

## A Soldier's Life

### Chapter 71: The Amulet

Tarvon turned the amulet in his hands. "The spell scroll analyzed the runes and told me the purpose of this device. It is a Dreamscape Amulet. I do not think you will need your oblivion pills with this," he grinned at me.

The dreamscape amulet sounded pretty remarkable. I asked, "So, what does the amulet do then? Or do I need to pay more gold to find out?" I asked jokingly.

The halfling grunted at my attempt at humor, "They are exceptionally rare for starters, only found in dungeons. There is some variance on how they function but not much."

"And they are valuable?" I piped in.

"And they are valuable," he confirmed. "From what I remember from my readings, you wear it against the flesh and channel aether into it, and it pushes you into a dream state. This artifact creates a dream-world environment where you can do anything you want. It allows you to fight, practice skills, and train your mind while you sleep. And you get a full night's rest as well." He handed it back to me, "I can order you a book from the Adventurer's Guild on how to use the artifact?" he offered. "It will detail how best to make use of the artifact."

"No," I replied. "And, just to confirm, you will not tell anyone I have this?"

"The item reading is completely confidential," Tarvon confirmed. "My reputation is at stake." I nodded and figured it would be less so if Tarvon suddenly ordered a book on the specific artifact.

"Is the dream different than a normal dream? How do you wake up from it?" I asked as I slid the amulet under my chest armor and into my dimensional space.

The halfling shook his head. "I have told all I can discern from the scroll and my memory. If you want to sell, I can connect with buyers outside the Telhian Empire. You will get twice as much as if you sold it here in the capital to the

Telhians.” His tone was neutral, but his offer indicated he did not like the Telhians.

“I think I will hold onto it for a while. Out of curiosity, how much would this be worth?” I asked indifferently.

Tarvon grinned a trader’s smile, “Dungeon artifacts like this are rare. My best guess, five to six thousand outside the Empire. If at auction, it could be more. But the Guild does not host dungeon auctions inside the Empire’s borders,” he added pointedly.

“Thank you, Tarvon.” I stood and left the halfling.

I returned to the Eastern Legion Hall and did not find anyone in our bunk room. My guess is they were all out shopping with their new gold. I removed my own armor and dressed in the clothes I had procured yesterday. If anyone asks, I will profess to have bought them today. As I was leaving the Hall, a female voice called from behind, “Looking awfully sharp this afternoon, legionnaire.” I spun to Hilda with her apron covered in flour coming out of the kitchen.

“Hilda, thank you for the wonderful breakfast. I was just heading out for a...” I was going to say meal but thought that might insult her, “drink.”

She nodded thoughtfully, “Down by the river docks is a tavern called The Boastful Bard. Tell them I sent you; they will charge only a copper for your first. Large copper after that.”

“Thank you!” I said, leaving the Hall. Since Hilda worked for a Praetorian Guard, I was not likely to use her name there as it might be some secret code to keep an eye on me. I might have to stop there on the way back to say I got a drink at her recommended place, though. I was looking for the trade district. My goal was to buy another book on spell forms in non-legion clothes.

I was not going to buy any books for the rare magics. That might draw attention to me. But I did have affinities of five in charm, eight in energy, and the newly added six in earth. All of these were too small to imprint a spell form, but if I found another magic affinity essence in one of these three, it might become strong enough. So my intention was to see what minor spell forms they offered.

I blended into the crowd as I moved toward the palace. The crowd was dense at the intersections, and it was hard to avoid the bustle of people. Someone tried to pick my pocket again. Since I had been on high alert, I noticed a street urchin boy, maybe six or seven, sliding away into the crowd empty-handed. He had searched one of my cloak's interior pockets and found nothing. The brazen boy came back and attempted my cloak's other side.

I snagged his wrist as he reached inside, lifting him off the ground with his arm. The crowd parted around us, not wanting to get involved. He squirmed and kicked, trying to free himself. He smelled off, like dried urine. "Stop your struggles, or I will snap your wrist," I warned him. He calmed down but had a fierce look of defiance in his eyes. I asked, "Where is a good bookstore?"

The thin boy did not seem to understand, "Point me in the direction of a good, respectable bookseller, and I will feed you."

He softened only slightly but finally answered, "Tell Another Tale." I looked impatiently at him. "Two streets up and two buildings left," he muttered. "Let me go!"

"You lead," I said, expecting him to run off. But he moved quickly and waited for me to bring him to the storefront.

He turned his back to me, "That cart there has good food." The food cart vendor eyed the boy suspiciously as we approached. It looked like open-face sandwiches.

"How much?" I asked the man.

"Five copper for a scoop on a slice," he replied, still watching the boy.

I handed him two large copper, "Four servings for the boy." He looked surprised, and the boy was drooling as I spoke and wide-eyed at my generosity. I left the cart and the boy to feast.

I entered the bookstore. It had the familiar library scent of aged paper and leather bindings. It was an orderly shop, but only six long double-sided shelves were in the center. An old woman approached me, "Young man, what are you looking for today?"

I smiled at the woman, "My twin nieces just had their tablet coming-of-age assessment. One had an energy affinity of eleven, and the other had an earth

affinity of twelve! I hoped to get each of them the most basic book guiding them to a spell form for their affinity.”

The woman’s smile had yellowing teeth and one missing incisor. “Congratulations! Twins are more likely to have a high enough affinity for forming a spell form.” She waved me forward to follow her, “I just received a translation to Telhiam from the Esenhem elves for the energy affinity.” She pulled one of six identical thin books from the shelf. The book had a white leather cover and looked in pristine condition.

I paged through it under her watchful eye. The paper was thicker and a much brighter white than my other books. The script was neat, and the entire book was transcribed by hand, as were my others. I had not seen evidence of printing presses in the Empire. It had seven spell forms inside: three for someone with a ten affinity, two for someone with a twenty affinity, and two for someone with a thirty affinity. “How much?” I asked the old woman.

“Seven gold,” she said, and I winced. “If you purchase an earth reference book, we can discuss a discount.” The earth book was not as impressive, and it was well used. It only had help for three spell forms inside. One for each step of affinity: ten, twenty, and thirty. The elves obviously had better magical knowledge.

Still, these were what I was looking for. I nodded after paging through, and the woman offered, “Nine gold for both.” That was less than I had paid in Macha, but I had no concept of the books’ value.

I planned to buy them but tried to get a little more, “Can you throw in some storybooks? One for each girl?” I only wanted more material to help practice my reading.

“I wish I had an uncle like you growing up,” the old woman gave her gap tooth smile. “I have just the two tales for the young women. Persephone is a tale of the love of a mortal and the God of the underworld.” She pulled out a thin red book. “And, The Trojan War. A war fought for the right to marry a beautiful woman.” I nodded and realized the First Legion had brought the mythic stories of Earth here.

“Agreed,” and I pretended to reach inside my cloak and pulled the nine gold coins into my hand. She smiled and checked each coin before stacking the books together, wrapping them in cloth, and tying the cloth with bands so it was easier to carry.

I left the small bookshop and found the urchin across the street, his belly bloated. The boy was maybe fifty pounds, and each serving must have been a pound in my estimation. He made to move but looked like he might vomit and wisely settled back down against the stone wall of the business. I moved quickly away, heading back to the Legion Hall, not wanting to be followed by the young pickpocket.

Pavel and Benito were in the room when I returned. My satchel of books had been secreted away when I was certain I had no eyes in me. Both legionaries reminded me of the boy, having over-eaten, and they were now paying for it. They moaned on their beds, their armor off. I let them be and went to Castile's room and knocked. I hoped we could continue the training, but she did not answer.

When I returned to the room, Konstantin was there, "Eryk, good you are back. Change out of your pretty clothes, and let us head to the yard for some training. There are a number of weapon masters stationed here. We can hone your skills some." He looked at the two on the bed and turned away from them. I thought Konstantin would force them to practice till they vomited, but we left them to their misery in the room. I did not feel special.

I walked with Konstantin to the practice yard. A dozen men were in melee training with various weapons, and two men were practicing archery. I asked, "Where is Castile? Should someone not be with her?"

Konstantin tossed me a practice short sword, and I caught it easily. "She is at the Legatus Legionis' office. She is recording the deaths of the legion men so she can obtain the death certificates for the Adventurer's Hall. That way the funds can be transferred to their families."

I was slightly surprised, "Wow. That was not what I expected."

Konstantin grunted, "Normally, Adrian would have handled it, but Castile is doing it to confirm the transfer of Brutus, Flavius, Quentin, and Remus to our company. If we do not get them, then our company strength would be just nineteen."

"I was referring to her getting the funds for our dead companions sent to their families," I clarified.

Konstantin nodded, "She could have attempted to keep the coin, but that is not who Castile is. Even though she is broke, she promised the men the coin."

When you go for lessons with her this evening, tread cautiously. She is not going to be in a good mood. Duke Octavian seized her collector on behalf of the Empire. That was the last thing she had of value that was hers.”

“What? I thought she owned it,” I paused, surprised, in our exchange, and Konstantin whacked me in the ribs for letting my guard down.

“It is almost impossible for a single person to pay for the accounted losses of a city, Eryk. All her assets have been seized, but she can start earning extra coin from assignments again. Duke Octavian made her destitute, but she will rise again,” Konstantin attacked in a series, and I defended well. He paused, “You have improved your physicality.”

I just nodded and attacked. As I made a good counter and scored a glancing strike, I asked, “How does weakening Castile help the Empire?”

Konstantin did not answer as we each added a parrying dagger. After we had worked up a lather and were resting, Konstantin answered my question, “The Emperor needs to maintain a fine balance. He keeps the Dukes happy by looking the other way during their petty grievances. Castile would have more value if she was a purely offensive mage. Instead, she falls in as a utility mage. Something like this would not have been done to Master Mage Durandus.”

“But still Durandus is dead?” I said as we rehydrated from a small fountain in the courtyard.

“I am guessing his brother was supposed to swoop in and take him to freedom when things got out of hand,” Konstantin postulated. Konstantin stood, “Enough rest. Let us see how you do against an unfamiliar opponent.”

I groaned as I stood.

Two hours later, I was nursing my bruises in the hot soaking baths of the Legion Hall. The men I had practiced with were just as good, if not better, than Konstantin. I had paid for the lessons in welt and bruises. There was no point in healing my purple bruises in the baths. I would have to deal with them as I did not want Konstantin to know about my healing ability. One, because he would tell his Praetorian master, and two because there was a fear in the back of my mind, he would go harder on me in practice.

I exited the baths and went to our room. Benito and Pavel had left, and Konstantin had remained in the baths in a deep discussion with the other weapon masters. I had given him two marks today but had paid with twenty-fold on myself. Castile entered the room and looked around as I was folding my new clothes. I could not put them back into my space now, as everyone had seen them. Castile scanned the room slowly with hard and angry eyes, “We can work on your spell form if you wish, Eryk.” Losing her collector was a major blow.

“I would appreciate that,” I said, following her to her private room. I was looking forward to her lessons. They would be a lot less painful than Konstantin’s.

## Chapter 72: The Dreamscape

I sat with Castile at a desk while she produced three books from a leather pouch, “These are basics of aether shaping from the introduction class at the Mage College. You can store them in your space when you are not studying them.”

“I thought you had no funds?” I asked as I paged through them.

“These are old texts, and I still have a few friends at the college. These books have been collecting dust for a hundred years and will not be missed. They take you through the three stages of spell shaping: aether awareness, manifestation, and manipulation.” She had obviously gone to some lengths to procure these for me.

“Thank you,” I said with genuine appreciation.

“Well, I still think you are wasting your time,” she bristled but had been obviously waiting for the praise. “You can study them on your own and ask questions of me in private. All mages in the Empire are to be trained at the Mage College. Since you are technically not qualified to be a mage, I think we are safely outside of the law.”

I studied her face, and it was obvious she was going to some lengths to show me that she was doing a lot to help me. I knew it was to gain my loyalty. “How did your time at the Legatus Legionis go?” I inquired, closing the books and sending them to my storage.

“You have been talking to Konstantin? Where is that old man?” Castile asked with a small smirk. I would not consider Konstantin old. He did have some grays in his beard.

“He abused me in the training yards this afternoon with the other weapon masters. They are relaxing in the hot baths now, talking about the best way to parry an overhead axe swing of an orc warrior,” I informed Castile.

Castile eyes hardened slightly. She asked suspiciously, “Training with weapon’s masters? Has he asked you to serve his Praetorian Guard master?”

I decided to trust the Castile with the truth, “Not since Macha. He said they usually do not accept foreigners into their service.” I reached for information with a question, “Do you know who he serves?”

Castile eyes told me she was thinking about revealing it. She was working hard to cement my loyalty, and her body language told me she was worried Konstantin was going to swoop in and take me away. She finally said, “I believe he serves Antonia Segreto. She is a merchant of considerable wealth and influence. One of the few allowed to trade with the Esenhem elves. Rumor has it she has numerous agents outside the Empire as well. I do not know how Konstantin became involved with her or why he is in my company. My best guess is that I travel the Empire more than most mage companies, and he reports interesting news to her.”

I digested all that information. “And Firth?” I asked about the other Praetorian servant I knew in our company.

Castile grunted comically like she had eaten something sour, “He is my watchdog. He reports directly to the office of the Legatus Legionis. His job is to make sure I do not betray the Empire or make a move against the Emperor. I do not know who in the office holds his lease, though.” She sounded less enthused and trusting about Firth. I guess knowing someone was ready to stab you in the back the moment you crossed a line would do that to you. It also now made sense how she seemed to send Firth away on short assignments more than others in the company.

We started working on the spell form for the air shield, and after three hours, we ended the session to go and eat. We gathered the others from the bunk room and went to the small private dining room. Konstantin went down to collect the food and drink with Paval from the kitchen. Benito rubbed his stomach, saying, “I do not know if I can eat anymore today.”



When they returned with the food, Benito ignored his earlier proclamation, filled his plate to bursting, and started eating. As we ate, Konstantin asked Castile, "Were the transfers approved for the four legionaries?"

"Yes," Castile replied while eating a thick potato soup, the only thing she took. "Company strength is confirmed at twenty-one even though Flavius is with Master Mage Sebastian. He will be not replaced if he does not return when we leave for the Sobral Province."

Benito spoke while he chewed, "Are we limited in what assignments we can take then if we are not at full strength?"

Castile nodded, "Yes. Benito that is surprisingly insightful of you. Our company size limits us to certain assignments. But we would need to fall to the company minimum of twelve legionnaires, and then we would be limited to only escort and guard duties."

Benito took the compliment by shoving another piece of steak into his mouth and smiling while he chewed. Konstantin reminded everyone, "The rest of the company should arrive late tomorrow evening. We will meet them and get into the bunk rooms. I have reserved a barge to transport us upriver in the morning."

"Excellent. I wanted to leave as soon as possible and not wait for the portal rotation." Castile stood. "Konstantin, if you have a moment, I would like to chat before you all get some sleep." Konstantin finished his cup and then followed Castile.

In the bunk room, Benito asked, "Did you spend money on those fancy clothes? You know that is just added weight in your pack."

Paval laughed, "Benito, he can probably squeeze them into his space now that we are no longer getting any potions."

To emphasize Paval's point, I tightly rolled all my new clothes and moved them into my legion box in my space. Benito laughed, "I never get tired of seeing magic. I would appreciate it if you would carry my pack sometime, Eryk."

"Coins are heavy. I would be happy to transport those for you," I said thoughtfully but was joking. Benito still dug around enthusiastically in his pack

and was about to toss the pouch to me but paused, thinking through his action. We all laughed as he put the coins back, rethinking my offer.

Benito said through the laughter, "It is not that I don't trust you, Eryk; I just don't want to have to go to you every time I need a copper."

By the time I settled on my bed, Konstantin had not returned. The dreamscape amulet was hidden under my shirt as I closed my eyes and channeled aether into it.

I found myself standing in a familiar room, the entry room of the dungeon we had discovered. The dungeon entry was perfectly clean, missing the orc writing on the wall. The dungeon's exit was behind me, but it was a prismatic rainbow of colors instead of an oily black surface.

I guessed the exit from the dreamscape amulet was through that archway. I somehow knew my consciousness was now contained inside the amulet. The realization made it feel a little confining and claustrophobic. I calmed myself. The halfling said I would be able to control this dreamscape. I imagined myself in full kit, and the armor formed around me. I drew the short sword and tested the edge. The edge felt as if it had just been sharpened.

I walked around the entry room. Everything felt so real as I ran my fingers along the stone wall. I tried to change the wall to a flat granite stone, but it refused my efforts. I tried to change the floor, and again, nothing. It appeared the environment was fixed.

Next, I tried to create something alive. I remembered my dog from when I was a child, Oscar, a tri-colored Aussie. He appeared and ran up to me, wagging his cropped tail energetically. He felt like a real dog, with soft fur and a wet nose, and acted like I remembered. I spent time creating sticks and balls and playing with Oscar. I was reluctant to vanish him from the dreamscape, so I took him to the next room.

The familiar fire beetles dotted the dome and moved about, lighting the chamber. I thought about eliminating half of them, and they started to wink out rapidly. Then I tried doubling their number, and the chamber quickly lit up to a day's brightness. The soft earth in the chamber probably concealed the two ankhegs. Could I see them without them erupting from the soft earth? Yes. I knew where they were if I focused. Could I reduce it to just one? Yes, the earth rippled, sunk, and one was gone.

What about creating a monster we didn't find in the dungeon? Maybe a griffin? It took a little more effort as I felt the amulet was drawing on my knowledge to create the creature. I surmised the more I knew and experienced something, the better the manifestation. The griffin looked real but acted somewhat aggressive. I banished the creature when it tried to bite Oscar with its beak.

What about Konstantin? The familiar legionnaire appeared and immediately addressed me, "Are you going to laz about all evening?" The stern legionnaire barked at me. "Draw your blade, and we can proceed through all the sword forms with a single weapon, two weapons, and then a sword and shield."

"Not today," I smirked, and I willed the ankheg to attack Konstantin, and it burst forth from the ground. Konstantin rolled expertly away as he began to fight the monstrous creature. Oscar looked up at me as we watched the battle unfold. I had not thought Konstantin stood a chance fighting it alone, but he was holding his own. He circled the beast and hacked when he had a chance, chipping away at the chitin shell. Oscar watched cocking his head, fascinated, as did I. I had thought to get some therapeutic revenge against Konstantin, but he was actually winning.

The ankheg then sprayed acid and missed him. It, however, created a large area he could not move into while it soaked into the dirt, limiting Konstantin's movement. This gave the ankheg a chance, and my dreamscape Konstantin was soon caught and crushed in a claw. I dismissed the body and creature, feeling somewhat guilty watching Konstantin fight alone.

The spider bridge was the same as I remembered. I froze the spiders with a thought before they even appeared and went to the next chamber. The familiar island with the floating stepping stones was here. I was able to freeze the jumping stones so they did not wobble. I moved to the final chamber with the giant scorpion. The snails trailing the viscous glowing liquid were also here.

So, this amulet recreated the entire dungeon as a dreamscape. I could control everything inside and even create things I was familiar with. Was the amulet's purpose to practice the dungeon before actually entering? Did time pass normally? What would happen if I died inside fighting? How accurate were my creations? Did the amulet learn from me or me from it? If someone else used the amulet, would my creations remain?

I had a lot of questions, and I admitted it was an extremely useful device, even if the environment was limited to the dungeon geography. I begrudgingly

admitted I needed the book that Tarvon Fogbough had mentioned. I went back to the ankheg chamber and practiced fighting with Konstantin. He fought just like the man but spoke a lot more, constantly berating my poor skills.

The best part about the dreamscape was I did not tire. Oscar sat and watched the entire time, patiently waiting for his chance to play again. I decided it was time to leave, but I checked one thing before I left. I created the spell form book for protection magic. I paged through it numerous times and confirmed the book was replicated entirely here. This meant I could study my magic while I was in here.

I gave Oscar a pat before walking out of the dungeon entrance. I woke in my bed with some dampness from sweat and a pressing migraine. It was warm but not hot in the bunk room, so I was confused by the sweat. It was still dark out the only window in the room. I could hear the others breathing in their sleep and Bentio's intermittent snoring. I moved the amulet to storage and would keep it there whenever I was not using it.

As I lay there, I thought about my experience inside the dreamscape. Time was apparently the same. It was the middle of the night. So five hours had passed in both realms. I was curious what kind of gains I could gain. My body felt well-rested, but my mind was taxed. The largest disadvantage was when I was in the dreamscape, I was unaware of anything happening to my body. I would need to be careful when I used the artifact.

It was not long before Konstantin barked to wake us all up, "Get suited for the yard. The vacation is over. Eryk, you and I will see Castile before heading down. She wants to know more about your time with Chancellor Marcel. And so do I."

## **Chapter 73: Reunited**

The three of us sat in a small meeting room. My head ached a little bit, almost like a hangover from using the dreamscape amulet. Castile opened the conversation, "Konstantin informed me last night the Collegium Scholarium is preparing for a sizable expedition. Konstantin thinks you are responsible."

I looked at Konstantin and then at Castile. Konstantin had never questioned me about my interview and apparently took things into his own hands to investigate, "I only answered the questions of Chancellor Marcel. He was

looking for the titan's city of Atlantium and thought Durandus found it buried deep in the swamp."

Konstantin was not surprised, but Castile arched her eyebrow slightly. She looked to be grinding her teeth slightly. "Why did you not tell me about this city when you returned?"

I did not have a good answer, "You never asked. I did not think an ancient city buried under hundreds of feet of silt was important."

Castile looked over at Konstantin and then back to me, "It is important. The Emperor is involved. He is sending five hundred of the Imperial Legion with the expedition. Ten mage companies and three units of regulars from the western forts are being recalled to protect the site."

That did sound like a large investment. "What does it mean for us?"

"Nothing," Konstantin muttered. "If the discovery is as important as it seems, the Chancellor will be given credit for it, not our company." I now understood why they were upset. The knowledge of the buried ruins might have helped Castile during the Tribunal.

"The Chancellor wanted to talk with Brutus and Flavius when they arrived," I offered. Castile held up a note with the Chancellor's seal. I had forgotten to inform them and winced. I had been focused on myself.

Castile shook her head, "What's done is done. Konstantin, with Orson dead and Flavius with Master Mage Sebastian, I want Eryk trained as a scout."

"What?" we both responded at the same time. "My dimensional pocket..."

"It is not as valuable if we have no perishables for you to store," Castile finished. "Konstantin, train the men. Eryk, let's review the spell forms before you join them." Konstantin left the room, giving me a sidelong glance on his way out.

"Why are you pushing me toward Konstantin?" I asked when we were alone.

"I am doing you a favor, Eryk. He will think I am punishing you for not having told me about the ruins. Konstantin knows more about survival than most Hounds. Learn from him. You may need the knowledge one day," she said pointedly. I was confused but nodded. Was she trying to earn my loyalty or

give me the tools to escape the Empire? We quickly reviewed the spell forms before Castile sent me away to train.

I found the others in the yard. Paval was getting abused by a sword master I had faced yesterday. Benito and Linus worked with a shield and spear against a training dummy. Konstantin called to me, "Get two practice blades, Eryk. We will work under those trees." I picked two wrapped short shorts and went to the area he had indicated.

As we stretched, Konstantin asked, "So, what spell form are you working on with Castile?"

I paused in my stretching and looked at him. He had asked so casually. "You told me it was never a good idea to reveal secrets if you did not need to. Unless you are going to tell me about yours?"

Konstantin grunted, "Well, at least you listen. Maybe you will be trainable as a scout. After sparing practice, we will go to the Emperor's olive orchards. Maybe I can teach something to prevent you from getting killed the first time you are sent ahead."

He did not sound too enthused about training me. I learned a little from the trackers when we hunted goblins and picked up a few things here and there, but I would not consider myself skilled. Konstantin was not gentle today. I was going to have to use some healing tonight if I was going to be able to sleep. We switched to sword and shield.

Frustrated with the abuse, I used a series of attacks I had worked on in the dreamscape last night. I was shocked, as was Konstantin when the blade clipped the back of his knee. He limped back and paused the session. I thought he was going to return the injury tenfold, but instead, he said, "Nice strike. You left your left side open, and you would be dead if you had been fighting two opponents." He winced, "I need to see the healing mage. We will meet here in one hour." Konstantin hobbled off.

I was stunned, as was Linus, who had been watching. I realized the muscle memory of the attack sequence I practiced in the dreamscape transitioned to the real world. Linus drew my attention, "That was impressive, Eryk. Do you want to practice spear and shield?" He was due to work with one of the spear masters and wanted a way out. I shook my head no, leaving him to his fate. I walked away so I would not get pulled in and healed the worst of my contusions and bruised muscles.

I wished I had a book on how the amulet worked to get the most out of it. I was guessing it somehow pulled knowledge from me and incorporated it into my creations. "I am just going to watch for a while," I indicated to two of the more skilled men practicing with shield and sword. I got a canteen of water, sat in the shade, and intensely focused on their fighting style. There were the elements of the basic sword forms we learned, and other unfamiliar aspects blended together to create a blinding offense and defense.

What I saw was too fast to discern clearly, but maybe my subconscious could sort it. I was still watching them when Konstantin returned, his limp healed. He waved me over, and we left the Legion Hall. I walked by Konstantin's side as we exited the massive city gates. Outside the city was another city of endless buildings, but these were made of wood, and the people's dress quality had dropped off significantly.

Konstantin said seriously, "I just heard the news that Macha has been retaken. The Duke tore down half the outer city with earthquakes. The Bartiradian army was decimated, and remnants fled across the border."

I offered my opinion, "That seems awfully brutal. What about the citizens that remained?"

"It is brutal. We can expect there to be a reprisal. The Duke barely lost any men and is now riding for the border. With the expedition to the swamps by Collegium Scholarium, the Empire is planning to send more men to support Duke Tiberius' attack," Konstantin informed me. "There has not been such a push in my lifetime."

"Are we going back then?" I focused and kicked a pebble on the paved road.

"No, we have our assignment. Keep your eyes on your surroundings, Eryk. A scout needs to be alert in the city as well as the wild, not kicking stones," Konstantin reprimanded me. "Tell me about the three people we just passed on our left. Do not turn around."

I was familiar with this teaching tactic from our time patrolling Macha. I thought hard on the last few seconds, "Two men and one woman carrying a basket. The basket had laundry. Probably clean since it was wet," I said confidently.

Konstantin grunted, probably because I remembered so much. "The two men were behind her, thickly muscled and close enough to grab her in case she



ran. She had a dead-eye stare, resigned to her fate. Probably a new prostitute in the Sprawl.” The Sprawl was the city that surrounded the capital.

I turned now but did not see the three in question, “Should we go save her?”

Konstantin gave me the harsh reality, “You can not save everyone, Eryk. Even being a legionnaire, the criminal enterprise those two worked for would kill you if you interfered in their business.”

The education continued for the next mile as we reached a walled orchard guarded by legionaries. We entered the orchard after Konstantin talked with them. “This is one of the Emperor’s Olive Orchards. He is the only one allowed to grow and produce oil from and ferment olives. We are going to practice moving quietly and unseen. There should be pickers in amongst the trees. We are going to sneak up on them.”

The next four hours were not as fun as I had hoped. Konstantin spent an hour showing, and then I had to put it into practice. The biggest key was seeing the target before they saw you. Then, using the terrain to remain unseen. I learned a lot and but thought I had done horribly. The pickers had learned what we were doing and made my life hell. I also swear Konstantin was rewarding them with coppers when they spotted me, so they were on high alert.

As we walked back to the city, Konstantin said, “Not terrible. It takes a lot of practice. Your biggest problem is your lack of patience. Now tell me about the two boys playing with wooden swords...”

Being so focused on everything around you all the time was extremely mentally taxing. When we reached the Eastern Legion Hall, my head was splitting from all the thinking I had been doing that day. I was famished and happy to sit down and eat with my small company family. The meal was a salad with peppers, corn, zucchini, and tomato in a vinegar and oil dressing. We did not have meat tonight, but plenty of hard-boiled eggs with salt and pepper. I was not the only one hungry, and we quickly finished all the food.

After everyone was satiated, Castile addressed us, “The portal to Caranhagan will open two hours after sunset. We will meet the rest of the company at the portal.” I was left to study my spell form on my own as Castile was too busy.

Three hours later, we escorted Castile in the center of our box formation. The Displacement Mage opened the portal. Dozens of people, soldiers, and



legionaries streamed out quickly for the short duration the mages could hold the portal open. I recognized Delmar first and then Lirkin. Our company peeled from the exiting crowd and joined us on the plaza. Delmar had everyone form up and salute Castile. It was touching, and Castile might have shed a tear, but I could not tell as I was behind her. Everyone was present except for Flavius.

Castile ordered, "Brutus, you need to report to the Collegium Scholarium for questioning. Ask for the Chancellor," she handed him the letter. "Everyone else, form a block, we are headed to the Eastern Legion Hall."

Adrian and Delmar flanked Castile at the front, and the rest of us formed up behind, and we marched through the city. When we arrived at the Hall, we got the news from the men. They had to wait for the next portal cycle to the capital. Benito and Linus were happy to relay our heroic run and the questioning by the Truthseekers.

We occupied a second bunk room, and everyone removed their gear and armor. The room quickly took on the smell of a locker room, and I think my choice to sleep near the window was a mistake. The airflow was pulling all the odors past me. Soon, everyone was asleep. The heavy breathing and snoring kept me awake. I thought about using the amulet but knew we were headed to the docks at first light to take a barge upriver to the Duchess' estate. Brutus returned before dawn and found a free bunk in the dark.

Adrian's voice cut sharply in the bunk room, and it felt like I had not gotten any rest, "Gear up! Breakfast down in the commons, and then we are moving to catch our ride."

The Legion Hall was active pre-dawn as other companies were also moving to their day's assignments. The common room was a cafeteria, and the servers gave everyone the same plate of food. The meal was a thick oatmeal with raisins and dates. I never liked oatmeal in my life, but I forced it down anyway.

We marched out into the streets and made our way to the Adventurer's Hall. I was surprised that the transactions went a lot quicker for everyone in the company. Guild Master Icarus was expecting us. Most just paid a small fee to have their prize coin transferred to their family, only taking a few gold themselves. The men were in a good mood, and I think it would soften the blow when they found out their wages were being cut in half. It was mid-morning when we finally made our way to the docks, Firth being the most vocal about not being able to spend his coin at the local brothels. I thought

perhaps Castile just did not want him making a report to his Praetorian Guard handler.

The city of Telhian was on a tributary to the ocean, and the larger docks for sea-faring vessels were in a small bay. The smaller estuary docks had small barges for trade going up and down the wide river. Our barge was forty feet long and fifteen feet wide. We all piled in, and I was glad we were not walking to the Duchess' estate.

The barge was one long, wide, shallow bathtub. It had a single mast and a sail in the center. It was crewed by three men. One worked the tiller, one the sail, and the third created the wind with his spell form. I moved to the bow of the barge and set up my pack to get some sleep on the boat ride. Delmar barked, "Eryk, it is a new day. No time to sleep. Pair off with Mateo for some practice. Whoever gets knocked the other in the water can take a nap!"

This was more of a game than actual training. We were using staves that Adrian had brought on board. I had a lot of training with the weapon when I trained with Helena in training. Bets were being placed, and I was on the losing end as Mateo was heavily favored.

I smirked as we stripped out of our armor, and Mateo was wet before he knew it. He was pulled back aboard to jeers. Instead of falling asleep for my earned nap, I positioned myself in the bow to watch everyone else train. I studied everyone intently, gaining knowledge for the next time I used the dreamscape amulet as we made our way up the river.

## **Chapter 74: River Cruise**

The barge floated down the calm river, and the dunking game turned into an interesting contest. Everyone was given a staff and fought without armor. Pulling the defeated man back on board was a rush before he floated past the stern. Sometimes, it was required for Blaze to toss him a rope before he passed. The losers stripped their clothes to dry in the sun. I was asked a few times if I wanted another go, but I declined.

We did learn that Kolm could not swim, and Firth jumped in first to save him from drowning. Kolm was vomiting up water while Firth swore at him breathing heavily from the effort, "Damn it, Kolm, you are heavier than a fat merwoman."

The contest was more to distract us as Castile, Adrian, and Delmar had a serious discussion in the stern and only watched briefly. I wondered what they were talking about concerning our fate.

As the men were drying, I could see Adrian and Delmar going around and talking with each person. Since they skipped Konstantin, myself, and the other three who ran ahead, I was assuming they were letting them know the results of the Tribunal, Castile's fate, and how it affected them.

I relaxed and watched the mage summon and manipulate his wind into the single sail. He must have a huge aether pool to keep the continuous heavy breeze and overcome the current. The mast even groaned under the stress. After the staff battles had finished, and I got bored watching the sail, I focused on the passing shoreline.

The river was wide, over half a mile across. There were numerous small towns and farms along the western shore as we traveled. I assumed the man at the tiller was keeping the box-like barge in the river area with the least current. When we veered close to the eastern shore, Blaze suddenly stood and released an arrow. A squeal of pain erupted from among the trees. Blaze announced while scanning the trees, "Gnoll. Everyone be prepared for an attack."

We mobilized quickly, shields came up, and the barge angled away from the shore. Adrian and Castile were talking, and I overheard small pieces of the conversation. We were only fifteen miles from the capital, and it was unusual to have gnolls this close. They were on the far shore, but still, it seemed to unsettle my comrades. Gnolls appeared to be a hyena-humanoid in their appearance.

After a few miles of river, everyone relaxed, and we stayed away from the eastern shore. Konstantin came and sat with me. "What do you know about gnolls?" I was about to get some more scout information.

"Just what they look like," I responded, having seen a few dead ones fleeing Macha.

"Gnolls are a plague because one pregnant gnoll gives birth to five or more in just three months. The young grow to maturity in just over a year. Two of those birthed will likely be female, and then you have fifteen or more pups on the way. In just two years, they will start sending out hunting packs. They are carnivores and will eat any flesh."

Brutus sat on my other side, adding, “I was always told they plague us because we killed off their natural enemies, larger creatures, and the like. Now they are able to breed unmolested.”

Konstantin laughed with mirth, “That and the wood elves have left the lands. Before the First Legion arrived, dozens of small elven villages were within the borders of the Empire. The wood elves hated and hunted gnolls with a passion.”

Brutus defended the Empire, “The elves were banished from the Empire because they would not join the army or pay a tithe to support it.”

Konstantin huffed a short chuckle, “That is what the history books say. But the history books are written by the Empire. I am sure if you asked the Bartiradian elves or the elves of Esenheim, they would have a different retelling of the histories.”

I soon tuned out Konstantin and Brutus debating the histories and policies of the Empire. I closed my eyes, listening to the water rushing under my head in the bow, and finally got some sleep.

“Wake up,” Brutus shook me. “We are making landfall to set up camp for the night.”

I stirred and found it was late in the evening. “Why are we not traveling throughout the night?”

“He is out of aether,” he indicated the man who had been filling the sail. “We are going to beach the barge at that town,” he pointed at a small village with a row of fishing boats moored appearing ahead.

Adrian spoke to everyone, “I have been told there are only eight rooms at the inn in the village. Castile will stay there, and everyone else on the barge. Unless you want to pay the coin for your own room,” he added.

Brutus murmured to himself, “As long as it doesn’t rain, it should be fine.” I forgot Brutus did not receive a share of the dungeon discovery reward.

Firth was the first one off the barge when it hit the sand bar. He turned to everyone, “If this armpit of a village has a tavern, then the first drink is on me!” That call got everyone to mobilize off the barge. I remained and watched the bargemen drive stakes into the shore to anchor the craft. The three bargemen

then went to the tavern. I was left on the barge with Lirkin and Mateo, who were sorting through the supplies that had been packed on the barge before we left. Most of it was provisions for the six-month assignment.

I approached the two, “Do you need help?”

Lirkin looked up, “No, just confirming everything on the inventory Delmar gave me. Konstantin ordered it, and Delmar wants it confirmed. At least dinner will be at the tavern, and I will not have to cook tonight. I would have prepared a meal on the river, but I get a little sick from the motion.”

I sat on a crate, “What did Adrian and Delmar tell you this morning?”

Mateo answered, “Mostly to take better care of our packs and gear. Castile no longer has an account at Legion Halls, so we must pay from our weekly pay to replace our gear. Still can be housed and fed at the Halls.”

Lirkin added unhappily, “We can still exchange worn-out gear, though. Also, our weekly salary needs to be drawn when we are in cities. And at half the rate we have been receiving,” he grunted.

“Adrian said she would make it up from the sale of loot eventually, though. The real kicker is the healing potions. Adrian told us not to get hurt,” Mateo laughed harshly.

“Castile is a mage. Why can’t she just learn to cast a healing spell?” said Lirkin as he rolled up the ledger, having finished.

“I am sure Castile would if she could,” I replied defending Castile.

Lirkin grunted and noted, “Missing one crate of potatoes, not bad considering how rushed the order was.”

Lirkin and Mateo remained to guard the supplies, and I went to get dinner. They were going to be relieved by Blaze and Firth later. As I walked, I also planned to check if any more rooms were left at the small inn. The noise in the tiny town led me to the tavern, where everyone else was drinking and eating. The local food was a spinach pie cooked with bacon fat and chunks of roasted garlic and onion. The crust was buttery, dense, and filling.

I listened to the conversations at my table. Most of the legionaries were angry with how Castile was being treated and how it had a trickle-down effect on

them. I finished a second serving of the spinach pie and asked the barkeep where the inn was located. It was directly across the street but did not have a sign on it.

There was a single room left for one silver for the night. I gladly paid and went and knocked on Castile's door after checking out the small room. Adrian opened the door, and it was obvious they had been eating dinner and discussing company business in her room.

Castile motioned me in, "Eryk, we are almost done. We can spend some time working on your spell form in a few minutes."

Delmar continued speaking, ignoring my presence, "If the ledger is correct, we have just under six weeks of food. If the Duchess does not supply consumables, there are two farms near her city where we can requisition some. The barge was stocked well, and Konstantin did a good job. I would still like ten more small bundles of arrows and two bows. Lirkin and Felix are our two next-best bowmen."

Adrian added heavily, "We did lose most of our skilled archers. We should probably do some more formation practice since we have so many holes in the company."

"And it is likely to get worse with every man we lose," the straight-backed Castile huffed. "Fine, we will work on formations in the evening. Get Lirkin and Felix some practice with the short bows. Any other concerns?"

"We can talk on the barge tomorrow," Adrian said, eyeing me, leaving with Delmar following him out.

I produced the book and sat on the bed next to Castile, "Do they know you are helping me work on a spell form?"

"Yes, Eryk. I made them aware. They do not think you are bending me over the bed if that is what you are worried about," Castile chastised me. She sounded slightly offended, so I avoided a response.

After we studied for a bit, I asked, "Why have you not learned any healing spells? You can cast spells, so why no healing spells."

"Sometimes I forget you lack the basics taught in the first year of the Mage College. You need to create the spell form and use the aether of the specific

affinity. If you studied the books I gave you, it would detail how to identify your different affinities on your core. You need to give the aether that affinity when casting the spell. Otherwise, the spell form created with the aether just collapses,” she paused. Then she admitted, “I have almost no affinity for healing magic. If I created the healing spell form, it would be so weak it could only heal a wound from a splinter.”

“So, how strong does a mage’s affinity need to be to create an effective healing spell?” I questioned Castile.

“Thirty is the low end for healing and most spells. The purity of the aether you create from your core empowers the spell further. Someone with an affinity of seventy will produce a much stronger spell than someone with thirty in the associated affinity,” I nodded at Castile’s explanation. It explained so much and answered Lirkin’s question.

We spent just over an hour reviewing the spell forms, and I think I was getting close. Castile had taken a multi-faceted approach to helping me. She had learned a dozen tricks in her time at the mage college. The mages who attended were expected to imprint all their spell forms in the first year. Most mages had between two and six affinities over ten.

Renna, the peasant girl I met while hunting the griffins, was learning her spell forms from High Mages before she even went to the Mage College. When I asked why, Castile had an answer, “Renna was being groomed. She was not only expected to learn the spell forms, but she was also going to be schooled in etiquette. The Mage College is a tough environment for plebians. My guess is they were just trying to prepare her so she would not buckle under the pressure.”

I left Castile and locked myself in my private room. It was not quiet, as an energetic couple could easily be heard through the thin wooden wall. The thuds and grunts bleeding through the wall would not matter as I produced and donned the amulet under my shirt. I probably should have brought my armor to my room from the barge but decided against making a return trip to the barge. Laying down, I channeled aether into the amulet.

I was stunned to find an excited and barking Oscar, happy to see me in the entry room. I walked into the next chamber, and the disturbed soil and blood from Konstantin was still there. This was unexpected as the amulet did not reset when I left. I gave Oscar a pat and then watched as I had an ogre and ankheg battle. The ankheg won after a very graphic and smelly fight.



I needed to decide how best to use my time in the dreamscape. If the amulet remembered everything I did when I was last here, would those things be here if someone else used the amulet? Could the amulet learn from other people as well? Every question led to another question. I needed to know more about its capabilities to get the most use out of it. I considered asking Castile. She seemed genuine in her efforts to help me.

I materialized a shelf and a comfortable black leather reclining reading chair in the entry room. I took the protection spell form book and continued studying from the evening. The quicker I learned the wind shield, the safer I would be. Oscar was in my lap, and I had absentmindedly rubbed his head while I studied the book. I spent about six hours in the dreamscape before returning through the prismatic dungeon entrance.

My head ached again on the bed in my room when I returned. I returned the amulet and slept a few hours before an irritated Konstantin banged on my door, "Eryk! If you are in there, we are leaving soon. Get your arse in gear if you don't want to be swimming to catch up. Next time, let someone know where you are sleeping!"

I put on my boots and rushed down to the barge. I caught up to Konstantin, who had a gleeful smile on his face as it looked like the company was just starting to eat breakfast on the barge. He had me rush for no reason.

"Grab some food, and we can walk the woods around the town. The barge leaves in a few hours. If you are going to be a scout, it is all about practice, and we have time to practice." At least my headache was gone from using the amulet.

## **Chapter 75: When it Rains, it Pours**

Konstantin waited while I retrieved my armor and suited up. Delmar laid into me, "Eryk, we found your armor here this morning and just assumed you drowned. You sleep this far again from your armor, and you will wish you had drowned!" I did not argue but figured it was unimportant since we were in a town. I had my short sword and my own tricks if something had come up.

Brutus elbowed me, "Don't worry, Bentio lost his helm to the river last night, and Lysander left his armor on the barge as well. He spent the night warming



the bed of the old server woman at the tavern. The fat one," he laughed at Lysander's desperation and others listening joined in.

Konstantin yelled, "Hurry it up, legionnaire. If there was an enemy in the woods, they would have taken their morning shit and be eating second breakfast by now."

I was not so sure I wanted this scout training. No, I did want it; I just would have preferred it was someone other than Konstantin teaching me. I finished buckling the armor and walked toward Konstantin, who was already walking away. I did not run after him; I just increased my pace slightly.

As we walked into the woods, he commented, "In the wild, you should sleep in your cuirass. It is uncomfortable as all Hades, but trying to wake and buckle it on is difficult when the battle rages around you. You can take off the baltea, vambraces, and greaves. But keep the helmet close by and put it in the same spot every night so it is instinctual to grab it and put it on at the first sign of trouble."

I chuckled, "At least you are not asking me to sleep in the helm."

He replied seriously, "I have found I hear better not wearing it to sleep. It affects your ability to hear things clearly around you as the metal helm rubs." I just nodded at his wisdom.

We entered the woods, and I was inundated with a lecture of endless information. I just focused on remembering as much as I could. The poisonous plants that made you break into a rash. How to identify signs of a person or beast passing. How to use the environment to conceal myself as I moved. Always identify the quickest, safest path of retreat. He mentioned some edibles as well but did not say how they tasted. The reconnaissance was a long, wide arc around the village, and I had numerous scratches from brambles while Konstantin had managed to somehow escape with none.

As soon as we boarded the barge, all the men helped push off. Konstantin reported to Castile, and I stood next to him, "No sign of gnolls in the surrounding woods."

Adrian replied, "The gnoll was miles back and on the other side of the river. Do you think its pack followed us?"

Everyone looked at Konstantin, who spoke from experience, "There is easier prey in the woods on their side of the river to feed them. But they are already bold being so close to the capital." Konstantin asked indifferently, "Do you want me to scout to the opposite shore?"

Castile shook her head no, "We already warned the village to be on alert, and they will spread the word of the gnoll sighting. I only noticed a few gnolls following our progress on the river with my sight. If we knew how large the pack was, it could help."

Konstantin made a supposition, "I think Duke Tiberous pulled too many mage companies to him from the capital. Due to his war preparation, they probably have had limited patrols for months out away from the cities and large towns."

Adrian seemed impatient, "We should reach the city of Parvas at midday. If they are going to attack us, it would be before then. We should keep shields and archers at a ready."

Delmar grunted, "We were going to do that anyway. The bargemen said Parvas has the only bridge across the Aganterao River before Sobral." The meeting of the minds was finished, and I was allowed to take my reclining seat in the bow.

The barge made its way to the center of the river, and the bargeman, with the wind spell, started to move the barge into the choppy water. Delmar had crates shifted and shield men and bowmen ready to respond. Adrian gave everyone the day off from training as a number of men had already sacrificed their breakfast to the river. The water was much rougher today, and the large barge rocked in the waves.

I, however, did not get the afternoon off. Konstantin questioned me endlessly about what he told me this morning. It was like he expected me to remember everything after just one telling. Lirkin attempted to cook but failed miserably as he had motion sickness. We ended up beached on a sandbar intentionally to stabilize the barge so he could prepare a lunch of sliced ham wrapped in pickled cabbage leaves. It also gave the bargeman who was creating the wind a break.

While we ate, a small water funnel moved down the river away from us. One of the bargemen shouted, "It is just a minor water elemental. They are harmless as long as you do not bother them."

Castile also took time to send out her all-seeing-eye to scout the far shore. I overheard her tell her lieutenants that she did not see any signs of a gnoll war party following us on the opposite shore. After lunch, I was one of the unlucky men who had to unbeach the barge. We sunk into the wet sand up to our knees to push the boat back into the current. We were going to make Parvas before nightfall, and then it would just be one more full day on the river to Sobral.

It soon to rain, and the wind started to turn gusty. Fortunately, we had the gusts at our backs, but waves still washed over the low barge rails. We all scrambled to protect the cargo. I was close enough to hear Castile talking to the man on the tiller, "It might be magical weather. It does not feel like a natural storm blowing through. We should probably make for shore and wait it out."

The waves were getting larger, and he nodded and yelled in the whipping wind, "We are thirty miles from Parvas. If we land, we will not make it before nightfall."

Castile looked to Adrian and Delmar, who both nodded. Castile acknowledged, "Land the barge!"

As soon the barge hit a muddy bank, Delmar ordered all the crates of supplies to be brought to shore, and we would make camp in the trees, high up the riverbank. The shore was a soft mud with a constant wash of waves. Before we knew it, we were covered from the waist down in the black mud, dragging the supplies up the twenty-foot-high bank. Castile had made the correct call as the storm intensified, and the rain started to turn into a heavy thick haze with no signs of slowing.

It took hours for everything to be brought up and covered, and the bargemen anchored their raft, but the heavy winds pushed it further and further into the mud as the river rose. Even I could see what was going to happen. The river would fall, and the barge would be stuck in the mud. Even though the bargemen knew it as well, they had no choice as the chop on the river was intense.

Delmar was screaming to be heard as we set up camp in the evergreen trees off the bank. He was trying to direct us where to set up tents and get sentries set. Our packs were the last thing we had brought up from the barge, and mine had been sitting in water for over an hour. Donte's pack had washed

overboard, and he had lost fifteen gold. He was not the only one with the bad luck.

Half of our legion armor lost pieces of armor, mostly vambraces and greaves, washing overboard. We had not worn our full kit in case we fell into the water, it would have been more difficult to swim in them. I was fortunate to have saved all my armor, although the padding in my helmet was soaked. We all fought to set up our tarp tents where Delmar wanted them. I staked my corners and hacked thin green trees to create ribs inside. It was very crude, but I had at least gotten myself on a bed of pine needles and would not be sleeping in the mud.

The rain continued to fall in sheets outside. My tent was open at one end, and I could see others struggling. Adrian popped his head into my tent, looking at my dry space, "Nice work, Eryk. You have the first watch." He pointed out into the trees, "Ten paces that way. Dinner is your packed ration bar. Felix will join you on sentry." He walked away before I could reply.

I pulled out the wrapped bar, quickly consumed it, and then washed it with a canteen of water. I rubbed the wax off the leaf and pocketed it for when I had to shit later. I pulled one of my oiled heavy rain cloaks out of my storage space. It was a Legion-issue cloak, so its appearance would go unnoticed. As I stood up in the rain, I was mostly worried I would find someone in my tent when I returned after being relieved. My tent could squeeze two but was comfortable for one.

I moved to the trees to find a shivering Donte. I felt terrible for him since he lost a small fortune when his pack went into the water. At least he had sent most of his reward to his parents before we left Telha. "They said to give this to you," I handed him the other oiled cloak from my dimensional space, pretending to produce it from inside my own cloak.

Donte nodded gratefully and put it on before going back to camp. I leaned against a large evergreen trunk and stared out into the woods. The heavy rain stirred the scent of fresh pine, and the gray sky was slowly dimming. Felix appeared next to me and leaned into the massive trunk as well. We were one of three pairs of sentries. The tree gave us a little shelter from the rain, but it still came down hard.

"I do not think I have ever been this wet," Felix muttered, miserable. I could barely hear him in the heavy rain.

“Is camp set up?” I asked.

“Mostly, they are trying to get the crates off the ground before letting people sleep,” he voiced loudly.

As the sun set, the rain got colder and colder and did not lessen one bit. I tapped Felix and walked to check the river before it got too dark. The barge was still tied to trees, but the river had also risen halfway up the banks. It had been raining for hours. I returned to my post and told Felix. He said Castile and Adrian were aware of the possibility of the river cresting.

We stood in silence until we were finally relieved by Blaze and Kolm. I had my glowstone out when I got to my tent, and no one was there, but someone had slept there as another backpack was present. It was probably someone who had just gone on sentry duty. I did as Konstantin lectured me. I left on my cuirass armor on and took everything else off. Then I placed my helm close with my glowstone inside of it. The stone was in a small black bag but quickly accessible.

I had my sleeping roll under me and used my oiled cloak as a blanket. I had only closed my eyes for a few hours when two sharp whistles rang out. Then a voice cut the heavy thuds of rain, “We are moving camp! The river is going to crest soon!” It was Adrian yelling for all to hear.

Glowstones appeared in the dark camp as everyone scrambled to pack their gear. I put on my armor and helm, stuffed my backpack with the wet bedroll, and took down my tarp tent. Brutus came and took his pack from my tent. His own tarp had been used to cover the supplies. Delmar was calling those who finished to carry crates further into the forest. I shouldered my pack and was given a crate of onions to carry. The sentries were pulled in and given time as well to pack.

The bargemen were staying in hopes their vessel could be salvaged after the storm. Konstantin made a report in the rain, and Castile and Adrian gave the hand signs for marching two abreast. We were headed for a tower on a hill that Konstantin had spotted from the river. Before moving out, we could see the river lapping at the bank’s top. We were leaving behind almost half our supplies. We could not carry everything.

Konstantin led us a few miles in the dark night up a modest hill to an old crumbling watch tower on top. The floors above had collapsed, but it was sheltered from the wind. There was a brief discussion about whether to try

and return for more supplies, but Castile decided not to return. The inside of the tower was square and twenty-five feet across. Some stone steps in the wall led to the top. It had only one entrance, so at least fewer sentries would be needed for the rest of the night.

Our soaked bodies unloaded our supplies, and not a single man did not have a sore back from carrying the heavy crates two miles. I sat against the wall and with others as the rain continued to fall through the missing roof. Konstantin sat next to me, "What do you think this tower was for, Eryk?" I did not want to be tested, but I studied the structure anyway.

It was maybe fifty feet to the top, and we were still close to the river. "Maybe it is to keep an eye on the river?"

"Exactly!" Konstantin exclaimed excitedly. "Before the Telhian Empire, these lands had dozens of small kingdoms. This watch tower belongs to a ruined elven city a few miles inland. The elven city of Caelora."

I knew Konstantin studied history, so his knowledge did not surprise me. He continued, "If the barge is not useable when the rain stops, we must make our way on foot to Sobral. We should take the old roads and pass near the haunted ruins!"

I humored him, "Sounds like fun," I said, drifting off for some much-needed sleep.

## **Chapter 76: The Elven Ruins of Caelora**

Two men took the watch at the only entrance to the ruined tower instead of the six sentries we had on the banks of the river. Drifting off, I briefly wondered if the three bargemen would be okay waiting out the storm. The banks were clearly going to overflow, and their safety was in question. They should have abandoned the barge and come with us for protection. I guess if that was their livelihood, I could see why they stayed, though.

The hollowed-out tower we were in was not that terrible. Lirkin was even trying to get a fire going under the shelter of the stone stairs that wrapped around the inner wall. He even succeeded, and a handful of men who did not have an oiled legion cloak rushed to make use of the fire. Lirkin started cooking dinner

for everyone. It was just a soup broth with chunks of vegetables and salted meat. The heat of the soup was more welcome than the sustenance.

I was woken in the morning by a soft kick, and even before I opened my eyes, I knew it was Konstantin, "Come, Eryk. We are being sent to check on the bargemen." Konstantin had his bow in hand and short sword in his hip. I stood and noticed the sun was not up, but the skies were overcast and light gray. The rain had pattered out to just a drizzle.

"Can't Castile just use her magic to check?" I questioned while getting ready.

Konstantin muttered, "She is sleeping and shouldn't need to waste aether on it. You need practice anyway."

I followed Konstantin out of the tower and down the hill. The muddy hill gave way, and I managed to surf the mudslide to the bottom. Konstantin just commented, "Nice balance, but avoid the obvious water runoff next time." As we moved into the woods, he whispered instructions to me the entire time. It forced me to walk quietly and pay attention as we moved. He stopped us a few times to point out tracks in the mud. Squirrel, rabbit, frog, and even a skunk.

Reaching the banks where we had originally camped was just thirty minutes of walking without the heavy rain, but my legs were heavy with thick wet mud. Our old camp was under a foot of water, and a few crates of supplies floated nearby, but most had washed away. Konstantin was searching the crates and moving slowly as we checked the river. I whispered, "I do not see the barge. Do you think they took it?"

Konstantin went to a tree and found a snapped line that had moored the barge. "No," he said. "I am guessing it broke free, and they are most likely traveling downriver in an attempt to find it." We gathered what we could into two crates to carry back. A few times, Konstantin abruptly stopped and then had me scan the trees for something he saw. It was usually the movement of a small animal or bird. This led me to point out movement before he had to tell me.

The company was packing up and eating a hot breakfast when we returned. Delmar was counting food and figured we had about a week's worth. Plenty to make it to Sobral city over land. I took a bowl of the mush, and Lirkin explained, "I cooked everything that got too wet and would not keep. Not my



greatest creation, but it will fill your belly.” I didn’t complain as I ate and even had a second serving.

Adrian addressed the company when we were ready to leave, “We decided the ferry ride was making you all soft. We are headed through the wild country to reach Sobral. This area is known for packs of dire wolves. Konstantin tells me we are also going to pass near some elven ruins.”

“Haunted ruins,” Konstantin added with a smug smile.

Adrian looked a little perturbed by the interruption, “Yes, haunted. Just a few specters, but they are tied to the city.”

Blaze asked, “What is a specter?” interrupting again.

Castile walked forward, “Specters are incorporeal spirits, weaker than true ghosts. Your blade can not harm them. Their touch will drain your life force and make your soul into one of them. Stay out of the ruins. They cannot leave the walls.” Her tone did not leave any debate.

Konstantin patted my shoulder, “It is time to learn the skills of a pathfinder.”

When we walked ahead of the company, Konstantin was constantly scanning ahead and above as we walked. “Today, we are going to talk about finding the best path and avoiding obvious ambushes.” The entire morning, Konstantin pointed out terrain features and tracks in the mud from various animals. The largest was a bear. We finally reached an overgrown road. The old paved stones had grass and bushes growing between them. Large trees above shaded the ancient road. We waited for the others to catch up.

Konstantin gave a brief report to leadership, “Just one bear, too small to bother us. There were no signs of the dire wolves, but the rains washed all signs of older tracks. This is the road that leads south to the elven ruins and onto Sobral.”

Adrian asked, “Will the city be easy to get around?”

Konstantin shrugged, “I have only read about it. I studied a lot of old maps and histories. The second Emperor slaughtered everyone in the city after they refused to submit to his rule. The slaughter was horrific and created the specters. There are still many treasures within, but the deeper you travel into the city, the more voluminous the specters.”



Castile confirmed, "We will follow the road. I do not want to go east to Parvas. The specters can not move far from where they were killed. Even if the terrain is difficult, we will go around the city."

Delmar just commented, "Parvas has a Legion Hall, and we could resupply there." Castile shook her head like they had already been over this argument a few times. We were going to head south.

We had lunch, and then we moved down the overgrown road ahead of the group. Konstantin noted, "The Empire maintained the road till about a hundred years ago. Much of the trade goes on the river or through the portals now. Some traders will still risk it occasionally."

"How much of the Empire is wild like this?" I asked as we continued.

"Most of the Empire is wild. The cities have patrols, and Mage Companies deal with wandering monsters that threaten the citizens. But nature moves fast to reclaim what belongs to her," Konstantin said quietly and held up his hand.

We moved off the road, and he showed me the tracks he had spotted. They looked the same size as the bear from earlier. "Dire wolf. See, it has just four toes. Bears have five. Shit, and there are at least two of them. Notice these two sets are different sizes." Castile and the company caught up to us as we had paused.

Castile looked at the prints, already figuring it out, "Dire wolves? And recent?"

Konstantin nodded, "Probably two hours ago at the most. The mud around print has not dried out yet, and the rain stopped about then."

Delmar asked, "Are they stalking us, or did they just cross our path?"

Konstantin walked into the woods for a hundred feet, and I went with him. The tracks remained perpendicular to the road. He returned to report, "By the looks of it, five dire wolves, and they just crossed here. They were not stalking us. But we should find a defensible place to make camp tonight."

Castile narrowed her eyes, "We are not camping in the ruins, Konstantin."

"Specters are easier to deal with than dire wolves," Konstantin advised with a straight face. Konstantin obviously wanted to explore the city.

“Only you and me have runic weapons,” Adrian chastised Konstantin.  
“Everyone else would be unable to defend themselves from the specters.”

“It was a thought. We should increase our pace then. If the dire wolves circle back, they will pick up our scent,” Konstantin counseled. We changed our formation and increased to a quick march.

The ruins of the elven city were not far down the road. Massive trees grew inside a crumbling stone wall. The road naturally diverted around the walls. We passed the city, and it smelled stale and had a cold, dry air coming from it that gave me goosebumps. The walls looked even worse than the tower we stayed in last night. One massive tree in the center of the ruins had a massive green canopy covering most of the city in shadow and did not look inviting.

Konstantin was to my left, “Elves keep curated gardens of special trees in their cities. Those trees are now more than fifteen hundred years old of uncontrolled growth. That was when the city fell to the second Telhian Emperor.” I looked up and guessed them to be at least four hundred feet in height. Movement in the upper branches caught my eye.

“I saw it too. Castile,” Konstantin turned. “A giant eagle nest in the city. They must be nesting safely out of range of the specters.”

Word was passed, and Blaze was responsible for keeping an eye out for the eagles. He was the best archer and also had the best vision of anyone in the company. The dreadful ruins were soon behind us, but we did not slow. I was more than happy to open some distance from the specters.

The clouds had finally cleared, and the sun was out, allowing us to dry our drenched gear. We did not stop our march until close to sunset. Konstantin directed the company to a defensible hill. We all hacked away brush for an hour to give us sight lines down the hill before setting up our tarp tents. I was glad for the evening meal, even if it was bland.

Konstantin had me come to the leadership meeting since I was now a scout. Konstantin informed everyone, “We made about thirty miles today. This road will take us all the way to Sobral, another eighty miles or so. Two days if we do not run into problems.”

Adrian said, “We should lighten our packs. Drop the extra food and lean on the baroness when we arrive.”

Delmar, who was responsible for logistics, disagreed, “We already lost most of the supplies. Half the men are missing a piece of their armor. We are not going to be able to replace anything in Sobral City. There is no Legion Hall there. I still think we should have headed for Parvas.”

Castile agreed, “We carry everything. Lirkin said some of the men’s chafe marks were getting bloody. We are going to struggle to keep up this pace.”

“We have done it before,” Adrian intoned stoically. He was referring to our run to get the capital for her Tribunal. The sun was almost gone, and a massive howl broke the evening air. We all turned and listened as the cry was answered.

Konstantin spoke, “The dire wolves. They are hunting, but not us. It is too far away.”

Adrian said, “I am still going to increase sentries to nine for the evening.” Konstantin elbowed me, which I guess meant our presence was no longer required.

As we walked away, he said, “One of the benefits of being a scout is you do not have to stand sentry at night. You can still volunteer, but you will not be called on. But before the light of day is completely gone, let’s see how much you remember...”

Konstantin questioned me on plants around the hilltop until it was too dark to see. I gratefully climbed into my tent—both mentally and physically exhausted. I thought about the amulet but did not want to be inside it if we were attacked, so I abandoned the idea. I needed the rest, but the dire wolves were on the hunt a few miles away. I imagined how fearful it would be for the animal they were chasing. I doubted it was a human as they would not have to chase a human. I guessed an elk or deer.

Snarling, barking, and cackling erupted from the woods to the north. I immediately left my tent. I was not the only one now listening intently and watching the dark. Blaze was standing next to me, “Gnolls. The dire wolves are fighting gnolls.”

Konstantin agreed, “Yes, definitely gnolls by the sounds. I am curious if they are the same group from outside the capital. It does not make sense unless the lone one you killed was the alpha’s mate.” Blaze shifted uncomfortably. “Don’t worry, Blaze. The dire wolves are taking care of them.”

It sounded like a violent fight and continued for minutes just a few miles away. Then, the dire wolves howled in unison, indicating their victory. Konstantin assured our camp the wolves would be feeding the rest of the night, and we could sleep. I took an oblivion pill because if I didn't, I knew I would be having nightmares of wolves the size of horses tearing me apart.

## Chapter 77: A Sense of Foreboding

The oblivion pill worked. I woke early, and it was probably my best sleep since arriving in this world. I was even up before Konstantin for once. I quietly packed up my things with my glow stone for light. I moved to a fire with some coals. I stirred them and added some dry wood to get a little fire going in the chilly pre-dawn air. I was surprised when Delmar came out of his tent, sat next to me, and added some wood of his own.

"How is your training with Konstantin progressing?" He asked as the wood started to burn into a healthy fire.

"I am learning a lot. He is quite knowledgeable," I replied.

Maybe my tone was flat, or it was how I said it, but Delmar laughed, "That well, huh? I argued against it. Even though we do not have potions for you to carry, we should be using your space for something. Hell, every man here is now carrying an extra twenty pounds of food."

His statement made me feel guilty because I could easily carry every backpack in the company. It was quiet for a moment, and then I asked, "You said only you and Konstantin had blades that could injure the specters?"

In response, Delmar drew his long blade. He was one of the few men in the company who carried a blade over thirty inches. My own preferred short sword blades were around twenty-eight inches. He handed me the blade, and the blade alone was just short of three feet, maybe thirty-five inches. It was also much lighter than it appeared. The steel looked polished, and the blade was well cared for.

"That is a dungeon blade. You can not see the runic work unless you heat the blade in a forge, but trust me, it is a magical blade," Delmar said fondly. "Back when I was delving into dungeons, it was given to me. It only has one enchantment on it: durability. The blade never dulls or tarnishes. Makes

cleaning a breeze,” he chuckled, and I returned it to him. “Any type of runic blade is magical and will strike creatures that exist ethereally, like the specters.”

“How do I get one?” I asked, and our quiet conversation got a short, loud chuckle from Delmar.

“There are no master arcane weaponsmiths in the Empire capable of making a runic blade. The last one was Master Bacchus, but he died before I was born.” Delmar put the blade into the sheath. He thought for a moment and looked at me seriously, “There are three ways to get a runic blade, Eryk. Kill someone who wields one and take it. Delve a dungeon and earn one from a dungeon reward. Or travel outside the Telhian Empire and find a master weapon smith who can forge one and pay him a small fortune.”

“So they are valuable then? How much would one cost?” I asked, hoping to get some comparison to my amulet that was valued upwards of six thousand gold.

“Very valuable. I am not a trader, and too many factors equate to a blade’s worth, but most end up in the hands of the First Citizens or their personal legionnaire guards. A simple runic dagger might cost you a hundred gold. A blade,” he tapped his sheath, “a thousand.” My jaw hung open because that was the reaction I knew he wanted.

“Is Konstantin’s blade the same as yours? A durability enchantment?” I asked Delmar since he seemed so talkative.

“No,” came a gruff voice from behind me. I jumped at the sound. It was Konstantin, and he sat at the fire with us. “My runic blade was forged by an elven smith a millennia ago. It is designed to overcome the defenses of the undead.” I was disappointed he did not draw it to let me look at it as Delmar had. He usually used a practice blade or wrapped his blade when we practiced. Konstantin put some ham on a stick and began heating near the coals.

There was an awkward silence, and then Delmar asked, “You never told me how you came by your blade, Konstantin.”

Konstantin grunted, “The first option. Killed an elven Ranger when I was with the Hounds. Took her blade. Had it appraised in the city, and it had a maker’s mark for the elven smith. Guess he was famous or something. It is a good

blade,” he finished with a grunt. The grunt was a signal he did not want to talk further about the origins of the blade.

“Is that why you wanted to go into the ruined elven city? To test the blade against undead ghosts?” I asked, piecing some things together. Konstantin had warned me about being fooled by the beauty of elves, and he just admitted to killing one. Maybe there was a story there.

Konstantin took the smoking ham and ate it. He then answered my question, “Some magic blades thirst for what they were forged to do. Mine is like an itch that needs scratching.” He abruptly stood, “Since you are up early, Eryk. We can walk the perimeter together.” Konstantin obviously did not want to discuss it further.

I positioned my pack against a tree so I would remember where it was. Once the whole company woke, I did not want my pack mixed with another by mistake. I followed Konstantin, and he started to descend the hill. “Konstantin, should we be heading out there? Just the two of us with the dire wolves so close?”

He didn’t stop but said, “The wind is blowing this way,” he indicated with his hand. “We will smell them long before we see them. Besides, we are just circling the base of the hill to look for tracks.”

I did not know where his confidence came from about not being attacked, but I followed his lead. As we circled, I noticed we never left the sight line of our sentries on the hill. Konstantin pointed out a lot of small animal tracks, but it appeared nothing large approached the hill we camped on. We returned to the top of the hill after circling the base twice. Once for Konstantin to point everything out and once for me to do the same.

The company was ready to move, and Castile addressed everyone, “We should be at the edge of the dire wolf territory. Our goal is to make forty miles today so we can make forty miles tomorrow and rest in Duchess Victoria’s Castle tomorrow night.” She got some cheers from the motivational pre-march speech.

Konstantin motioned me to him, “Eryk, you are out front, just like yesterday. Do not get more than fifty paces ahead and retreat if you sense or see danger. I am going to serve as the rear sweeper. We may be moving out of the dire wolf hunting grounds, but something still does not feel right.” He looked back down the road toward the ruins of the elven city of Caelora.

We separated, and I was on my own after only three days of training. Yes, we were on a level paved road that ran fairly straight. But I was out front and would be the first to encounter a threat. I knew there were worse things in this world than dire wolves and gnolls. A few hours into the walk, I spotted some old wagons in the woods just off the road. I waited for everyone to catch up. Konstantin arrived, and we both moved into the woods to explore the wagons in a clearing off the road.

There were three wagons, all weathered and damaged. Konstantin moved slowly, found a few small bones in the leaves, and looked into the wagons. There were some sealed pottery jars and rotting linens. Castile, Delmar, and Adrian joined us. Konstantin grunted, "Not dire wolves, or there would have been more damage to the wagons. Not bandits, or they would have taken everything. I am guessing whatever happened here, it was about two winters ago."

"So, an old merchant caravan?" Castile asked while looking into the decrepit wagons.

"Most likely. They circled the wagons for the night. Whatever took them, it was in the night. At least six horses—maybe as many as twenty men by the bones and rusted weapons in the area. Scavengers dismembered the bodies. Even though the site is old, I suggest we get far away from here before making camp," Konstantin advised. He looked uneasy at the mystery.

Adrian suggested, "Maybe it is time to drop supplies to move faster?"

Delmar countered, "No, we are a large enough group that we are scaring off most threats. The supplies are needed; we can give double rations today to help lighten the men."

"Do it. And have some men search the wagons. If they didn't take the trade goods, maybe there is a lock box somewhere," Castile ordered.

Firth and Wylie joined Konstantin and I as we searched the wagons. Everyone else was on the road eating. I found a plain gold ring on the ground, still around a finger bone. I sent it to my dimensional space without telling anyone. Firth found the lockbox under some rotted boards in a wagon. We brought it to Castile and forced it open. Water had damaged the documents, making them mush. But there was a fair amount of coin. "The fates must be smiling on us," Castile murmured.



The chest contained twenty-six large gold and a huge assortment of smaller coins in gold, silver, and copper. She fished out some jewelry and four essences from the moldy mass of paper. I recognized them as two minor strength essences, a major fortitude essence, and a major constitution essence.

Adrian said softly to Castile, "The two strength essences should go to the new legionaries, Quentin and Remus." Castile nodded and handed them to Adrian, who went to deliver them.

Castile handed the major essence of the constitution to Delmar, "Although I hate to reward bad luck, give this to Mateo." Mateo had a small fortune of coins left when his backpack washed overboard from the barge. "It should take the sting out of his loss," Delmar turned and left on his delivery mission. Castile held the essence of fortitude in her hand for a few moments, considering. Then she placed it in her mouth.

Castile turned to me, "Seems I have use of your dimensional space. You can store the lockbox there until we reach Sobral." She closed it and handed it to me. I nodded and sent the box to my space.

We returned to the road, and Castile addressed the company, "Fortunas has smiled on us. I will be able to meet your enhanced pay and replace your lost legion gear." Grunts of appreciation came from the men. I could see Wylie explaining what she meant to Quentin and Remus by increased pay—a way to buy their loyalty. I could already tell the essence gifts were well received. They had both fought hard on the aqueduct and deserved the reward.

Brutus looked on enviously, but his time would come. Brutus and the missing Flavius were the only other new members of our company. Castile would have some work to do to earn their loyalty.

As we scouted ahead, Konstantin walked next to me, and I asked, "How were the wagons undiscovered for so long?"

Konstantin had obviously been thinking about it and had a response, "This old trade road is probably only used by the desperate merchants. The elven ruins and dire wolves are probably not the only threats. Most merchants will hire a barge or head west, then north, to reach the capital if they can not afford to use the portals." He paused, "still, it is perplexing that those wagons were relatively undisturbed and just weathered for years."



I noticed Konstantin's pace had increased, pulling the legion into a faster march behind us. It must be his way of showing some fear of the unknown. We walked late until sunset, and Konstantin directed everyone to a clearing far off the road. He had everyone walk single file and focus, stepping on stones. Konstantin's own tension did not help the company as they set up camp.

"Come, Eryk, I will show you how to obscure our tracks from the road," Konstantin took me back to the road. That meant I was going to have to set up my tarp in the dark. The lesson was like reverse tracking. Konstantin pointed out things that showed our passing and how best to hide it. "It will not fool an experienced tracker, but hiding the trail will help you learn how to move unseen yourself. This," he held up a jar of powder, "is spores from a myconid. It is a fungal monster. If you breathe them in, your nose will flare up, and you cannot smell anything for days. Your nose will also run like a river." He handed it to me. "Go back from the direction we came and lay a trail across the road. Use about half the jar, and do not breathe it in."

"Is this for the dire wolves?" I asked.

"No, we made over forty miles today and are likely out of their hunting territory. But any creature that tracks by scent will be foiled by this. Hurry before darkness comes," Konstantin went into the bushes to rejoin the others, and I was left on the road. I jogged two hundred yards down the road, laid a thin line across the road, and then returned. I almost missed where we turned off but carefully made my way back to the company.

There were already eight men on sentry duty. Lirkin did not even start a fire and handed me a ration bar. Brutus came over and helped me set up my tent in the dark as I ate. "Everyone is on edge," Brutus said softly.

"Fear of the unknown, or maybe they know what it is and do not want to scare us," I suggested of Konstantin and the leadership.

Brutus looked around at the settling darkness, "Whatever it is, I do not like these woods. It feels like something is watching us."

We finished getting my tarp up, and he returned to his own just a few steps away. I settled onto my wet bedroll. I kept on my cuirass and put my helm nearby with the glowstone inside. I had to remove my boots and socks to let them air out. I healed my blisters and one blackened toenail. I decided to

forgo the oblivion pill tonight. After Brutus had said it, it did feel like something was watching us.

## Chapter 78: City of Sobral

I lay there as the night insects opened their chorus, and the whispers of the sentries drifted to me. If I was not so exhausted, I would have forced myself to stay awake, knowing that tomorrow we would reach Sobral and I could rest in the city. I drifted in and out of sleep as the nightmares I was imagining were overcoming my need to sleep. I heard the sentries switch late in the night and was about to fade again to sleep when Konstantin's voice cracked the air.

"Everyone to the center of camp! It comes!" He yelled. I slipped on my boots and helm and moved out to the center of camp with my sword and glowstone. The camp crowded together, shields out.

When I joined the others, Castile asked, "What is it Konstantin?"

"A powerful undead, my sword is warm to the touch in anticipation. The weapon has never been this hot before," Konstantin said, unsure of the threat.

"How many," Adrian asked as the rest of the company made a large circle around Castile.

"I think just one. Much stronger than a specter. Stronger than a ghost I fought a long time ago. I do not know what it is. But it is coming from that direction," he pointed his blade off into the woods.

Delmar asked, "Do you think it is pursuing the lockbox?"

Castile disputed that, "Undead have no use for possessions. And it is in Eryk's space, so it would not be able to track it anyway," she paused. "Unless it is bound to an object in the lockbox, then maybe," she sounded uncertain about her knowledge.

Adrian barked, "It does not matter; it is here." The wall of light that our glow stones made into the thick trees began to waiver as wisps of darkness formed into a creature black as the night with glowing red malevolent eyes. It was humanoid and had elven features. It looked over the company and then

focused on Konstantin—or, more specifically, his blade. It outstretched a hand pointing or maybe requesting the blade.

Everyone was fearful as it felt like death incarnate looking at us, but Castile found her voice, “It is a wraith. They are weaker in daylight, so it must have been stalking us. It can not be harmed with normal weapons, but I think I can bind it with my shadow chains.”

Konstantin spoke, “It wants my blade. I can feel the pull to it.”

“Don’t give it the blade!” Delmar barked, “It is one of two weapons we have that can harm it!”

Konstantin yelled back, “I was not planning to. I just wanted you to know why it was following us. It has some link to the blade, I can feel it. Maybe—it wielded it in the past or forged it.”

“If anyone has a silvered blade, it can also damage the creature,” Castile said. I looked at my own blade, and only a few sparkles of silver dust remained from Telha City.

Castile started working her spell, and her own wisps of shadow chains moved toward the wraith. One chain wrapped around its wrist, and it pulled its arm to its face, “My chains are not strong enough to hold it! Kill it quickly!” Castile screamed, some desperation in her voice. The wraith howled in rage and lunged forward. The piercing scream made it hard to hear the others.

Castile added three more shadow chains and slowed the creature. Delmar broke the shield wall and swung his runic long sword to meet the creature. The dense black shadow shrieked in anger and attacked Delmar as he danced away. Constantine was at the creature’s back and slashed with his own weapon. Hundreds of tiny white sparks flew off the creature, briefly creating a gap in its blackness before it reformed. I felt helpless as I watched.

The creature spun, breaking Castile’s bonds, and swiped Konstantin’s arm that was holding his sword. He grunted and switched the blade to his other hand. Arrows were piecing the black wraith at a steady pace, but each one just passed through and did not elicit any reaction from the horror.

Firth and Mateo bravely joined Konstantin and Delmar to serve as another distraction with their spears. Castile kept summoning more chains to slow the creature. Delmar was attacking the back of the creature, while Konstantin

struggled with its undivided attention. If it had not been bound and slowed by Castile, I think Konstantin would have been in real trouble.

Konstantin relied on reading an opponent in combat, and this black mass had nothing to read; it just attacked. A backhanded swing stuck Mateo, he screamed and moved away, holding his face. Brutus moved in to take his place. His spear wiped through the black ghost, trying to distract it.

The wraith was getting smaller as Delmor and Konstantin slowly whittled away at it. Hundreds of white sparks always accompanied Konstantin's strikes. The creature of darkness howled, splitting our ears. Castile's chains faltered for a moment, and Konstantin took a blow to his chest and lost his sword.

Konstantin rolled away, but before the apparition could reach the sword, Adrian retrieved it and pressed the frustrated creature again. As the creature shrank in size, Castile's chains became more effective. I felt useless, just waiting for my turn to fight the creature. I considered moving the entire creature to my dimensional space, but that seemed ludicrous. And it would have to remain there forever as I could never release it.

We were winning, and soon, the creature turned translucent and disappeared. Everyone paused, not quite believing we had won against the nightmare. Linus was looking at Konstantin; his left arm and chest were completely blackened. The side of Mateo's face was black well. Delmar had taken a light blow on his hand, and his thumb was black.

Castile ordered, "Set the perimeter. I will see to the wounded." I moved with her, having felt ineffective in the fight like almost everyone in the company.

Linus looked up from a shallow breathing Konstantin, "I do not know what this is or how to treat him."

Castile knelt, "It is necrotic damage. I have only read about it."

Konstantin rasped, "Got to my lungs. There is a greater healing potion in my bag." Linus rushed to get it and was soon back. We watched as he drank it, and the blackness faded to a yellow-blue bruise. He was also breathing easier.

"Necrotic damage kills the tissue. A strong enough healing potion or a healing mage can counter the effects and restore the dead tissue," Castile explained.

Mateo's right jaw was completely black. He tried to talk, but all that came out was nonsense. Benito offered, "I have a minor healing potion. Will that work?" When everyone looked at him, he shrugged, "Got it at the Imperial Alchemists in Macha."

Castile considered, "It will help a little. Should be enough for him to heal on his own after the potion." Castile sounded more like she was guessing than she actually knew. Mateo's jaw turned yellow-blue, and his speech was slightly slurred, but he looked like he would be fine.

The company started a fire a short while later as it was the middle of the night. I somehow ended up in Castile, Delmar, and Adrian's meeting. Konstantin was lying by the fire, exposing his upper body and enjoying the heat as he shivered. The potion worked mostly on his chest before running out of energy. His arm was still very black, but he could move his fingers.

Delmar started the midnight meeting, saying, "We should have gone to Parvas."

Castile looked angry, "I told you no. I know the Count who rules the city is Octavian's eldest son. If we arrived without the barge, I did not want to risk a confrontation."

Adrian tried to calm them both down, "Konstantin can walk, and we can make it to Sobral tomorrow." I was just a spectator as they discussed possible plans.

Delmar regained composure, "We can leave at first light. We will drop all but two days of food." Castile's eyebrows went up. Delmar explained, "Now that we have excess coin," he pointed at me, "we can be more frivolous with supplies."

Adrian added, "Agreed. We can get the men who lost armor replacements as well. We were lucky we did not lose anyone and will be there in a long day's march tomorrow." He changed his tone a little, "With Konstantin down till he receives more healing, should we promote someone else to temporary scout? Firth or Wylie?"

Castile considered, then shook her head, "Just Eryk is fine for a single day. I am sure Konstantin will insist he maintain his duties anyway, even if he wheezes like a boy with lung rot."

I was dismissed to tell everyone to drop whatever food they could not eat in a single day's march. It was the best news they had gotten on this ill-fated trip. Everyone had over twenty pounds of food in their pack and eagerly started trading for the best bits for the march. The food they thought was worthless was mostly the ration bars wrapped in wax leaf. Over one hundred of them hit the ground near the fire. The company was given orders as soon as the sun rose and headed back to the road. Konstantin assigned me rear guard, and I lingered just long enough to move the pile of ration bars to my space.

Even if I did not want to eat them, I could always use the wax leaf for soft ass wipes. I was rear guard, as Konstantin had insisted on being out front. According to Konstantin, I was to stay about 50 paces back and walk through the woods off the road. My job was scanning the woods to our left, right, and behind. If I saw trouble coming, I was to blow my whistle twice to alert the company. The idea was to give them an extra ten seconds to prepare for a threat.

Walking alone in the morning away from the company was a bit nerve-racking, especially after last night. I kept the rear of the formation in sight and the whistle Konstantin loaned in my hand. At midday, the company stopped, and I caught up to them for lunch. Almost everyone was eating some type of salted meat and candied nuts. I sipped my water and munched on spicy jerky that was meant to be hydrated in a soup. It was extremely salty but had a nice kick.

Konstantin found me and spent the entire thirty minutes asking me questions. Apparently, I had failed to see four signs of passage in the woods that he left for me—a snapped branch, an overturned rock, a copper coin, and a bit of black fabric. I did not argue and just told him I would be more observant in the future.

We reached a road marker, and Castile announced we were in the Sobrol province, just fifteen miles from the city. Delmar brought me forward, no longer feeling the need for a rear guard. We started seeing farms just five miles later, and the road turned into dirt. I was walking next to Firth, and he explained, "The plebians probably pulled the paving stones to build their homes in this area after the road went into disuse."

We got a lot of looks from the farmers in the fields. We were a battered legion company with a number of men missing pieces of armor. The road intersected another road along the river. A road marker indicated that the city of Lignum was forty miles to the northeast, and the city of Loule was twenty miles along

the southwest. The city of Sobral—if it could be called a city was just a mile along the road following the river.

As we approached the Sobral, it did not have the fancy Roman arches or columns found in the capital. All the buildings surrounding the central Citadel were mostly aging wood. The stone that could be found was coarse-cut and not polished. There was no city wall, just a wall surrounding the Citadel on the far side of the city sprawl. The roads were not straight, and we had to weave our way to the gates of the Citadel.

“Harpy’s tits,” Firth swore, “That has to be the worst-looking brothel I have ever seen.” He was indicating a one-story wooden structure with dark blue paint. Its sign read The Nasty Nymph, and the image on the sign left no doubt what they offered within.

We found only two guards at the large gate. The mortar on the wall surrounding the Citadel was crumbling. Castile announced herself, and we were allowed to pass. At least the Citadel itself looked to be in good repair. And there were a lot of glass windows on the towering structure. In a wheezing voice, Konstantin was at my right and told me, “The Count who ruled this city before it was made into a duchy for Victoria was a mage who specialized in making glass. Shipped it all over the Empire.”

Konstantin caught his breath, “When he died ten years ago, the Emperor sent a baron to run things. He did a terrible job, and the population shrunk. He gave it to his favorite granddaughter to see how good she could rule and if she could bring it back to prosperity.”

The young Duchess came down to greet us as we entered the courtyard. She had two men, both soldiers flanking her, and a young maid on her hip. The Duchess had on a bright white dress with blue highlights. She smiled as she addressed us, “Mage Castile, thank you for taking my assignment request. You and your men will be quartered in the Citadel while you complete the assigned task.”

That statement got happy murmurs from everyone. We followed the Duchess into a large entry hallway with stained glass windows showing scenes of legionaries fighting various monsters. Our dirty boots and foul odor made it feel like we should not be walking on the polished marble floor. The Duchess turned twice down hallways, and we entered a massive dining room with a long table. There were plenty of place settings for everyone.



The Duchess went to sit at the head of the table. "Castile, if you and your leaders could sit close, we will discuss things as dinner is prepared and served."

Adrian was brave enough to ask, "Do you not want us to clean up first?"

The maid behind her answered, "Baths are being drawn in the guest quarters. We were expecting you by barge and had a rider upriver waiting. He would have given us some warning, but your arrival by road surprised us." The young woman sounded slightly upset.

The Duchess just smiled and waited while we sat. I was a little surprised when Castile had me seated to her left. Delmar and Adrian were across from us. The Duchess sat at the head of the table. Castile smiled and addressed the Duchess, "Now, can you tell me why you really wanted us here?"

The young Duchess smiled, "In good time! Try the wine from the Esenheim elves."

## Chapter 79: The Duchess' Plans

The young Duchess delayed the conversation. She waited for the first dinner course to be brought before talking with Castile. A large bowl of split pea soup was placed in front of everyone. "Looks like vomit," commented Mateo from down the table. Brutus slapped the back of his head. Mateo added quickly, "But I bet it tastes good."

I was not sure of formal protocols with a First Citizen or a Duchess, so I waited for Castile. Castile waited till the Duchess took her spoon before doing likewise. I took my spoon and tasted the soup. It was cold but definitely pea soup. A little salty but good. It was so good that an eruption of slurping started down the table. Most of the company were conscripts and never had any etiquette training. Felix even picked up his bowl and used it as a cup. He finished his bowl, turned around, and asked a young servant boy for seconds. The boy ran to the kitchens and returned with a full bowl to the happy Felix. Across from me, Delmar and Adrian ate methodically with just the spoon. I mirrored them, showing manners.

Castile took a few spoonfuls and put down the spoon. "Duchess, why are we here?" She asked patiently again.

The young First Citizen Duchess nodded, "I do need you to complete the survey markers for my lands. I have a white marble quarry on my lands and have contracted two thousand stones to be quarried from it to serve as the markers. I expect you to be occupied on my lands for the next five or six months."

Castile frowned, "Will there be an Imperial Surveyor with us?"

Duchess Veronica pushed away her barely touched soup, and a servant rushed forward to remove it from the table. "There will be an agent from the Imperial Surveyor's office, an apprentice. He will mark and record each stone as you bury the white marble marker every hundred twenty yards." She took her wine in hand and asked casually, "Did you travel down the old road?"

Castile shifted in her seat at the question, "We did. Torrential rains forced our barge ashore. It broke loose overnight. We were forced to come on foot and did take the old road," Castile admitted.

Duchess smiled, "You have been traveling, so you are unaware, but the weather has been askew the last few days everywhere. The Bartiradian weather mages have cast major disruption across the Empire by releasing greater elementals across the realm. A blizzard in the capital, tornadoes across the plains, heavy rains flattening crop fields, and tsunamis along the coast." The whole table was suddenly quiet at the pronouncement of the natural disasters.

Adrian broke the silence, "Why?"

The Duchess smirked, "Revenge for Macha. Duke Tiberius tore down the city walls around their army. They had heavy losses, and only a few hundred made it out alive. Now the Emperor has committed another ten thousand men to Duke Tiberius to push into the Bartiradian Kingdom lands." The Duchess sipped some wine, hiding a small smile, "Although this is mainly to cover for the expedition to excavate Atlantium. But you already know about that." Castile looked at me, and I pretended to enjoy my soup.

Delmar asked hotly, "What damage has been dealt to the Empire from the elementals?"

The Duchess waved it off, "Not much. From what I heard from message sendings, all the cities are fine as mages successfully held off the most intense weather. The most significant damage was to crops. It will affect

market prices for the next year or two, and we will have to import more from the south, possibly open trade with Bouton orcs.”

The table got loud as men talked to each other about the implications until Castile silenced them by looking at Adiran, who barked an order for quiet. Castile asked, “Why do you need a mage company to do your survey work? It is allowed since it is an Imperial Survey, but why?”

The Duchess ate a blue cracker daintily while explaining, “The survey will serve two purposes. One is to cement the borders of my new province. The second is to keep you and your company occupied for five months so Duke Octavian can cool down. I asked if you took the road because it had not been used for five years. Every merchant risking it has disappeared, to my knowledge.”

Castile took her wine and sampled it for the first time. We were waiting for Castile to answer the Duchess and reveal what she wanted of our adventures. I was unsure what game was being played and was happy to enjoy my soup. “We encountered dire wolves and a wraith,” Castile admitted to the Duchess.

Further down the table, Konstantin added, “And a gnoll war party.” Castile nodded at the addition.

The Duchess frowned, “You escaped a wraith? And dire wolves? I had hoped for you to subdue the lands along the road.” She folded her hands in front of her, “The lands north are part of the Imperial Province. The Emperor was willing to transfer them to me if I successfully reopened the trade road.” She rapidly tapped her index finger on her arm in an apparent habit.

Delmar barked a laugh, “You want our company to clear the wilds and patrol the most dangerous road in the Empire?”

Castile admonished Delmar, “I can handle this negotiation, Delmar.” Delmar looked irate as he pushed his soup away to show his anger. Of course, the bowl was already empty.

Veronica nodded, “Not the most dangerous road, but definitely dangerous. Was the wraith from the ruins of Caelora?”

“No, we were dozens of miles past the elven ruins—but it might have pursued us from the city. Wraiths are not tied to a single place like specters,” Castile

said uncertainly. I looked down at Konstantin, who was focused on using half a loaf of bread to clean his soup bowl.

The young Duchess considered, “I know there are wraiths and specters within the ruined city walls. But was not aware they ever left the city.”

Castile had a quick response, “We are not certain the wraith was from the city, but it did have elven features—so was an elf in life. But either way, I am not interested in accepting a mission to kill dire wolves and specters for you. If you want the wolves handled, request the Hounds. If you want the city cleared of undead, petition the Emperor, but I know such missions have failed prior. I took the survey request as a thank you for your help at the Tribunal.” Delmar nodded, satisfied with Castile’s rebuke of the Duchess’ expectations of us.

The Duchess’ finger increased in tempo on her arm, coming up with a response. She finally said, “Let me get to the point. I would like to take your legionaries into my service. I have two hundred guards and ten thousand citizens across my lands. I rule this city and two large towns. I am tasked with bringing prosperity back to this city.” She made a wide gesture. “I have unhappy citizens and no exportable trade goods.”

“What about your marble quarry?” Delmar asked. Plates with a thick steak with potato wedges underneath were brought out. The men followed the plates hungrily while Castile locked eyes with the Duchess.

The Duchess gestured emphatically, “There are twenty quarries in the Empire. Most have higher-quality marble and easier access to transportation. The last Count of this Citadel produced glass from sand. I cannot replicate that feat. After he died, the Emperor assigned Baron Jakob to Sobral City, who milked the people for every copper to line his own pockets. I need to restore order and gain the confidence of the people.”

Duchess Veronica was passionate in her speech, but Castile did not seem swayed. Neither did Delmar or Adrian. Most of the company was too busy eating to be paying close attention now, the clatter of knives and forks covering the conversation at our end of the table. I was slowly cutting my meat but listening intently.

“You are trying to lure my legionaries away from me?” Castile asked with some hostility.

“Not really. I just ask that you take every request I send to the capital and work for me,” the Duchess smiled with a grin.

Adrian swallowed a bit, “Company mages only work for the Emperor. You can only contract a mage after they finish their service. And you had Castile’s service extended by ten years.”

Castile answered for the Duchess, “Duchess Veronica lacks the funds to hire a mage. Instead, she wants me to work all her petitions to the Emperor that require a mage company.”

I looked at the faces around me, and it felt like they were playing poker. I only vaguely understood the process. Assignments for mage companies were generated through the Legatus Legionis office. These assignments were generated by processing requests from First Citizens and other bureaucratic branches of the Empire. The mages in charge of the companies could then cherry-pick assignments. If a mage company was not busy, then it could have an assignment issued to them by the Legatus Legonis Office. Castile was never idle, always going from one job to the next. The Legatus Legonis had forced her to take the assignment to defend Macha through the machinations of Duke Octavius.

The young Duchess was calm, “With your funds being cut off, you need a sponsor Castile, or your legionaries will accumulate debt replacing equipment. I will support them,” she offered magnanimously.

I probably should not have intervened in the negotiations, but I asked anyway, “How does Duke Octavian have his own legionaries? Are they part of a mage company, or did they finish their service and were hired by him?”

All eyes turned to me, and Adrian answered, “Only First Citizens can maintain their own force of legionaries. They are required to pay for their equipment and pay twice their salary to the Empire. The Empire then pays their regular salary to them. Just another way for the Empire to fill its coffers.”

“So not only does the Empire not have to maintain them, but the Empire is paid their annual salary? Like a rental fee?” I confirmed.

Duchess Veronica interjected, “Yes. The legionnaire must voluntarily enter the service of First Citizen. For me, a legionnaire would be twenty gold a year paid to the Empire. They receive one gold a month from the Legion Hall.”

Blaze, who was two seats, gasped, “Ten gold a year? That is twice what Castile pays us.” Veronica smiled as it was clear she had intentionally spoken loud enough to be heard over the silverware.

“So this was all a setup to steal my men?” Castile said coldly.

“I want you to think of this as a partnership, Castile. I can not afford to steal your legionaries from you. My finances are such that just maintaining this Citadel takes all my resources. The two hundred soldiers on my land are poorly trained and poorly equipped. I need you just as much as you need me,” the Duchess smiled placatingly.

Castile considered for a long moment and cut and ate a piece of her steak. She moved the steak aside and went for the potatoes, which appeared grilled. She seemed to like the potatoes and ate them one after another, thinking. She finally asked, “How will you make certain that your requests are accepted, and I can choose them?”

The Duchess smiled, seeing her fish almost caught, “I have a friend in the receiving office. When a message sending is received from me, she will expedite the request, generate an assignment, and attach your company to it at posting. All dukal-level requests that are made are always converted into assignments. I am not the only Duke who has used this loophole.”

“What if the Emperor calls for war? Then all mage companies need to report for wartime assignments,” Adrian asked, his plate empty. “With Macha and the weather elemental assault, things are escalating.”

“I can not see into the future—Adrian,” she apparently had done some research to know his name. I wondered if she knew mine. The Duchess continued, “But a Pronouncement of War is unlikely. Even if we invaded the Esenhem Kingdom of the elves, the Emperor would not formally declare war. The political ripples would be too much, and there are not enough citizens to draft without affecting production.”

“Can you keep Duke Octavian from interfering in your scheme?” Castile queried seriously. I could sense Castile was weighing her options.

“Nothing is ever certain. But I believe my agent to be trustworthy,” the Duchess was having trouble holding back her smile. It was obvious that Castile was strongly considering her offer.

Delmar broke into the discussion, “What kind of support are you offering? Potions?”

The Duchess shook her head no, “I can not afford potions. But I do have a healing mage in my city. An old man with a powerful healing spell form, just very little aether. He is contracted to me and will do all your healing without compensation required.”

Castile seemed to consider, “Not good enough. You will need to hire an alchemist. We need at least lower-tier potions when we are out on assignment. I can not cast healing spells.”

The Duchess winced, “Finding an alchemist to come here and set him up would cost hundreds of gold.” Seeing this was a sticking point, the Duchess nodded, “A first-order alchemist then. Give me a month to procure his services, though. I will find the coin.”

“I think we can come to an agreement then,” Castile nodded as the next course—some type of fish—was brought out to the delight of the men. The two women began to cement their new partnership.

## Chapter 80

The next course was thinly sliced sugar beets, baked on top of dense pasta in a cheesy but oily sauce. It added a sweetness and crunch to the Roman mac’n’cheese. It was also going to turn my pee red later on. The pasta was heavy, but it was the best thing served tonight. A few men further down the table were getting louder, drunk on the wine, but no one at the head of the table held them in check.

As the rest of dinner proceeded, I had a front-row seat to final negotiations with Castile and Duchess Veronica. The biggest hurdle seemed to be what requests the Duchess would submit to the Legitus Legonis that Castile’s company would then accept. I listened as I ate, and certain requirements needed to be met. It had to be Empire business, a monster subjugation, a benefit to a First Citizen, or a defense against a foreign power in order to be legitimate.

Linking a request for a duke was very loosely regulated. When an assignment was accepted, the mage company had a certain number of days to complete



it. The assignment could be completed quicker, freeing the mage company. Our current assignment was slated for a maximum of six months due to the distance and work involved.

A duke could only have one preferred request active at a time. They would be assessed the Emperor's tax if they exceeded the one request. Since Duchess Veronica was so tight on coin, she could only make one request at a time. The tax was also applied if a request required more than one mage company to complete it.

The discussions basically ended with Castile being able to review the request before it was sent magically to the capital by the message sending spell. There was no dessert, just an alcoholic heavy cream drink. I could smell the alcohol coming off it as I brought it to my mouth. I had barely touched my wine but quickly drank the creamy alcoholic milk but did not feel the expected buzz. I guess I would need to work harder in the future to overcome my enhanced constitution.

The Duchess stood, clapped her hands, and twenty-four servants, all dressed in her dark green house colors, arrived. "The servants will take you to your rooms. You should all have baths waiting for you!" There was a scramble as a few of the servants were young women.

Castile barked, "Hold legionaries!" And the men stumbled as many were drunk. She turned to Adrian, "Adrian assign each man to a servant, and if I hear of any impropriety or abuse, I will handle the discipline myself." Castile left with the first middle-aged man in the row. The waiting servants had also all clearly heard Castile's pronouncement.

Adrian started pointing at the servants one at a time, and they stepped forward, and he would call a name. The first servant he pointed at was a graying older man, and Firth was assigned to him. There were snickers from the men as everyone knew his propensity to visit brothels. I still believe he mostly visited brothels in his capacity to work for the Praetorian Guard. Firth grunted non-committedly as he followed his man out.

That was how it went. One after the other, and I waited and waited. Finally, it was just me, Konstantin, Adrian, and Delmar. The four remaining servants were all young women. That sneaky bastard! Delmar spoke, "Konstantin, after you clean up, I want you and Eryk to scout the city and surrounding terrain."

My jaw hung open. I guessed, as a scout, I was going to have to get used to getting less rest than the others. "You two," Adrian pointed, "Take these men to adjacent rooms if possible." We followed the two women in green dresses out of the hall.

As we walked, I noticed that although the Citadel had lots of glass, there were not many decorations. Some walls looked like they had square fading, so maybe a picture had once been there. Missing furniture in the wide hallways was marked on the floor by their outlines in the floor where they once stood. We ascended wide white marble steps following our two guides. Both had light brown hair held back in a bun. The green uniform dresses were baggy, so you could not tell their figure from behind.

We climbed to the third floor and were brought down a wing, "This is the guest wing. Each apartment is fully furnished, and we will be available to call on at any time." She paused at a large, deep blue door that I recognized as tace wood from Tsinga.

"Ah, tace wood from Tsinga," I said aloud, stroking the door. I was doing this for Konstantin's benefit as well as to show off my knowledge to our escorts.

Konstantin was unimpressed, "You can have this room, Eryk." Konstantin moved to the next door with the other servant woman.

The servant opened the wide door and waited for me to enter. The room was massive, and the walls and floor were the white marble that I assumed was quarried nearby. "This is my chamber," the woman motioned to a door to the right. "It is where you can find me if you need anything. If you follow me, I can show you to the bath."

I paused to take in the room before following. A massive bed dominated the wall to the left, and a single nightstand was adjacent. A floor-to-ceiling window nearly ten feet wide dominated the far wall. We were on the backside of the Citadel as the windows looked down onto gardens and a forest beyond. A bar ran in the ceiling over the window, but the curtains were apparently missing. I stepped to catch up with the servant.

"Thank you, what is your name?" I said as she walked around the corner.

The young woman turned, "Lareen, legionnaire." She paused, "May I have yours as well?"

“Eryk, Konstantin mentioned it in the hallway,” I said, disappointed she did not remember.

She smiled at my disappointment, “I was unsure if it was your name or a term of derision based on his countenance.” I think she just talked down to me, but I was not sure. I guess I was supposed to be the brutish, uneducated legionnaire.

She paused at a narrow door, “This is the latrine. Once you use it, call for me, and I will empty it.” I nodded but planned to shit in the woods when I went out scouting with Konstantin.

The next room was the private bath. A tub was recessed into the floor. A long wooden table ran along one wall, and a high window gave the chamber light. It was big enough for two—or three people. “I thought you did not have an aqueduct? They carried all this water up here?”

Lareen looked at me, “Ten boys haul buckets up to the top of the Citadel all day. There is a cistern up there.” She walked to a spigot near the tub. “A servant heats the first pipe coming off the cistern and gives us the hot water. Your water will just be warm as we had so many tubs to fill.”

“I will clean your clothes for you, Eryk, while you bathe.” Lareen waited patiently, and I stripped off all my gear and clothes. She started sorting the items. I settled into the tub, and it was barely even warm. Well, it was water, and I had an assortment of scrubbing devices on the floor near the tub. I took the soap and an abrasive sponge. I washed my hair first and then worked my way down.

I thought Lareen would have left as I was ignoring her per Castile’s orders. She was still working and always turned away quickly when I looked at her. I sat down in the tub and scrubbed away the four days of road dirt. The soap had a floral scent I could not place. Loreen had placed my pack and all my gear on a table in the large bathing room and finally left. The only problem was there were no towels or clothes to change into.

I rinsed off and stood. The bathroom door had a lock on it, and I closed and latched it. I pulled out my clothes and dressed in my nicer clothes. I knew Loreen was going to take at least an hour to wash those clothes. I was in a private space and was not going to be disturbed.

I decided to take out the dead elf scout from when we escaped Macha. I would use the collector on him and see if it preserved him for using the device. I was nervous as I did so, and the body appeared on the floor. The elf looked so young, like a teenager. I removed his bow and quiver with eleven arrows. His bow was layers of wood and much longer than the legion short bows. The arrows were longer, too, so I was not sure about using them interchangeably with a legion bow.

I placed the collector on his chest and activated it, waiting anxiously. The blue wisps were drawn into the collector, and an essence was formed! It actually had worked. The elf was eighth or nine days dead, and he still gave an essence. It was a pearly pink and the size of a major essence. It took me a moment to remember light pink was for the empathy attribute.

That was my lowest attribute. I did not hesitate and dropped it in my mouth. The dissolving ball seemed to have a lemony taste that traveled into my brain. Can you even taste lemon in your brain? Before I could dwell on it, the sour sensation faded.

After assimilating the essence of empathy, I felt slightly off, like I was not quite myself. I was kneeling on the floor and noticed a blood trail coming from the elf's body. Shit. Of course, I had stabbed him in the chest to kill him, and he had been preserved fresh. I would have time to clean up the blood after I stripped the body and placed it back in my space. The body was still warm but pushed past my discomfort.

I pulled off his small satchel. It was like a small backpack and had numerous items inside. There was a pouch with steel arrowheads and fine wire wrap. I guessed he repaired or even made his own arrows. There was a bag of tightly wrapped food. A roll of thin netting. Maybe it was to catch birds to take their feathers for arrows? A small kit of knives with a sharpening stone. A few blood stains on the kit made me think this was for dressing a game animal. So, this elf was a hunter. A pouch of salt. A white shirt rolled tight. The final item was a fire starter kit. I put everything back in the satchel and placed it with the bow in my dimensional space.

I took his belt off, and it had a knife and a long sword. I checked the blades, and there did not appear to be any markings, making them runic weapons. The craftsmanship looked average to my untrained eye. I searched his jacket and found a pocket on the inside. A bag with some powder—the color and consistency looked like the mycoid powder Konstantin had given me. There were no healing potions at all on him. He had an old, tarnished silver chain

around his neck. It was intricate, and I was not certain if I should take it. In the end, I did and placed it with the other items in storage.

The elf looked to be more of a hunter than an army scout. Maybe a civilian recruit to the Bartiradian army or a volunteer woodsman. I moved the elf back to. I removed my clothes, not wanting them to get dirty. Then, I began to clean up the congealing blood with the spare shirt from the elf's satchel. I drained the bath as it was a simple plug in the bottom and then used the water from the spigot to clean. I even wiped down the tub, as it had a layer of dirty soap scum on it.

With the tub cleaned, I quickly used the cold water to rinse my body again before dressing. I guessed whoever heated the water pipe was off duty now. I checked the cleaned bath and nodded. I unbarred the door and went to the only mirror in the room. I looked a little ragged with a few days of facial growth.

I crashed on the bed and waited for either Konstantin to drag me out or for Lareen to return with my cleaned clothes. The bed sucked me as it was too fluffy for my taste. I could smell the feathers inside the mattress. I preferred the smell of my griffin-down pillow, so I removed it from my space, placed it under my head, and quickly fell asleep.