space." Her eyebrows arched, but she did not seem surprised.

She took the book from me and noted, "Volume two..." She paged through it and then looked up, "And what spell form did you decide on?"

"My protection affinity is thirty," Castile's eyebrows went up, but she did not offer a comment. I had just revealed that my time affinity was at least thirty. I decided to be funny. "I think I want to imprint the protection from the elements. If I choose either of the other two, then my mage commander will send me into more dangerous situations." Castile read them quickly and then smiled at my joke. I added, "I really want to know if there are other options for me to imprint."

Castile was patient as she reread the text, "Aetheric armor is a common magic item used by mages. They are expensive but extremely useful." She reached into her shirt from the top and produced a fist-sized amulet. "This is a similar artifact. It can repel three or four strikes before being drained. The problem is it takes a lot of aether and some time to recharge."

She paged through the book again, “These are definitely the spell forms to maximize your protection affinity of thirty. Wind barrier has the most utility in and out of combat utility, but the strength of the barrier is related to your protection affinity.”

“So it is like my dimensional pocket? My higher affinity made it a larger pocket?” I asked, as Castile already knew my space was larger than advertised.

“Exactly. Wind barrier can be used as a shield in combat, a way to block a passage in combat, or even a platform to stand on momentarily. Even though the barrier is not strong you could cast many of them as layers until you ran out of aether. Aetheric armor would drain your aether directly, and you could run out rapidly,” Castile explained.

“The wind barrier also only lasts about ten heartbeats, according to the text. So, do you think protection from the elements is not the correct choice?” I asked for her honest opinion.

“It is not a bad choice. But you realize that if you use the ability openly, you are displaying your spell form for all to see. With protection from the elements, rain will never touch your body, and you will not sweat in extreme heat. Even your hair would not be tussled in the wind. Aetheric armor is the same as blue sparks would flash when you are struck. Only wind barrier would leave no trace and be invisible,” she said, offering her educated opinion.

“And, if I was not concerned about showing my spell form? Which of these three would you choose?” I asked again.

“If I was not in the Legion, definitely protection from the elements. In the Legion, wind barrier. With aether shield, I would be too worried about having my aether drained involuntarily by repeated attacks. I would get an amulet instead. Also, if you are a battlefield and flashing blue sparks, you quickly become a target of the enemy as well,” she explained her reasoning.

I considered her reasoning, and it made sense. Only if I was not going to be fighting, then the protection from the elements made sense. I considered showing Castile my amulet but thought I might be able to get it identified in the city on my own. Complete trust was going to be baby steps. “Okay, I would like help with wind barrier.”

Castile smiled since I took her advice. She started by showing me a few exercises to work on improving my channeling. Castile had more knowledge and better understanding than Damian. She fine-tuned my visualization for meditation and showed me how to cycle aether in my core to draw in aether faster. Then, she gave me a few hints on imprinting the wind barrier spell form. We spent nearly three hours together in her room.

“I need to bathe, eat, and sleep,” Castile said as the sun had set. Tell Konstantin I will talk to him in the morning about when the rest of the company will arrive.

“Thank you, Castile. Even though I can not cast a true spell, maybe you can show me how to write out the spell forms in the air?” I asked hopefully.

Castile studied me, “If we have time. It would take you years to learn with your attribute, Eryk. It is much harder than I have shown it to be.” She sighed, “But yes, I can teach you.”

I felt good about my situation as I returned to the bunk room. As I entered, Konstantin, Pavel, Bentio, and Linus looked at me. Konstantin started to get up, and I said, “Castile said she would talk with you tomorrow. She is going to bathe and rest up as she is exhausted.”

They all looked at each other. Benito blurted, “Told you! You all owe me a silver!” I was confused. What did they think happened?

Chapter 69: The Price of Freedom

Benito had bet the others that Castile and I had an intimate evening together. Konstantin had not been part of the bet, but by the look on his face, I needed to give him an explanation.

Since they would see my wind barriers eventually, I went with that, “Castile was helping me to learn a new spell form. She was also showing me how to replenish my aether faster as well.”

Benito’s mouth hung open, looking at me like I had betrayed him. He slowly handed a silver coin to Pavel and then to Benito. Now that the awkwardness had passed, Konstantin took charge of the situation, “Get some sleep. We will go and get our gold from the Adventurer’s Guild in the morning.”

I lay down and quickly fell asleep. My dreams were marred by nightmares of having to defend the walls of Maca from an army of storm giants and then being enslaved by them to dig out their lost city in the swamps. I tossed and turned most of the night, waking numerous times, but the dream remained the same.

In the morning, Konstantin, who had long been up, directed us all to suit up and wait in a small private dining room. Castile joined us, cleaned and looking healthier. Konstantin brought up breakfast from the kitchens. They were similar to the stuffed rolls we had yesterday but had different spices today. We had a chilled berry wine with almost no alcohol in it. We consumed the food in silence.

After we finished, everyone was waiting for either Konstantin or Castile to speak. Benito, the idiot he was, asked, "Mage Castile, are you teaching Eryk a new spell?"

Castile's eyebrows arched, and she looked at me. Benito was still sore at losing two silver. Castile offered a tight smile, "He is working a new spell form, not a new spell. Only mages can cast spells." Benito deflated as Castile confirmed my story, and his silver was lost.

Konstantin spoke, "The others will be here from Caranhagan in two days. We are all going to the Adventurer's Guild this morning to collect our coin." He looked at us, "I suggest you get your coin and transfer it to your family or deposit it in the Imperial Reserve. You do not want to walk around the city with that much gold."

Castile tapped her finger softly on the table, thinking before she spoke, "I have received our next assignment. We are going to be guarding a team surveying the Duchess Victoria's lands in the Sobral province. It is a six-month assignment."

Konstantin paused his drink to his lips. His eyes looked like he expected this, but his voice had confusion in it, "The province is less than one thousand square miles. Why so long?"

Castile shook her head, "The Duchess's province is new, and she wants to make sure the borders are clearly marked. A white marble stone will be anchored every one hundred yards along her border."

Benito pipped up, "Well, that sounds like a great assignment. We just need to guard a bunch of wagons full of stones?"

Konstantin looked at Castile, who did not look happy. "I am guessing we are going to be the ones digging the holes," Konstantin noted to Castile's dismayed nods.

Castile explained, "From what I understand, the Duchess' province is mostly useless. She has just one city on the Aganterao River, a few dozen farms, and some small lumber camps. Most of her lands are wild. I do not know the threat level of the creatures, but the main concern will be from the other Dukes not liking where the markers are being placed."

Konstantin nodded, finished his cup, and said seriously, "Land disputes are never fun, especially at the ducal level. Do we at least have an Imperial surveyor with us?"

Castile thought for a moment and then pulled the letter from inside her cloak and read it, "It just says to meet the surveyor in Sobral city. My guess is there will be no Imperial Surveyor."

Konstantin grunted, "I suggest we double up on supplies then."

Castile grimaced, "My Imperial Reserve accounts have been seized to cover the Empire's losses in Macha from our early retreat. Also, I can no longer draw reinforcements for the company for ten years unless I fall below the minimum company strength of twelve."

Konstantin barked, "Well, that is dragon shit. We are not a Displacement Mage Company! Do we need to buy our own replacement gear?" His anger was rising, and veins stood out on his neck.

Castile nodded slowly, "Old gear can be exchanged at no cost, but new gear will be charged to your legionnaire debt." She exhaled slowly, "Do not worry, I still have the gold from the dungeon discovery and will cover new gear. And I can purchase healing potions from the Guild."

Benito asked, "I thought the Adventurer's Guild does not operate in the Empire?"

Castile shrugged, "They have a few Halls in the larger cities or near dungeons, but generally, the Empire will send out the Hounds or a Mage

Company for monster threats. Still, the Adventurer's Guild is the expert on dungeons. The Emperor allows them, for that reason, to siphon off essences and artifacts from their efforts in a dungeon rather than risk his forces inside dungeons."

Konstantin added, "There is also the Guild War. About a thousand years ago, the Empire tried to throw the Adventurer's Guild out of the Telhian Empire. The adventurers banded together and joined the Empire's enemies. Only after losing half of its territory did the Emperor agree to allow the Adventurer's Guild back with the stipulation they never attacked the Empire again. The Empire had to concede the monitoring and management of dungeons within its territory to the Guild as part of the treaty."

Castile added, "The Empire does keep tight control of the essences and artifacts coming out of dungeons. The only place to sell them is in an Adventurer's Hall. Then the Empire will usually swoop in and purchase them."

Castile stood, "Enough discussion. We need to prepare for the company's arrival and a river voyage to the Sobral province."

We followed Castile to the street and formed a protective box around her as Konstantin led us to the Adventurer's Hall. The civilians moved out of our way, just not as enthusiastically as they had when I walked with the Chancellor yesterday.

The Adventurer's Hall was a single-story building in the lower city near the southern gate, about as far from the palace as you could get and still be within the city walls. When we entered the room, it reminded me of a Legion Hall, minus the legionaries. A number of men and a few women sat eating and drinking or playing table games. They did not look happy to see us.

Castile stepped forward and went to the counter, "Mage Commander Castile here to collect the discovery reward for a dungeon." The man behind the desk was grizzled with massive forearms and made a show of slowly pulling a large book and slowly paging through it.

He looked up at Castile, "Seventeen hundred and five gold and eighty-eight silver and fourteen copper." He motioned for a man sitting in the common room. The man left his drink to join us.

The man was clean-shaven and introduced himself, "I am Guildmaster Icarus. I have the truth spell. If you will confirm that you are, in fact, Mage Commander Castile Duval."

"I am," Castile said sharply. After her experience with the Imperial Truthseekers, I guessed she had no love for any of their ilk.

The grizzled man received a nod from the Guildmaster, "It will take a moment to create your voucher." The man left the counter, and another man took his place. Konstantin went forward to repeat the process, and instead of creating a voucher, the guild master counted out seven large gold, five small gold, and sixty-eight silver coins for Konstantin. The smaller amount was more manageable to pay out directly.

I was next in line and confirmed my name as Eryk Marco. I received the same amount of coin as Konstantin. I put it into a pouch, then under my armor, and then moved it into my dimensional storage. Konstantin noticed, and I think he thought about giving me his coin but held it. The men and women in the Hall were taking too much interest in the exchange at the counter. When everyone had their coin, the man came out of the back with a stamped bar. Castile took and led us out of the Hall.

On exiting the Hall, Duke Octavian and four of his legionaries were waiting for us. He had a smile on his face, "Mage Castile! So interesting to see you in the lower city and at the Adventurer's Hall no less! I heard this amazing tale from First Citizen Justin Cicero just the other day. You had discovered a new dungeon? That is remarkable! I hope you are not planning to hold onto the reward gold. Your release was contingent on all funds being seized."

Even behind Castile, I could feel the fury oozing off her. The Duke motioned one of his men forward, and they took the stamped bar from her hand. They handed the bar to the Duke, and he inspected it and frowned, "Where is the rest of it?"

A voice from behind us had the Duke look up, "That is all the coin she received after your Empire taxes, Duke Octavian." It was the Guildmaster Icarus. The Duke narrowed his eyes at the Guildmaster. He then looked at each of us, and realization spread that Castile had divided the spoils among her men. We remained next to Castile in support as the Duke fumed. The Duke turned abruptly and left with his legionaries.

Konstantin muttered, "What a pixie prick."

Benito asked, "So, does this mean we will not receive our weekly pay?"

Castile snapped, "You can collect it in the Legion Hall, Benito. That is where I will be." She walked off alone.

Konstantin looked at Benito, "You need to learn when to keep that thing shut. It is only good for eating and pleasuring your woman. Castile paid you extra coin on top of your Legion pay from her own pockets. You will get your five silver, forty coppers weekly." Benito looked a bit flustered and eventually moved off with Pavel and Linus to care for his coin. I was left with Konstantin.

"Eryk, I am headed to the Merchant's Hall to send these funds to family. You are welcome to join me," Konstantin waited on me.

"Do they have tablet readers in the Adventurer's Guild," I asked, looking back at the building.

Konstantin looked at me, "Probably. Never been in one for more than a moment before. You would probably have to join the Guild, though."

"I can do that? Even being a legionnaire?" I asked Konstantin.

"There is no law against it. A number of legionaries join after they finish their term." Konstantin studied me as I thought. I slowly turned and walked back into the building.

Chapter 70: Adventurer's Guild

When I entered the Adventurer's Guild, I was the focus of attention again. There was a pause in conversation as distrustful eyes focused on the lone legionnaire. Guildmaster Icarus stood and approached me, "Legionnaire, is there something else I can help you with?"

"I was wondering if you have a tablet reader I can rent? In private?" I asked, hopefully. The man considered my request by looking me up and down, judging me.

"We do have a tablet, but only members can use it. The cost is a silver for attributes and ten silver for affinities. But you need to be a guild member to

rent them,” he answered. That was much less than the gold I had paid in the city of Varvao.

“Are they private?” I asked again.

“Yes, the room is spelled to avoid scrying,” he said, nodding, and I could tell his patience was wearing thin.

“Excellent. I would like to get a membership then and rent both tablets,” I replied.

His eyebrows showed surprise. Icarus considered me again before calling to a table behind him, “Desdemona, come help this young legionnaire register with the guild.”

A short woman who had been playing something that looked like Go stood and came over. She was close to my age but had a weathered face and dark tan from long hours outside. “This way, legionnaire. We can use my father’s office.” I followed her down a hallway; her sun-bleached hair smelled like the sea. We entered an orderly office except for the desk with a dozen folders and papers everywhere. She just shuffled everything off to the side and found a parchment sheet she was looking for in the pile.

She sat heavily in the desk chair. “Name?” she said with some impatience.

“Eryk Marko,” I said, sitting across from her.

“Have you ever registered with the Guild under a different name?” was her next question.

“No, this is my first time,” I said.

“Okay, the next ten questions are optional, but...” she started to ask.

“I will just skip them then. I just want to use the tablets,” I admitted. She looked at me, annoyed. She put down the quill and eyed me hard.

“Fine. Twenty-five silver to register with the Guild and eleven more silver for both the tablets.” She muttered, annoyed having to deal with me. I reached inside my chest piece, pulled a gold coin into my hand, and placed it on the table.

She stood up, swept the coin, and took the paper that just had my name on it. "Wait here legionnaire." She left in a huff. She either did not like me, men, or legionaries in general.

It was a good hour before she returned with a circular brass medallion. My name was clearly stamped on one side, and on the back was the symbol of the Guild, a globe with a tree in the center of it with numerous branches and detailed leaves. Desdemona tapped it while placing a stack of silver on the desk for my change, "That is your guild emblem. It has your name and number." I turned it over and noted my number, 13-393919, below my name.

I grabbed the sixty-four coins on the desk. I assumed she gave me 64 single coins instead of six large and four small to try and be a nuisance because she did not like me. I noted a hole in the token, "There is a hole in the top. Do I wear it around my neck?" I asked.

Desdemona tossed me a leather strip from the desk to make a necklace, "Follow me, and I can activate your tablets for you."

Before standing and leaving the office, I slowly tied the leather cord to the medallion to irritate. I then asked, "Is there any significance to the number 13-393919?"

The impatient woman barked, "The first number is the Guild Hall you joined in. This is Guild Hall thirteen," she paused, "The original Guild Hall was on the banks of the river, but we relocated here. The second number indicates what your membership number is at this hall. But we only started tracking membership about a thousand years ago."

I followed the short woman out, and she was maybe five-foot-two with a muscled hourglass figure. I was a little upset by her attitude. I removed my helm and followed her to a small closet. The tablet was the size of a desk, dominating the tiny room. It was not the handheld one I was accustomed to, and it looked weathered and ancient. Desdemona sat on the other side of the table. I asked, "I thought this was a private reading?"

"Do you have aether and the control to activate the tablet?" her eyebrows challenged. She was way too smug to be likable.

"I do," I said, trying to figure out the tablet. It had everything on this one tablet, all attributes and all affinities. I figured it out after a few moments of studying it. It made sense that I needed to channel my aether while pressing both my

hands into the indentations resembling hands. Desdemona had not left yet. I asked, “Where is the reset so I can erase my results?”

She stood and started walking toward the door. She tapped the corner of the tablet as she passed, “Channel aether here, legionnaire. It will reset and blank the tablet.”

When the door closed, I locked it from the inside. I stood before the tablet and produced the strength essence from my dimensional space. I would get a reading. Reset the tablet and get a reading again. I placed my hands and channeled my aether. My scores appeared on the tablet, and I consumed the strength essence. Before resetting the tablet, I studied my improvements with the essence worked on my body.

Strength (+2/+0)	50/79	Intellect (+0/+0)	31/54	Aether Pool (+2/+0)	16/22
Power (+3/+1)	48/83	Reasoning (+3/+2)	49/61	Channeling (+1/+0)	15/55
Quickness (+3/+0)	35/49	Perception (+0/+0)	54/60	Aether Shaping (+0/+0)	8/8
Dexterity (+4/+1)	39/60	Insight (+1/+0)	35/49	Aether Tolerance (+2/+0)	24/50
Endurance (+1/+0)	67/95	Resilience (+1/+0)	47/71	Aether Resistance (+2/+0)	7/19
Constitution (+9/+3)	50/68	Empathy (+1/+0)	12/21	Prime Aether Affinity	Space
Coordination (+6/+2)	46/63	Fortitude (+3/+0)	53/89	Minor Aether Affinity	Time
Elemental Magics (Common)	Unaffiliated Magics (Uncommon)		Rare Magics		
Fire	0	Charm (Mind)	5	Space	98
Air	0	Illusion	0	Time	90
Water	0	Clairvoyance	0	Displacement	61
Earth	6	Protection (Guardian)	30	Materialism	9
Lightning (Energy)	8	Necromancy	0	Worlds	88
Spirit (Healing)	23	Celestial	0	Void	22
Nature (Plant)	0	Abyssal	0	Convergence	74

My eyes immediately went to the affinities, and I now had an earth affinity of six. That seemed a little bit of an extreme gain from zero with one apex essence. Next, I confirmed my healing affinity had also increased, up to twenty-three. This improvement was what allowed me to imprint the self-healing spell form.

My physical, mental, and magical attributes had gained as well over the last two weeks. I had consumed a fair amount of essences and even now felt the strength essence doing its work. Hopefully, the strength essence would settle before I was disturbed. The last time I did a tablet reading in a city, I was rushed out. When I felt the essence had settled after about ten minutes, I reset the tablet and activated it again.

Strength (+2/+1)

52/80

My actual strength had increased by two points and my potential by another point. This was amazing for a major essence. I confirmed that was the only change and reset the tablet and reset it again. I only felt mildly stronger, but the changes were still ongoing, with my muscles feeling hot and emitting heat like I had a fever. Soon, the essence was spent, though, that I was sure of. My goal for the rest of the day was to find somewhere to get the amulet identified anonymously.

I unbarred the door to find Desdemona in the hallway waiting. "Wait," she ordered as she went inside to make sure I did not steal or damage anything. She was being awful thorough, checking the tablet and under the table like she did not trust me.

As she confirmed the tablet still worked, I asked, "What else do I get for my membership?"

Desdemona paused and thought about being abrasive but exhaled and talked cordially, "You can rent a room or bunk in any Adventurer's Hall. You have access to the job posting boards in the Halls, and you also can enter the dungeons we monitor." She finished her inspection, "Also, you get discounts on services like equipment, food, drink, and use the tablets." She studied me like I was not the enemy now.

"Nice tan," I offered a compliment that was usually well received in my past life.

She gave me a hard look, and then chortled a laugh, "Windburn and cooked is more like it from days spent on deck."

"Deck? Like a ship?" I asked.

"What else has a deck, legionnaire," she said, mocking me but with a slight smile. Maybe she was warming up to me.

I ignored the retort. With a good-natured smile, I replied, "Where can I purchase artificed items and potions in the city?"

She gave me a strange look, “Here, legionarie. The Imperial Alchemists also have a shop near the palace, but our prices are half theirs, and the product is probably better. Most artificed objects need to be ordered and shipped in. It takes about a month. The Telhians purchase anything we stock besides potions.” She guessed at my intentions, “You got some gold and thought you would spend it?” She had seen me get my reward for finding the dungeon.

“Exactly! Where is your potion shop?” She waved me to follow, and I did. We were soon in a side room that reminded me of the Legion Hall equipment rooms. Except this one smelled strongly of worked leather and weapon oil.

A short man was behind the counter, and I blurted, “Are you a dwarf?”

He huffed, “Halfling legionnaire. Dwarves are not welcome in the Telhian Empire. Halflings are tolerated.” He ignored me and looked at Desdemona, “Why is the Legion Boy here?”

“He joined the Guild, paid, and given his bronze,” Desdemona smirked, and the halfling looked resigned to help.

“Name is Tarvon Fogbough. I run the Guild warehouse in Telha,” he held out his small hand, and my hand engulfed his forearm as we shook wrists. At least the man was polite now that he know a was a member.

“Eryk Marko. Please to meet you, Tarvon. I am looking for some potions to help me sleep without dreaming,” I asked. Tarvon looked at Desdemona, who rolled her eyes and left us to do business in private.

“I have a honey-slumber drought.” He pulled a blue liquid vial from under the counter. “This does not remove dreams but makes them pleasant. Ten silver a dose. Then I have oblivion pills.” He pulled a jar of red marbles out, “These will knock you out for about six hours, no dreaming, just peaceful rest.”

“How much are the pills?” I asked as the jar had dozens of marble-sized pills.

“Guild rate is a silver a piece,” Tarvon said, tapping the jar.

“How do they work? I mean, can I wake up if there is danger?” I asked.

“It is just a deep sleep. Someone could wake you, but most likely, you are not going to wake on your own. If you took two pills, you would be out for a good eight hours, and no one is going to wake you without some magical help.

Three pills could kill you, and it would definitely kill me.” He was very patient, explaining.

I pulled out a gold coin and placed it on the counter, “I will take one hundred.”

As Tarvon counted out the pills, he said, “If you are having this much trouble with nightmares, you might want an artificed dreamcatcher nightcap to do the same thing or see a Guild Mage to purge whatever memories are causing them.”

“I will try this first,” I said, taking the glass jar.

“I advise against using them out in the wild, legionnaire. The last thing you want is to have to take time to come to your senses when a gnoll hunting party finds your company’s camp at night,” Tarvon advised. I nodded at the wisdom but had been thinking the same thing. “Do you want any healing potions? Stamina potions?”

“How much are they? And maybe a cure disease if you have it,” I asked the halfling. He stepped off his platform and went in the back to retrieve a few racks of potions.

“I have six cure diseases here. I want to note they do not work on magical diseases,” he made eye contact to confirm I heard him. “They are ten gold each, which is a great deal as the Imperials charge twenty-five for theirs. Except these two on the end are a week from expiration. Just a gold each for those.”

He shuffled the racks, “For healing...Desdemona just brought in a fresh shipment of potions. I have a healing ointment, lesser healing, and greater healing. The ointment will close wounds, the lesser potions can heal soft tissue and mend bone, and the greater healing can align and mend bones and generally heal just about anything except poison and disease.” He motioned to the cure disease potions I was interested in.

“Do you have any of the healing ointments or potions near expiration at a discount?” I asked interested.

Tarvon started reading the dates and moved the potions about in the racks, “Six ointments, half off, as they just have a few days left. Fifty silver each. Fresh vials are one gold, the same as the Imperial alchemists. But the lesser healing potions are four gold, one gold less than the Imperials,” he beamed a

white smile at me. "I do not have any lesser or greater healing potions getting close to expiration. Greater healing is forty gold," he held up his hand to stop me, "Imperials sell them for fifty, so it is a great deal."

"Why don't you store them in a dimensional space?" I asked the halfling.

"If only we had someone at the Guild Hall with one! Most of the adventurers avoid the Telhian Empire like a plague. They do not treat us well no matter what the treaty states," Tarvon said, and his tone told me I was getting him upset since I was a legionnaire.

"I will take all the expiring stock. The two cure disease and six ointments. Also, four lesser healing," I placed twenty-one gold coins on the counter. He put the vials in one rack and pushed it toward me.

After the death dog scare, I was happy to have the cure disease potions. The healing ointment was good to have if I was close to running out of aether or needed to close a companion's wounds. Sixteen gold for the four lesser healing potions was insurance if I was out of aether or had a companion in need.

I felt I had established a good rapport with Tarvon, so I asked, "Do you know where they identify dungeon artifacts in the city?"

"I can do it here. Just a gold, and it is private," he eyed me curiously. I had overlooked that the Adventurer's Guild monitored the dungeons, so it made sense they could identify dungeon objects.

I debated, but this seemed like my best chance to find out what the amulet did without experimenting on it myself, "Okay, I have something I wish to have identified."

Tarvon's eyes went up in happy surprise, and I slid him a gold. He took it and said, "Follow me," he hopped off his platform behind the counter and went to a door. With his back turned and no one else around, I sent my jar of oblivion pills and the potion rack I had purchased into my dimensional space.

The small man's office was half orderly and half a mess, "Forgive the smell. I have to send all the expired potions and broken vials we do not sell back to the central Guild Hall." It was not an unpleasant smell. Like rotting vegetables with a strong hint of cloves. He closed the door and sat on his desk chair. "Let me see it then."

I reached into my armor, pulled the amulet into my hand, and handed it to him. He turned it in his hand, "Definitely a dungeon artificed device. I think I may know what it is, but you paid for the full service." He pulled out a parchment with the runic script and placed the amulet on it in front of him. The runic script started to glow a blue-white light that was aether working through the runes. Travon's eyes reflected the blue light as he studied the scroll as it worked. When the light faded, he looked up smiling, "Well, Eryk, this is quite the intriguing artifact you have here."