

A Soldier's Life

Chapter 81: Willpower

“He looks like he is having a good dream,” a familiar voice broke my light sleep.

“I was till you came in my room without knocking,” I grumbled and opened my eyes to see Konstantin standing over my bed, his young servant at his side. He tossed some clothes at me, and they landed heavily on my stomach.

“Put those on. We will go and explore in commoner garb. Your fancy clothes will bring too much attention to us,” Komstantin advised. He addressed his servant, who had a pained look I know is all too familiar. “You can go. I will return to my room in a few hours.”

“I didn’t have any other clothes,” I said while rolling out of bed with the bundle of clothes in my hands.

“While you have been napping, Eryk, I have walked this Citadel. It is one of the oldest I have ever seen. Dozens of additions over the centuries. It was probably a capital of some relic Empire before the First Legion,” Konstantin sounded a little excited. He then looked me seriously in the eye, “You should always familiarize yourself with your environment before you rest. What if the place burned down? Where should you go?”

“A fire escape plan? But isn’t this entire building stone? Seems unlikely,” I commented while changing.

“The First Emperor was killed when an entire wing of the palace was turned into molten rock by a massive ritual, Eryk,” Konstantin said while walking through my room, doing an inspection. He even ducked into the large fireplace, expecting there might be something hidden up there. When he came out, he had a black soot mark on his cheek and forehead. I just hoped he didn’t use the mirror and walked around with it. He went to the massive window and looked out in the gardens. The sun was setting, and I realized we might be caught in the woods tonight.

“What are we looking for on our trip around the area? Is this like the time you made me walk around the city of Macha?” I asked, pulling on my boots.

“Exactly!” He had seen his reflection in the window and was rubbing the soot out; so much for embarrassing him. “As a scout for the company, our job is to know the best ways to retreat from danger. This place,” he spun, indicating the Citadel, “is a trophy castle. It looks beautiful, but,” he tapped the glass behind him, “is terribly indefensible. I would bet a large gold that each addition to this palace added a few secret passages.” So that was what Konstantin had been looking for in the fireplace, a secret passage.

Konstantin walked to the door, and I followed him. We took a narrow stair at the end of the hallway. A servant stair brought us to a storage room outside the kitchen. Some cooks looked mildly interested as we passed through their work area. Konstantin grabbed a loaf of bread, and I did likewise, as it was warm. When we were out of sight, my bread went to my storage for a later snack.

We exited into a courtyard, and Konstantin moved quickly to the wall. Far across this back courtyard were the stables—horses mixed with milk cows and, I think, a few goats. I did not have time to determine if the Duchess maintained any heavy horses for a cavalry. With only two hundred soldiers under her command, it seemed unlikely. At the wall was a passage guarded by two men in the Duchess’s dark green livery. One was young, a teenager with greasy black hair, and the other was much older, with almost completely white hair and a pot belly. They did not stop us as we exited through the passage they guarded in the wall.

On the other side were two more of the duchess’ guards, both middle-aged men. One yawned as we passed, and the other looked us up and down before looking out into the city. As we entered the streets, Konstantin asked, “Impressions?”

I had been waiting for his question, “They do not bathe regularly.” Konstantin gave a sour expression at my joke. “Fine, the guards on the outer wall were the more competent. Or at least look more competent. The inner wall was a lazy veteran and a new recruit. No one questioned us or asked about our business. We could be assassins leaving after a mission and getting away freely.”

“Good. I knew you were not a lost cause. What was the dominant hand of the old guard?” Konstantin asked.

I searched my memory. He had a spear, and his short sword was on his right hip, “Left-handed, his blade was on his right.” I said after thinking for two steps on the road.

“Excellent,” Konstantin smiled brightly. It looked wrong on his face. “But you should have also noted the boy was right-handed, and they should have been on opposite sides of the passage.” I wanted to chirp that he had not asked me that question, but I held my tongue and nodded.

We moved among the wooden structures, “Now we are going to walk through town and see how well they are patrolling the streets. Crime is rampant in the city, cutting the Duchess’ taxes.”

We walked the streets and found patrols taking food from vendors without paying. Responding slowly to requests for help. Taking long breaks in alleys—sometimes napping. A few guards were even in incomplete uniforms. When it was completely dark, Konstantin had me follow him outside the city to circle the Citadel’s walls.

I asked, “It would only take a hundred trained men to take this city. Why has it not happened?”

Konstantin looked behind us, “It is on a main road in the center of the Empire. There are probably companies of regulars that pass through weekly. Also, if the city was threatened, the Emperor would send a dozen mage companies and two thousand regulars through a portal in a nearby city. It would only take half a day for them to arrive. The Duchess, however, is responsible for keeping her city in order and has not been doing a great job.”

The blue moon seemed larger tonight, and I looked up at it and quickly looked away before Konstantin could berate me for ruining my night vision. We moved through the woods, and Konstantin stopped constantly to examine plants on the ground. After the twentieth time, I asked, “What are we looking for?”

“Common alchemy ingredients for healing ointments and simple healing potions,” Konstantin informed me while kneeling on the ground.

“You are an alchemist!?” I exclaimed, extremely surprised.

“Gods, mercy, no. I would never have the patience to spend an entire day purifying ingredients, combining them in exact proportions, and then activating

them with a touch of aether. However, I do know the basic ingredients, and Delmar asked me to look. When it is light out, I will show you them and how to harvest them. We need to make more use of your dimensional space. Most ingredients need to be fresh, so you are an asset for that.” Konstantin studied some red-brown grass before getting up.

“So everything an alchemist needs will be out here?” I looked into the graying woods.

“Maybe for the healing ointment. It only needs a base and two aetheric binding agents that are common. The simple healing potion requires honey from specific flowers that giant bees harvest. That will have to be imported from the south. Finding a trader should not be difficult.”

We circled wide into the woods, and Konstantin found numerous well-trodden paths in the blue-lit woods. He did not want to use the glow stones because the moon was bright enough. He guessed the paths were from hunters from the city or woodsmen living in the wilds bringing their game in for sale in the city. I made sure to relieve myself in the woods so Lareen would not have to clean the chamber pot.

Even with looking down all the time, Konstantin still pointed out numerous animals as we moved. We returned to the city and the Citadel well past midnight. The two guards outside the passage entry halted us. Konstantin patiently explained who we were and our purpose outside the gate. One of the inner passageway guards was summoned and ran to confirm with their captain. At least this seemed more secure.

The runner returned, and we were allowed in. I could tell Konstantin was not happy the captain did not come to see for himself. At the kitchen entrance, Konstantin turned to a hallway on the first floor and left me without a word. Was this another test? I was heading to my apartment and getting some sleep. He could report our findings on his own. Besides, he had done very little talking after we left the city.

The stairs were dark, so I used my glowstone and found the correct door to my room shortly after. I opened the door and found a small fire in the massive fireplace. On the massive bed were all my clothes, cleaned and dry. My armor was neatly placed on the floor, with my pack at the foot of the bed. I kicked off my clothes, stripping to just my my trousers, and fell into the bed face down, pulling my griffin pillow to me.

The sound of a door click had me roll over. I was expecting it was Konstantin coming to say I did something wrong. It was Lareen coming out of her small room. I pulled the glowstone to see her, and she had on just a long shirt—a nightgown. She spoke, “Your clothes are clean.” She walked forward to point at the arrangement on the bed. Her oversized green dress gone, I could see her more clearly.

She had her light brown hair down and looked more attractive than I had expected. It was hard to tell someone’s age because everyone was so much shorter than I was accustomed to. Lareen was barely five foot three. I planned to follow Castile’s orders anyway and shook my head, clearing my impure thoughts.

“Thank you, I would like to get some sleep,” I muttered and rolled over. I was sure if Konstantin was here, he would yell at me for turning my back to a potential assailant.

Her soft voice came back, “Do you need anything to drink or eat, Eryk?”

I rolled back over to look at her. She had taken a step forward. “I am fine; just wake me for breakfast.” I waited, and she stood there and didn’t move. She looked expectantly at me. I came up with a dozen excuses to ignore her, the chief being I did not want to anger Castile. “Anything else?” I asked, ready to reject her.

She bit her lower lip, “Did you clean the tub? I mean, I know you did, but why?”

“Oh, that. Yeah, I took the bath, so it made sense that I was the one to clean up,” I immediately regretted saying that, as I did not want to have to clean up after myself. I added, “I am not used to having a servant. I will make sure to leave my mess behind from now on so you have something to do.” She smiled a little at my remarks.

“Well, you only did an adequate job anyway. I had to clean it again,” she said, grinning and taking another step toward the bed. Her features became clearer, and her nearness roused me.

I did not want to show her my body was betraying me, so I said, “Thank you. Sleep well tonight, and wake me for breakfast.” I rolled away from her and had to wait five minutes before I heard her door shut. If she had pressed further, I

might have caved like a sand castle to a wave. It seemed inevitable if she was going to be persistent every night, and we were staying here for months.

I needed to focus on something else. I pulled out my amulet and wore it. I needed some sleep, but I think I was close to my spell form. I entered the dreamscape and was immediately greeted by an excited Oscar. I should come here just for puppy therapy. The chair was still present, and I relaxed with the spell-form book and started studying.

About four hours later, I felt it lock into place. I rushed out of the dungeon entrance, exiting the dreamscape, to go and try out my new spell form.

Chapter 82: A Walk in the Woods

My room was still dark and quiet when I opened my eyes, and I brought out my glow stone. I quietly moved into the bathing room and barred the door. A strong, lemony scent was hanging in the room from Lareen's cleaning. Was the Empire aware of disinfectants? With magic, they probably knew about bacteria, maybe even viruses. I took out two more glowstones for added light.

I held out my hand and searched for the new spell form on my aether core. It took a moment, and I found it and pushed aether through it. A low pop sound, like someone clicking their tongue with their mouth closed, rang softly in the room. A disc of blurry blue air appeared in front of me. I guess Castile was wrong about it being invisible. The disc was a yard across and a hand width in thickness. That was all the measurements I could take before the disc of compressed air vanished without a sound.

I created the next disc and oriented it parallel to the ground. I counted this time and waited. It was roughly twelve seconds before whatever held the disc together lost cohesion. I tested this twice more and rotated the disc each time as I pushed aether through the spell form. The time the disc remained the same size each time. I was casting the disc through my hand and could place it in any orientation from my hand with a thought. I could not change the disc shape at all, though.

I then tried casting two discs at once. There were no issues, as it was anchored and independent once the disc was cast. One thing I could not do was dismiss the disc after it was cast. I had to wait for it to expire. In my estimation, each disc was taking a little over a unit of aether to cast, draining

my small aether pool, but I needed to figure out the utility of the compressed air barrier.

I pulled out a short sword and attacked the disc. Hitting the disc was like striking dense rubber. The sword stopped and rebounded very slightly. It took three full-force swings to break the disc before the twelve seconds expired. With less enthusiastic swings, it took five or even six hacks to break the disc.

Next, I tried a spear. I took a running start with a spear and tried to pierce it. The disc held, and I was impressed. The tip had stopped abruptly, and it was a little jarring, and I had to heal a sprain to my wrist. Two rushing attacks using my body weight did manage to break the spell form, as my second attack was only slowed momentarily. All my experiments had drained my aether, so I sat and waited, thinking of other tests I could do.

My next test was for an arrow. The arrow actually stuck into the wind barrier, looking like it was suspended in the air. I fired four more arrows quickly before the time elapsed, and the fifth broke the disc, and they all clattered to the floor. The disc could take a certain amount of disruption before failing.

I waited again for enough aether to cast a disc a foot off the ground. Then I stepped up onto it. It held my weight and lasted the entire twelve seconds. This would look amazing if someone did not know I was using magic. After another long wait, I tried to cast the disc from my foot instead of my hand. It was disorienting, like trying to write words upside down, but it worked. I had been worried about wearing boots, but the disc still manifested. I assumed it meant I could wear gloves as well and still create the wind barrier.

This spell form had a lot of utility, and although it was not quite as Castile had advertised, I was quite happy with my choice. I opened the bathroom door to find Lareen standing there in her nightgown. I was only wearing my trousers and boots. There was an awkward pause that I filled, "I was doing my morning training." I had been grunting and making a fair amount of noise in the bathroom. Her eyes narrowed slightly in skepticism, but she nodded and went about her duties, checking the latrine first, which was empty. I still had an aversion to someone cleaning up my shit for me.

"Breakfast will be in one hour," she announced. "If you will allow me, I wish to change for the day."

"Dismissed," I said uncertainly, and she nodded and left. I dressed myself as well. I was eager to tell Castile of my success with the spell form. Lareen

came out in the same bulky dark green dress, hiding her figure. I followed her to the dining room. About half the company was already here trying to eat as much as possible. I took the same seat I held at dinner last night and found Lareen bringing me a glass and a plate of food.

The plate had a portion of oatmeal blended with chunks of dried fruit and nuts. The rest of the plate had something like French toast with no sweetness to it. Just eggs soaked into bread and then baked down the table, according to Kolm, explaining the crunchy bread.

My glass was a very weak ale, probably watered down. Lareen asked me three times if there was anything else I wanted from the kitchen. I asked for bacon but just got fried ham steaks. Maybe they did not cure and smoke bacon. I did not know the process, but it could not be too difficult.

Castile, Delmar, and Adrian arrived as I was eating my third ham steak. The Duchess was not at breakfast. Castile sat beside me, and I leaned into her, "I imprinted the spell form last night." Castile nodded but did not show the excitement I had expected or the praise I was hoping for. I retreated back to my plate and ate the rest of my ham steak. It was not long before the entire company was eating.

The Duchess did not show up to breakfast, and Adrian and Delmar had their own private conversation across the table. Castile ate the oatmeal and cut up some apples for her breakfast, ignoring the egg-baked bread. Adrian spoke to Castile, "I think we are ready." Castile nodded, and Adrian stood. The table went silent as Adrian usually gave assignments.

"Well, it appears the Duchess is spoiling you men. Personal servants, anything you want for breakfast, individual rooms. We can not have you getting soft. We are going to be here for months," cheers broke Adrian's planned speech, and he waited for it to die down. "We have numerous tasks to get completed, including digging and placing eighty miles of markers." Everyone was silent. "We are also going to be training the province soldiers up to our standards," some boos rang down, and Adrian grinned. Legionnaires thought themselves superior to the regular army, city guard, and provincial soldiers.

Adrian waited for everyone to calm down, "Delmar, Brutus, Kolm, Blaze, and I will be staying in the Citadel to work with the soldiers." Boos echoed in the dining room as our two leaders took a job in this castle's comfort. He held up his hand, "Just to teach them discipline how to do their jobs. You will

eventually be training them with the spear and, later, the sword so they don't accidentally stab themselves. We will rotate men to supervise the training."

"Konstantin and Eryk are going to scout the lands around the Sobral city for the next two weeks," I audibly groaned. And some men chuckled at my misfortune. Konstantin was wearing a grin. "Castile and Felix will be working with the Duchess." A surprised Felix spit a little of his beer. "Everyone else will start on the markers by the road east of here. Two men from the Duchess and one agent from the Imperial Surveyors will supervise you."

Wylie commented, "Why not just have the plebians dig the holes? We can guard them while they do it."

Castile stood, "We could have them do it and finish in a month. Or we can do the work ourselves and finish in five months."

Benito asked, confusion in his voice, "So, isn't one month better?"

"Idiot!" Firth muttered, understanding the implications. "We get to make use of the Duchess' hospitality for that much longer."

Benito's eyes went wide, "I don't mind digging a few holes if we get to eat like this at every meal." Everyone laughed, but one or two of the others had been thinking the same as Benito.

Adrian finished, "You all will be leaving in an hour. Kolm to me." The men shoveled food into their mouths before leaving. Kolm was called over and sent out on a mission to find a leather worker to replace the missing pieces of armor among the company men. I sipped my ale and stared down the table at Konstantin, who stared back with a grin.

Castile stood and ordered, "Tell Konstantin of your new spell form, Eryk. He will help make it viable in combat." Then she was gone with a perplexed Felix in tow.

Konstantin soon stood over me, saying, "Let us go Eryk and get some camping gear. Make sure your storage space is empty. I will want to fill it with flora for the future alchemist."

I went to my room to pack my backpack with the standard legion gear. Lareen was standing by, waiting to assist, but I did not have anything for her to do. "Will you be gone long?" she asked as I finished.

“As long as Konstantin wants, I guess. I was told two weeks,” I told the young servant. She seemed disappointed as I left and met Konstantin in the courtyard. We circled out to the woodlands, and I asked, “Konstantin, is this safe? Just the two of us?”

“We will not go more than five miles from Sobral. Take the opportunity to learn as much as you can and get comfortable in the woodlands on your own. I will teach you to spot the serious dangers that should be avoided,” he said confidently.

“And what if we don’t avoid them?” I asked skeptically.

“We see which of us is the faster runner,” he laughed aloud at his joke. That did not make me feel any better about this training—or the fact Konstantin laughed, he never laughed.

We walked for a time before I revealed my secret, “Castile told me to let you know I have a new spell form.”

“Perfect! She told me you were working on something. What is it?” he asked, looking at me as we walked.

I created a barrier directly in front of him and had the satisfaction of him walking into it and falling flat on his ass. I just kept walking, smiling as I heard him scramble quickly to his feet. He spent time inspecting the air shield behind me. I had to slow my steps and wait for him to catch up. I was thinking what horrible things he would do to me, but I decided it had been worth it.

“Well, that is useful! Have you tested it?” Konstantin asked, intrigued and not angry. I nodded, “Well. I am certain I can come up with some things you have not tried yet.” I suddenly got the feeling the testing was not going to be pleasant.

The mission was just as Konstantin had said. We were out to get her flora. I was taught how to harvest a number of ingredients. Blood grass needed to be taken out slowly by the root. Blood grass was very common. Mandrake was not as easy. It needed to be dug up and was like a hairy carrot. Borage was a bush with red fruiting berries. The berries were the easiest thing we collected all day. The fresher they were, the more potent they would be for an alchemist.

Draffe was a pink flower and hard to find. Fireleaves was another pink flower that we found. Unfortunately, it was eaten by bugs. Konstantin said it was not used in healing brews but extremely valuable on its own since it was hard to find, and bugs consumed it almost immediately after bloom. One of these small flowering plants was worth almost an entire gold to the right alchemist. Konstantin did not know everything either. I would ask him about a plant here and there, and half the time, his response was, "Don't know. I suggest you don't touch it, or put it in your mouth." It was like he was talking down to me like a child.

I could tell we were zig-zagging as we moved away from Sobral. As we stopped for lunch, I asked, "How long are we going to be out here?"

"Until you fill up your space, Eryk," Konstantin muttered through chewing on a sugar weed. "Castile wants you ready to impress whatever alchemist the Duchess can find. The Duchess was right; any decent alchemist is not going to want to come to this backwater city."

We spent the rest of the day working on developing my herbalism talent. We were focused on seven plants that Konstantin knew could be used for making curatives. He also had us collect a few that he knew were rare but was not certain of their uses. My arms were scratched, and my nails clogged with dirt from the day's work, but the knowledge was rewarding. The box I kept for legion goods in my storage was already more than half full. It would not take long tomorrow to fill it.

The night was setting in, and we had ventured far from the worn paths. Konstantin had us stop, "We will not train tonight. There is no one to guard us. We are going to sleep in that tree," he pointed at an old gnarled tree with a massive dark green canopy.

I was happy when he pulled out a rope and looped it over a branch twenty feet up. "Sleeping in a tree means you can not run, but if you are alone and in a dangerous country, it is the best way to get sleep on the run." We climbed the tree and secured ourselves with rope at ninety degrees to each other on different branches.

Konstantin smirked, "This will be the worst night of rest you have ever gotten. Every time an animal passes underneath us, I want you to tap my shoulder and point it out."

"How am I supposed to get any sleep?" I asked as night was settling.

"You are not," he heaved a chuckle. He was chewing on his ration bar and sprinkling some of the mycoid powder below to mask our scent.

I was a little upset with his training, so I pulled out the loaf of warm bread I had taken from the kitchen yesterday and began eating. Konstantin was immediately aware of the delectable smell, and I chuckled, "You did tell me to empty my dimensional space." I ate the entire loaf slowly and happily. I was certain I would pay for not sharing tomorrow—but it was worth it.

Chapter 83: The Sisters

I was miserable most of the night. My back ached, and my legs kept falling asleep on the thick branch. The rope also dug into my ribs when I drifted off and did not maintain my balance. The nocturnal animals that passed under us were a constant parade. I pointed them out, raccoon, a pair of foxes, a giant beetle, and four giant weasels. The weasels had Konstantin on edge and had us remain still until they passed well out of sight. Their long, lanky bodies were seven to ten feet long.

After being sure they had passed, he said, "Giant weasels are not to be taken lightly. They must have a den around here and are probably the apex hunters in the area. I am guessing that was two parents and two young ones. If they caught you alone, they would each grab you and tear your body apart." As if prophetic a pitiful cry of an elk or deer could be heard a distance away. It was quickly silenced.

Konstantin listened and waited for a while before continuing in a whisper, "Their coats are extremely valuable to the right buyer, and they generally do not attack humans but are a menace to livestock. Their saliva is also deadly as it prevents blood from clotting." He finished his lecture, and the rest of the night was quiet. Konstantin assumed the weasels' scent trail had scared everything else away.

As the sun rose, we waited till mid-morning before descending, just in case the weasels were late getting back to their den. I was surprised the weasels had unnerved Konstantin. He admitted, "If I was in a group, I would not be so cautious. But alone against those four fast hunters? No, it would not have gone well." He then hedged his own statement, "Now, if it was just two of the critters. I could have handled that." He put on a crafty smile.

We started gathering plants and some mushrooms that sprouted overnight. He pointed out a purple berry, "Winterberry. It's very sweet, and they keep all winter, hence the name. If you want to have some with your breakfast, just make sure you chew them well and spit out the seeds."

I picked a few of the berries, which were hard. I squeezed one too hard, and it burst, covering my hand in a brilliant blue. I tried to wipe it off, but it was like ink and stained my hand. Konstantin looked both amused and disappointed.

"I guess this would have stained my teeth," I noted, weary of Konstantin.

"And your lips," he smiled. "A little payback for the bread and the introduction of your air barrier. They are nutritious but also make a great dye. Oh, do not look so sour, Eryk! The stain fades after a week or so. Or a simple alchemist solvent would work as well."

I grunted, showing my displeasure. We continued on task, but I took careful note of any possible shenanigans from Konstantin. Just before noon, I informed Konstantin, "My dimensional space is full. Should we head back?"

He arched his eyebrow, seemingly surprised, and nodded. As we walked back, he asked me questions about what I learned about my air shield. When I told him everything I had learned, he responded, "I admit that is one of the more impressive spell forms I have heard of, especially for a legionnaire. The fact it is a spell form means it takes you no time to cast it, unlike a true spell. It will serve as a barrier against most mage-ranged spells and infantry weapons. And you can overlap them! If it didn't have such a short duration, you would be unstoppable in combat. Show it to me again."

We paused in our walking, and I set the shield at eye level. Konstantin felt the air and moved slowly around it. "Remarkable. And you can stand on it?"

I cast another one two feet off the ground and hopped up. I jumped up and down like a kid on a bed. There was a very small spring effect. Konstantin asked, "How do you know where to stand?"

"The air is blurry blue. Wait, you don't see it?" I asked, perplexed.

"No, I can feel it and get the shape with my hands, but I see nothing. It is not unusual for mages to be able to cast spells only they can see," Konstantin motioned for me to cast it again. I did, and he quickly felt it out its shape and

climbed on it. He jumped like I did until it ended and landed smoothly on the ground.

“Well, we can practice with it. But I also suggest you find out how many in a row you can cast when your aether is full.” He drew his short sword. I sensed this was not going to be fun. In the end, it was a lesson filled with many suggestions. Konstantin thought the shield was defensive, offensive, and a great way to confuse an opponent’s movements since only I could see it.

Tactics like casting one eye level parallel to the ground to combat rushing opponents. Creating tripping hazards low to the ground. And his favorite was creating a box if I circled an opponent and had the aether to spare. We were sweating heavily, and I was out of aether when Konstantin halted the practice. “You need a lot more practice, but I think you could join the Hounds if you wish.” His statement hung in the air.

It sounded like a probing question, and I replied after a long pause, “I am fine in Castile’s company. As long as we are not sent to die in a siege again.”

Konstantin gave a horse laugh, “That was a tight one, agreed.” He did not mention the Hounds again, “Now, as we head back to the city, I want you to give me three more ways you can use your new air disc outside of combat.”

I came up with barring a door, keeping the rain off of me, and using it as a platform to jump higher. Konstantin considered each, “The door is a good idea. I hadn’t thought of that one. The rain shield, not so much, Eryk. It only lasts a dozen heartbeats. It is a waste of your small aether pool. The jumping platform is good, though. Scaling a wall or descending out a window. Keep thinking and experimenting. The best warriors have solutions before the problems present themselves.”

We entered the city of Sobral, and Konstantin led us to a herbalist shop. “I am going to leave you here to sell your harvest.”

“I thought we were gathering them for the alchemist the Duchess was hiring?” I asked confused.

“Oh, you are—just not this batch. Once you sell them, give the coin to Castile or Adrian for the company coffers,” Konstantin said, waving a hand in the air as he walked away.

“How do I know what a fair price is?” I barked at his retreating back.

“Figure it out,” he yelled back and was gone to do his own business.

I entered the shop to find two older women at the back, crushing dry herbs in a mortar and pestle. I approached them, and they gave my legion armor, a narrow appraisal with their eyes, “What brings you here, legion boy?”

The other woman eyed me up and down and suggestively said, “Need an ointment for the crotch crickets?”

The pair were not being malicious; they were just old women talking playfully to the younger generation. “I am here to sell.” They had skeptical looks in regard to my appearance—either from my age or armor. I moved to an open table and dumped the contents on the table from my space. They were suddenly more interested and began sorting through the pile of fungi and flora, mumbling about magic being wasted on the youth.

I wandered the shop as they worked, and there were a number of jars of ointments and tinctures and bags of powders. “Are you two young women alchemists?” I asked, picking up something labeled red aloe and mint oil.

The one on the left chortled, “No boy. We might know as much as an alchemist about herbs, but we both lack any control over our aether cores to infuse potions to activate the ingredients. All of our concoctions are non-magical in nature.”

The other woman added, “But sometimes our products are just as good as an alchemist.” They nodded together, and I could see the resemblance.

“Are you sisters?” I asked, trying to be friendly.

“We are, Lyla and my sister Ria, at your service, boy.” They nodded in unison.

“I am Eryk,” I bowed, and the old women giggled at my formality.

Ria took over the conversation, “We are willing to purchase these,” she indicated half the table. “For twelve silver and 40 copper. These are either too damaged or just not useful to us. These she pointed, and two yellow bundles of flowers and a stack of winterberries have value but not to us.”

I did not know if their offer was fair, so I tried to haggle, “Twenty, and you tell me what I did wrong in harvesting the damaged ones.”

Lyla narrowed her eyes, sizing me up, “Sixteen, and we will charge you four silver for an education.”

I laughed as she had offered me less, “I guess you are not interested.” I moved to gather up my harvest.

Ria took hold of my wrist softly to stop me, “Sixteen silver, and we will take an hour to talk with you and answer your questions.”

The next two hours were extremely informative as the two older women liked to talk—and flirt with me. I learned about all the flora and fungi I had harvested, their uses, and their preparation for preservation. They explained what I did wrong in my harvesting, and I now had some ammunition to correct Konstantin. I moved the valuable yellow flowers and berries into my space. I had a list of what the older woman would want in the local woods and what they thought an alchemist would want as well. They had been extremely helpful, and I think they enjoyed talking with me.

I left the herbalist with sixteen small silver coins. It was not a bad haul for two days’ work. It was three times what a normal legionnaire would make in a week. I made my way happily back to the Citadel to find Castile. Castile was in the dining room with the Duchess and Felix. Felix was taking notes, and I walked behind him. He had incredible penmanship and was drafting letters for the two women. Castile looked up, waiting.

“I made the company sixteen silver, harvesting in the woods.” I placed the coins proudly on the table.

She looked up at me and then at the coin, “You can give the coin to Delmar. Did your training with Konstantin go well?”

“I made significant progress,” I replied and relaxed as it appeared I was seeking her approval and praise for my efforts and would not get it.

“Good. We are sending out letters to alchemists registered with the Empire. Continue to practice your gathering skills. When we get a bite, I will likely send you and Adrian to convince them to relocate to Sobral.” Castile explained her plan. So that was what Felix was writing. I swept up the small amount of coin and retreated to my room.

I had just stripped off my armor when Delmar knocked. He entered, said I had done good work, took the sixteen silver, and left. I turned on the tub water to

find it was cold. I knocked on Lareen's door, but she did not answer. I filled the tub with cold water and took a cold bath. Once clean, I fell asleep on the bed in my trousers. Konstantin had kept me up all last night, and sleeping came easy.

Chapter 84: Castile's Immodesty

My dreams started pleasant enough but did not end that way. I was riding a giant weasel into battle. The soft fur and rhythmic ripples on its body beneath me as it ran across the field were powerful, invigorating, and mesmerizing. As we ran through the woods, I saw Konstantin hanging from a tree tangled in rope and trying to extract himself. I laughed at him as I raced past. After seeing Konstantin, things quickly went downhill.

I soon found myself fighting a dozen elven archers underneath the aqueduct in Macha. My weasel mount was mewing and squeaked in pain as it was incapacitated with a dozen arrows. I desperately tried erecting an air shield to hold off their assault and cursing as I had not practiced enough and kept placing it in the wrong spot. The archers kept yelling in their language that they wanted their comrade back. Not the elf rider, but the woodsman scout still in my dimensional closet.

Then Konstantin was on the aqueduct above me, not to help but to give me directions on how I should be fighting when outnumbered. I tried to run while swearing at Konstantin and took an arrow to the back. I woke in a sweat.

Lareen was standing over me at my bedside in her nightshirt. I jerked back in surprise, "Eryk, are you well? Should I get a healer?"

I cleared my head and wiped the sweat from my face on the sheets, "I am fine." I regained myself quickly, not liking I had been found so vulnerable. The concern on her face was welcome, and I suddenly longed to be able to talk with my parents about my problems. I brushed it off and stood on the bed's other side, away from Lareen. "When is breakfast?"

"Sunrise is not for three hours. Do you wish for me to bring you something from the kitchens?" She asked conciliatorily.

“Please. Can you have them make me an omelet with sharp cheese, diced sausage, and green onion?” I asked, yearning for some comfort food. Growing up, we had chickens, and my mother made the best omelets.

“What is an omelet?” She asked, confused.

“It is something from my homeland,” I replied and then told her how it was made.

I dressed and locked myself in the bathroom. I then practiced my sword forms, incorporating my air shields until I ran out of aether. I exited the bathroom expecting to find Lareen with my breakfast, but she had not returned from the kitchens. I started doing some static stretches to relax. I had dated a yoga fanatic and health nut for a short time, and to placate her, I had joined her in the mornings. Back then, I was going through the motions to ensure she would stay the night, and now, it was relaxing. Maybe it was more relaxing that she was not here constantly correcting me.

I was fitter now, and stretching my aching muscles felt good rather than healing them with aether. Lareen entered with a plate and pitcher while I was in the cobra pose. She looked at me strangely, then explained her lateness. “I am sorry they burned their first attempt, and I made them cook it again.” She looked around the room. “Do you want me to bring a table and chair into your room? Will you be taking meals here often?”

I looked around at the spartan room. “Yes, two chairs and a small table. I will take some meals here, and when I do, I would like you to join me.” She smirked a smile briefly and then hid it and nodded happily.

I sat on the bed and ate my overcooked omelet. “Next time, tell the cooks to add a cream splash and whip the eggs together. They cooked this too long, and it is too dry and crunchy.”

Lareen looked a little upset and blurted, “The first one was burnt...I told them to cook it again.”

I held up my fork, “It is fine. I have had worse.” I continued eating while she just stood there. She filled a glass from the pitcher and handed it to me, taking the empty plate. The pitcher had a very weak wine, which I guess could be called grape juice. I started dressing, and Lareen rushed into her room to change into her dress. I was done well before her and was already walking down the hallway. Maybe I could wake Konstantin like he liked to wake me? I

paused at two doors across from each other and realized I did not know which was his.

Both doors were blue tace wood, so I could not hear anything on the other side. I guessed he would have chosen the room facing the gardens and tried the door handle. It figures that it was locked. Lareen was fixing her hair back as she caught me in the corridor, "Is this Konstantin's room?" She nodded, finishing her hair. "Do you have the key?"

"No, only the Citadel steward and Marie, the servant assigned to him, do," she said regretfully since she was not able to help.

"What about Castile's room? Can you show me where it is?" I asked.

"It is in the Duchess' wing of the Citadel. I can show you," she smiled at being able to help. I followed her down some stairs and into another wing. The hallway had more furnishings, but it was still fairly sparse. She stopped and indicated the door, and I was about to knock when the door swung open.

A middle-aged male servant with messy black hair was standing there. I was not sure who was more shocked, me or him. When he opened the door, the distinct smell of sex hit me as warm air rushed out of the room. Castile was on the bed inside the room, her lower body under covers but naked from the waist up. A modest fire was burning in her fireplace. There was dead silence as no one moved or spoke. Then Castile, who made no effort to cover her chest, said, "Breakfast, Alder?" The servant ran off to the kitchen at the reminder.

Castile stood, still naked, and I was too shocked to do anything but stare. Nudity was not a taboo in the Telhian Empire, but it felt wrong. I averted my eyes as soon as she started dressing, "Yes, Eryk. You are here quite early. Sunrise is not for another hour." Her tone held a tinge of mirth at my embarrassment. I think she was showing off her body intentionally.

"Sorry. I just...I wasn't sure what I should do today." It sounded lame to visit her before dawn just to get orders, so I added, "And thought we could start working on another spell form for me."

Castile stopped dressing, still somewhat exposed, and she was hiding a smile at my shyness. Lareen stirred behind me, and I suddenly felt like a child. I looked up and met Castile's eyes. I just focused on her eyes, nothing else. After a pause and a small smirk, Castile pulled over a blue shirt to cover

herself completely before speaking, “Not something to be discussed in present company. Leave us,” she said firmly at Lareen.

Lareen scurried away, shutting the door behind her. I was sure the Duchess was going to know I was learning a new spell form before too long and kicked myself for mentioning it. Spell forms were not uncommon, and Castile was smart not to let the servant know what I was specifically working on.

I moved to sit by a large window. The view had the gardens below, and at least Castile had curtains in her room that could be drawn for privacy. A table, covered in stacks of papers, was here. Castile sat across from me and moved the papers, “We are trying to develop revenue streams for the Duchess. Her province does not have much. The only thing we came up with was opening the trade road,” she frowned at the idea of our company clearing the dire wolves and other dangers. “It would add Sobral as a merchant stop but still not turn the tide of her financial destitution.”

I sat there quietly, still uneasy about seeing her naked. Castile seemed content to ignore my intrusion and, seeing her naked, and moved the conversation forward, “Eryk, how has your training with your new spell form come?”

I eagerly created a disc above the table to change the focus and put a stack of papers on it. Castile felt the edges out, and the disc popped before the twelve seconds. My mouth hung open in surprise. Castile smirked, “Counterspell, remember? I just disrupted the aetheric weave holding the air together. It is a good spell form. Can it support your weight?”

I nodded confidently, “Yes. I can stand on it, and I have been practicing using it in combat with Konstantin’s help.”

“Good! Find out how much weight it can support. It should be around five hundred pounds, but it depends on the strength of your protection affinity. Are you ready for a time spell form?” Castile asked seriously.

“Yes, what are my options?” I asked, relaxing in my chair.

Castile smirked and stood with purpose. She went and retrieved a tome from a chest that was locked. She walked the book to me and said, “There are three standard volumes for each spell form for each affinity at the Telhian Mage College. The Duchess has a remarkable library, and all three time

affinities are bound into this one rare tome. She is unaware I am borrowing this one, so keep it hidden in your space when not studying.”

“Thank you,” I pulled the book closer and opened it to an index. My Latin was much improved, and I quickly read off the spell forms.

Time Affinity Lesser Spell Forms

Hasten Mind

Seize Momentum

Echo in Time

Compress Sleep

Time Affinity Major Spell Forms

Hasten Self

Slow Aging

Age Target

Probable Future

Time Apex Major Spell Forms

Slow Bubble

Flashback

Ageless

Stasis

Castile explained, “There are more time spell forms out there, but these were the most utilized a hundred years ago when the book was copied. Time is a very rare affinity to have and you are lucky this compendium was in the library. The lesser spell forms are for affinities between ten and twenty-five. The majors are for twenty-five to forty. And the apex forms are from forty to seventy.”

She did not ask which range I fell into. Based on my protection spell form, she was smart enough deduce that I could at least add a major spell form for the time affinity. There might be something stronger out there for my ninety affinity in time, but I could not access it with this reference book.

I paged through for a few moments, and Castile announced, “Learn this on your own, and do not share it with anyone. You should store it before Alder returns with my breakfast.” I nodded in understanding, closed the book, and moved it to my dimensional space.

There was a brief silence before I intoned, “Thank you for preparing me for—life after the legion,” I hedged. Castile gave a curt nod, but I sensed maybe something else there as well. Maybe she was planning on fleeing the Empire, and I was going to be her escort.

I turned the conversation away from the topic of the Empire, “What does Konstantin suspect of me?”

Castile laughed, almost musically, “A young man with too much potential to waste it. He talks about you like you are his own son. He believes you are from some backwater village on the edge of the Duchy of Tsinga and awed at city life. You are lucky he knows very little of the Duchy. He used to teach the history of the Telhian Empire. Did you know that?”

“No, he never told me,” I said, interested in learning more about the man.

“He knows more about the emergence and formation of the Telhian Empire than anyone. He taught a truth that a duke didn’t like about his ancestor and ended up in a cell. He was acquitted at trial, but no one would hire him as a teacher after that. He eventually chose to serve as a legionnaire,” Castile explained Konstantin’s fate in three sentences.

“Which duke?” I asked, thinking it was Octavian, and that was why he supported Castile.

Castile was holding back a smile, “Duke Soren. Duke Soren had an accident a few years into Konstantin’s service while he was with the Hounds.” I wanted to ask but didn’t need to, as Castile continued. “He passed questioning by the Imperial Truthseekers.” Castile’s slight smile told me it did not give her much assurance that Konstantin was not involved somehow. I already knew Konstantin was dangerous, but if he could orchestrate a Duke’s death, doubly so.

A knock came at the door, and Castile allowed her male servant to enter. Alder cleared the table and served Castile a breakfast of sliced fruit with a small side of boiled oats covered in black syrup. Maybe chocolate? He also had a pot of hot mushroom tea. As Castile ate, she gave me orders, "You are to continue gathering herbs outside the city. Konstantin is going to join the men digging the markers. I need him to scout the woods as they move deeper into the forest. Sell what you can in the city, and let me know when the market is saturated. There is some demand, so it should be weeks."

"So, I am on my own? No supervision?" I also wanted to say there would be no partner if I was attacked. She nodded, and maybe being with Konstantin was not so bad. He was a formidable warrior, and I felt safe under his care. Maybe Castile was seeing if I would try to run. I was given the opportunity, and it was at the forefront of my thoughts at this moment.

"Do not travel too far from the city and return before sunset," Castile added, sipping her hot tea with satisfaction.

I stood, "Do you want me to give the coin I make to Delmar?"

Castile arched an eyebrow and thought for a moment. She picked up a sheet that clearly had notes on what I earned from my harvest, "Thirty silver a week. Anything earned beyond that you can keep, Eryk." She held up the sheet, "Your week started yesterday, and the sixteen silver coin counts. Ask the sisters where else you can sell the bounty of the woods in the city."

"How did you know about the sisters?" I asked, and Castile smirked. I just shook my head and figured she had been checking in on me with her all-seeing-eye. She probably wanted to be sure I was being honest when I turned in the coin.

I left Castile's room and headed back to my room. As I passed Konstantin's door, he stepped into the hallway. "Eryk, I am only going to be with you for the morning. After, I will be heading to help with the survey markers."

"I just talked with Castile, and she told me," Konstantin looked slightly surprised and amused, realizing what time it was. I decided to sway his suspicions, "She was occupied with her servant but spent some time talking with me."

He immediately understood. “Good, she needed some stress relief. You should do the same.” You have to be the tightest-wound legionnaire in the company.

“But Castile said...” I started to say.

Konstantin shook his head, disappointed, “You need to listen to orders more carefully. She said not to force or abuse the servants. If they are willing...” He paused before continuing, “If you are too bashful or your servant is unwilling, join Firth at the Nasty Nymph. I will be ready after breakfast, and we can review everything I taught in hopes you do not do anything stupid to get yourself killed. It would not please me after all the effort I have gone through in training you.” Konstantin walked arrogantly down the hallway, leaving me with a lot to think about.

Chapter 85: Goliath

Konstantin spent the morning walking with me through the northern woods. “The only large predator tracks were the giant weasels. You should be fine if you stay in my prescribed area.” He set some boundaries he thought I should not go past, about four miles from the northern walls of the Citadel. Then he left me.

I thought it was a ruse, so I was constantly on high alert, thinking Konstantin may be shadowing me. I started gathering some of the easy-to-find red mushrooms first. They were in season, and the sisters said they bloomed overnight and needed to be harvested within two days. If the gills underneath were black, they had already released their spores, making them useless. The mushrooms served as the base for the simple healing salve that was used to close wounds.

Next, I focused on the blood grass. Not only did I need to make sure to get the roots, but I also needed to not damage the leaves at all, or they were useless. According to the sisters, they oozed a runny red sap if the leaves were damaged. This sap was stored in the roots and needed to be fresh for the alchemist. Not damaging the roots was tricky, and storing the dirt with the plant was easier.

I continued digging, cutting, and harvesting well into the afternoon. I was near one of the well-trodden paths when the largest man I had ever seen was

walking toward me with a deer on his shoulders. I stood up from behind a berry bush, and he paused. "Legionnaire," he eventually said in a neutral greeting with a small nod. His voice was deep to go with his massive frame. He stood over seven feet easily, and his gray skin told me he was likely not human. He slowly scanned the woods around him, looking for others.

He did not pose as threatening. I cautiously nodded in greeting, "My name is Eryk, and I am out here harvesting herbs and shrooms."

His eyebrow arched, while his crystal green eyes quickly observed that I had nothing to carry them in. I reached down behind a bush, and he tensed. I pulled the entire crate from my dimensional space, revealed it, and tilted it toward him to show the contents. He nodded slowly and dropped the deer on the ground with a thud. He wore mostly medium-brown leather clothing. He had a stained club at his waist and a quiver with six thick arrows. A large unstrung bow was on his back. "I mean no harm, legionnaire, unless you intend harm to me. I am retrieving my writ to hunt and trade." His deep voice echoed in the woods.

I watched him carefully as he went to one of his pouches and retrieved a half sheet of worn parchment. He extended his arm, expecting me to take it. I carefully took the paper and stepped back. I read it while keeping my vision trained on him. The paper said the goliath, known as Maveith, was permitted to hunt and trade within the Sobral city woodlands. It had an official wax stamp that was now cracked and chipping. I noticed the date was fifteen years ago.

I looked up at the man, who looked larger every second, "This is over fifteen years old."

In his deep voice, he responded, "It has no date of termination."

I nodded and asked, "I thought the Telhians did not allow other races to live in the Empire?"

He cocked his bald head like a dog, "Is that so, legionarie. Your odd accent tells me you were not raised within the Empire."

"A forced conscript," I admitted. "But my mage company will be working the woodlands for the next six months." I felt it prudent to let him know I worked for a mage. I carefully handed the parchment back to him.

“He cocked his head again, “I served the mage that lived in the Citadel for a time. We had an agreement before his passing,” he held up the parchment for a moment before returning it to his pouch. “All the wardens have the same agreement.”

“There are more of you?” I asked a little loudly, looking deep into the woods.

The giant gray-skinned man bellowed a massive laugh, “No legionnaire, there is only one Maveith. The other three men are humans like yourself.”

“Does the new Duchess know you are out here?” I asked the giant man.

“New Duchess? In Sobral City? I heard rumors from the city folk I trade with, but I can not confirm she knows of me. After the unpleasantness with the prior Baron, I prefer not to make myself known. Though, now it appears I have no other choice.” He heaved a heavy sigh.

I relaxed slightly, “What happened with the Baron?”

His gray-skin face hardened some, “He demanded half of all I hunted and foraged. Also, I was prohibited from selling or trading to any city folk.”

“I heard the Baron was a prick. What is a goliath?” I asked the man, indicating his race on his writ.

He was confused. “Prick? Like thorn? Yes, he could be described as a thorn.” The man was not stupid as he puzzled out my slang quickly. His voice got deeper as he continued, “Goliaths are from Stone Mountain Island. We live there and rarely travel. And you will ask, why am I here? Because I have chosen to be here, legionnaire.” His tone told me he did not want me to ask further questions on the topic.

“I will have to report your presence to my commander and the Duchess,” I added, ready to react if he became agitated. I could remove his heart in less than a breath.

The giant man cocked his head, considering, “Perhaps it is best that I return with you, and you make introductions for me if it must be done?” His face soured slightly, and he turned to the deer. “I can make this kill as an offering to the Duchess and see if she will honor my writ as it is written.”

I looked down at my crate and then at the goliath. He misunderstood, "I can carry your load, legionnaire. That way, I can not surprise you with an attack. Caution is wise around strangers." There was humor in his deep tone as if he did not consider me a threat.

"Fine, you can lead the way," I responded. He balanced the deer on his shoulders and picked up the crate that was small in his hands. After we walked for a while, I asked, "What are the dangers in these woods?"

The goliath replied immediately, "There are two giant weasel dens in the northeast. They mostly hunt at night. An ogre might wander into the region every year or so, and the wardens will band together to remove it." He thought for a moment, "Ten years ago, there was an active and aggressive treant. It has since gone into hibernation and is best left undisturbed."

"Why haven't the wardens taken care of the weasels?" I asked.

"Balance legionnaire. The weasels hunt the weak, sickly animals and keep the predators in check by defending their territory. If their population expands to over a dozen, we may meet and decide to eliminate a pair in the next breeding season." The goliath patiently explained.

The walls of the rear of the Citadel came into view. I waved at the only spotter in the rear tower. He must be familiar with the goliath as he did not sound an alarm. "Do you frequently travel to the city?"

"I usually trade with locals over there. Just one day a week," he pointed to a tree clearing with an old crumbling stone structure. The area was visible from the Citadel's archer's perch in the tower, so they had probably seen the goliath trade every week. So why wasn't the Duchess already aware?

When we reached the gate, the two guards were in clean uniforms and standing at attention. "Halt legionnaire. The half-giant is not allowed inside the Citadel grounds." The man gripped his spear tightly and moved to a readiness footing.

"I see you are being trained. Maveith here," I inclined my head to the goliath, "Is a goliath and not half-giant. He is here to speak with the Duchess."

The guard looked at his companion and seemed unsure. He pulled out his whistle and blew two times in low key. The two guards from the inner bailey

came out, followed by Adrian. Adrian's face on seeing the goliath was priceless. Shock, curiosity, and apprehension were playing on it.

I spoke as no one else seemed able to for the moment, "Adrian, this is Maveith. He served as a warden in the woods for the mage that used to govern from the Citadel. He hopes to renew his writ with the Duchess."

Maveith intoned deeply with agitation, "My writ has no expiration, legionnaire."

"This is Adrian, one of the leaders of my mage company. I am sure he can handle your request," I smiled at Adrian. Maveith put down the crate with my harvest.

Adrian rolled his eyes, "You two," he pointed at two guards with spears. "Flank the guest and follow me." He looked at me, a slight twinkle in his eye, "On your own for a single day and already bringing home strays, Eryk." He looked at my harvest, "Take care of that, and then find me in the Citadel. I will bring Maveith to Castile and the Duchess to review his writ."

I picked up my crate and went to visit the sisters. I only got three silver for half a day's work, but it was something. The sisters also told me of the other places in the city that would purchase certain things from the woods. I walked slowly back to the Citadel, stopping for a quick meal at a tavern. I got many looks from being in legion armor, and no one talked to me beyond ordering the food. I returned to the Citadel, and finding the group did not take long. They were in the dining hall with Maveith seated on a bench since a chair was too small. Castile, Adrian, and Duchess Veronica were in chairs.

"Is this your scout that brought the goliath to my Citadel?" The Duchess asked.

Castile responded, "Yes, this is my porter and scout, Eryk." The Duchess took me in twice before returning her gaze to the others. I wondered if Lareen had already told her about me learning a new spell form.

The Duchess was considering something, and they waited while she thought, "I agree that the terms are fair. I will want the other wardens to swear to me." Maveith intoned something in a strange language, and the Duchess nodded. She stood and left the table.

Castile had a small smirk after the large doors were shut, "Maveith, you and your fellow wardens will be reporting to Konstantin and Eryk here. Your writ

remains valid, and your coin will be three silver a week.” The goliath relaxed, and the bench groaned under his weight.

She looked at me, “Eryk, this warden, and the others are in the employ of the Duchess now. They will only be reporting what happens in the woods north of the Citadel and are not expected to fight. Go with Maveith, and he will introduce you to the other wardens. Make sure they understand their obligations.”

Maveith stood and intoned, “Come, legionnaire, I will host you tonight in my cabin.”

“My name is Eryk,” I replied to the large gray-skinned. “Or do you prefer I call you Goliath?”

“Call me what you will,” he said, unconcerned. “I still have my daily chores to finish before nightfall and do not wish to linger in your human city.”

I was a little worried about being sent away with an unknown—monstrosity. I looked at Castile a little pleadingly, “What if the goliath decides he is hungry and eats me in my sleep?”

Maveith chuckled at my words, “Don’t worry, legionnaire, human flesh tastes bitter to me.”

Castile ended the humorous argument, “Goliaths are known to be an honorable people, Eryk. I doubt he has ever even tried the flesh of a human.”

Maveith grumbled a deep laugh, “Never assume something, mage.” I think he was joking and just saying that to needle me.

Adrian finally spoke, hiding his own grin, “We will avenge you if you fall, Eryk.” But he was smiling, too, at my discomfort. I guess I missed the conversation they had before I arrived, where the trust had been established. “Eryk, take Maveith to the storeroom. He is allowed to take what he can carry as part of his bonus.”

“I am assuming he can carry a lot?” I said, looking at the massive humanoid. “And where is the storeroom?”

They called a servant to bring us there. I was a little surprised to be sent off with a strange goliath. I wished I had had some time to ask why to Adrian or

Castile. As we walked to the storeroom, “Do not worry, legionnaire. I will keep you from harm in the scary woods.”

“Who is going to protect you from me?” I replied off-handedly. He just laughed, scaring the servant with his baritone.

“I like you, legionnaire. We are going to have fun,” he said as we descended stone steps. He barely cleared the doorway. The storeroom was full of just foodstuffs. Maveith took a small cask of cooking oil, two large bags of flour, four racks of salted ribs, and a large bag of dried peppercorns. He seemed satisfied even though he could carry more.

“Did you trade the deer for these supplies?” I asked as we left.

“Mostly. That and the promise to help serve as the forerunner for your company placing the markers. I also have to convince the other wardens to help, and that is why you are coming.” The large man said as we left the Citadel gates.

We walked in silence for a time as the goliath tried to get his awkward burden comfortable. I could have carried it all for him, but presently, I thought it wise to continue to let him underestimate me. After an hour, we finally did start talking....

Chapter 86: The Wardens

As we walked, Maveith asked, “Are you any good with your pokers, legionnaire?”

The goliath pointed at my spear and sword while a club the size of my leg swung on his hip. Dried blood was evident on it. I downplayed my skill, “Decent enough. I have only been learning for the last six months.”

“Well, do not worry. I will protect you out here. You can be my junior. That is like Kid Brother among my people. We protect those of our people who can not protect themselves,” he replied with sincerity or maybe humor. It was hard to tell because of his deep voice.

I nodded, not taking the bait to argue with him. I queried his skills, “Are you familiar with the local flora and fungi?”

The large man's deep voice intoned, "Just the edible ones and some of the ones that prevent infection."

We spent the next hour talking about and pointing out different flora and fungi, making slow progress toward his home. I learned a little about the local edibles, and he learned some of the more valuable ones he could sell in the city. That was something new for Maveith. He was going to be allowed to enter the city and freely trade with the people. It was not so much a concession but a request by Castile and the Duchess. The Duchess wanted it known that the goliath was under her rule. I assumed it was for the intimidation factor.

We finally reached the goliath's home. A small clearing held a herb garden, and tanning hides of two elk and a deer were stretched on a rack. A small shack made of stone was in the back, and he pointed to it, "That is my smoker shack for preserving meat. I just finished a batch of elk meat." He pointed at his unique cabin. "That is home."

It looked like he had built a ten-foot-wide cabin between two massive boulders. It was not very tall either, the wood shingle roof only coming up to my chin and extending back about fifteen feet. The entire structure was just ten by fifteen. Maveith was waiting for my reaction, so I gave him one, "Impressive." He started laughing in deep, belching chuckles.

He walked to the doorway and opened it. It showed stairs going down into a large, well-lit room. I followed him down. A dozen fist-sized glow stones were embedded in the stone walls. But the walls were further back than expected. The room was too large. He waited again for my reaction. "Did you carve your cabin into the boulders?" I asked, figuring out the size was maybe thirty by thirty feet.

"With my own two hands over the course of two years. Besides the other wardens, you are only the third person I have invited in, legionnaire," he said congenially.

"Thank you for your hospitality and the honor, goliath." I took in the large room. Half the room had stone tables and chairs, which appeared to be his work area. The other half was his kitchen and larder with drying herbs and meats. Two archways in the back were dark, and I assumed they went to other rooms. The dwelling was dry and smelled earthy.

Mavaith went to the kitchen area to unload his burden. "I will begin the meal. Those buckets over there need to be filled by the stream we passed coming in. Filling the tub over the stove should only take you three trips." I thought it was an invitation to do his chores for him, but I didn't protest. Each bucket was maybe six gallons, and there was even a yoke to carry them on my shoulders. I made the first trip to the wide stream, which had a number of small fish visible from the shore.

When I returned, Maveith was cooking wild onions and potatoes with one of the large slabs of bacon he had taken. "Are you going to cook that entire slab tonight?" I asked, curious as it was easily twenty pounds.

"Dinner and breakfast, yes. Giant boar is hard to find locally, and this belly meat will be a treat," his deep voice intoned as he was focused on the meal preparation.

I finished filling his basin by the stove, which he used firewood to heat. A draft hole in the stone took the steam and cooking smoke away from the room, but soon, the room heated up, and I was sweating. He cut the bacon into square chunks, seared them, stored the fat in a container, and then added the crispy chunks to a thick onion and potato soup. He presented me with a bowl of the meal. The bowl was as large as my head, and we sat at one of the stone tables.

Maveith hunched over his stone bowl while he shoveled the meal into his mouth, moaning in delight with each spoonful. I tried the soup, but he had been a little too generous with the ground peppercorns he had just acquired. The bacon chunks were still crunchy. The bowl I was eating from was polished stone, as was the spoon. I looked around the room; everything was made from stone except a small part of the ceiling and the wall with the door entry. The walls were smooth, not rough like they had been mined. Maveith finished his bowl and let out a long, contented belch. He went and retrieved a second bowl and sat down eating more slowly this time.

Curious, I asked, "Can you shape stone?" I held up my spoon as evidence.

He nodded and finished swallowing. "I can, just with my hands and not for long. I do not have very much aether." He pointed at the glow stones in the ceiling, "I made those from a single glowstone. I only need to charge them once a week."

Everything I saw now made some sense. He had literally carved his home out of the rocks with his bare hands. I finished my bowl, swallowing the peppery soup, and he finished his second. I asked, "So, where am I going to sleep?"

"You are going to share my bed, legionnaire," he said so confidently that I thought he was serious. He broke into a bellowing laughter a moment later. I was sure I had made a face of unease. "Come, I will show you the guest room," he intoned, still laughing.

I followed him into the passage on the right, and he took one of the glow stones from the ceiling as he passed. The short corridor ended in a rectangular room lined with shelves. Most contained rolled-up leather hides, but several sealed stone jars were marked in strange letters. There was an alcove about two feet off the floor with two large weasel hides. "I don't have many guests, but you should be comfortable. My sleeping room is adjacent, and if you get scared, legionnaire, you can crawl in with me," he chuckled, thinking he was being funny. "Rest as I still have a number of things to finish this evening."

I waved my hand to dismiss him, and he walked out. I stripped off my legion armor but kept my helmet close by. There was no door to my room for privacy, but that did not matter. The pelt of the weasel was incredibly soft. It has a silky smoothness, and I glided easily on them as I slid between them. I could not believe I was here tonight instead of at the Citadel in my room being attended to by Lareen. Did anyone even tell her where I had gone? I took out my griffin down pillow and got comfortable.

I took out the time affinity book and carefully reviewed each page. Then I took my amulet and went into the dreamscape. I recreated the book while Oscar was begging for attention. It looked correct. Now, I could return the book to the Duchess' library and still be able to study the spell form once I decided on one. I filled the shelf in the entry room with all the books I owned since I had paged through them all at one point in time. And I tried to add a book from Earth as an experiment.

I laughed as *The Hobbit* was added to my collection. I took the book and paged through it. Even though I had read the book twice in my life, I doubted I remembered everything I had read, but it looked complete and even had the same paper smell and feel I remembered. I put it on the shelf.

I decided I needed some practice fighting monsters. I spent some time fighting the ankhegs with my new air barrier spell form. The acid spray they had could

be diverted with two stacked shields. I just needed to be careful not to step in the puddles until after the acid lost its potency. I froze the entire room whenever I was about to take an injury. I was still uncertain how death worked in the amulet. Maybe the Duchess' library had a reference book for the dungeon artifact. I lost three times and reset the entire encounter each time, starting from the beginning.

My biggest asset was the air shield. I could cast it and prevent the giant bug from turning, giving me time to damage its flanks. Oscar watched me try different tactics, patiently wagging his cropped tail, waiting for his turn to play with me. The fourth encounter was my first serious injury. My leg had been crushed before I paused time, but it did not hurt until I wanted it to. The pain was intense, but with just a thought, my leg was healed, and the pain was gone. I controlled everything in the dreamscape.

I played a few minutes with Oscar before leaving and told him I would be back. I had been inside for maybe four hours. On leaving, the intense headache hit me, and I moaned into the fur. I didn't understand. The last time I used the amulet to learn the air barrier spell form, I had not felt anything when I left the dreamscape. What was different?

I had created items that were not part of the dreamscape—all the new books. Maybe the amulet pulled the knowledge from my head, and that caused this pressing migraine. It was an interesting observation, and I would experiment to confirm it. Would I get the same migraine if I only fought and reset the monsters? What about the Konstantin construct I created and dismissed? Would he still cause mental fatigue if I summoned him, or would the amulet remember him?

The weasel pelt had made me sweat, so I removed a canteen of water and drank it. I could hear Maveith snoring loudly in the other room. It was muted by the stone but still annoying. My headache made sleeping hard, so I took an oblivion pill and drifted off.

"Wake up, legionnaire! We have a long day ahead," Maveith said in a deep voice, breaking a rather nice dreamless sleep.

My head was still splitting from the amulet. "Damn, goliath. You and Konstantin would get along splendidly." I moaned, getting up.

"I look forward to meeting him," he said cheerfully. Leave your armor as it will make too much noise, and we have a good distance to travel. Also, Trek is not

fond of legionnaires. Best not to advertise what you are.” He sounded too chipper this morning, and I was glad to notice at least my headache from the amulet was quickly waning. “I already ate, so get what you want, and we can head to Trek’s treehouse.”

He had left me some of the soup, and it was already heated. The bacon was no longer crunchy, but it was still good. I felt naked without my hardened leather armor and steel helm. We left at a fast walk, and Maveith stated, “It is about twelve miles north. We will pass close to one of the weasel dens, so making as little noise as possible was best.” I followed Maveith, and he moved extremely quietly for such an enormous being.

“How are you so quiet?” I asked after an hour.

“Habit mostly. It is hard to sneak on an elk when you are stomping the ground. I am not sure if I can explain legionnaire, but I will try,” he said with seriousness.

The next few hours, I walked in front, and he taught me his self-learned skills of moving silently. It had to do with body movement, where you were stepping, how you were stepping, and getting a feel for it. When I made a noticeable noise, he had me pause and figure out what I did wrong. It was more of a learn-by-mistake education, as a lot of Maveith’s movements were more instinctive than learned. He had to think about just as much as I did.

When we arrived at Trek’s Treehouse, it was high in a thick oak tree. It was made from logs, and hauling them up there must have been an impressive feat. Maveith looked around from a distance before announcing loudly, “I do not think he is home.” He walked into the clearing under the tree and looked around. He shook his head. “I don’t know. I was hoping to catch him before he left to hunt today.” It appeared to be a poor act on Maveith’s part, announcing his arrival.

“Were you now?” A voice came from far to our right. A thin, blonde man with an impressive beard entered the clearing to join us. He had two hand axes on his belt. His clothing, like Maveith’s, was all medium brown colored hides. “You coming to see if I am still alive, Maveith.”

“No, a job offer from the new Duchess,” Maveith intoned, and Trek immediately went sour. “Do not worry, you can remain in your treehouse. She is not going to force you into the city. She is marking her lands, and you just

need to keep on the lookout for critters when her men are laying the markers in this area. This is my new kid brother, and he represents the Duchess.”

“Kid brother? What? Did you shit him out? I doubt any woman would lay with you.” He looked me up and down with some curiosity.

I grimaced at being the butt of their jokes, but endured it. “There is even three silver a week pay for your efforts,” I added, trying to finish the introduction, “I am Eryk.” I held out my hand, but he ignored it.

He swayed his head in consideration of the offer. Maveith added, “I will spend it for you in the city and bring you what you want.” Maveith addressed me, “Trek does not like being around a lot of people. I am surprised he didn’t bolt for the hills with the two of us here.”

Trek spat and grinned, “I would have, but I count you more animal than man, Maveith, so I just counted your new boy here. I can handle talking to one person.” It was obvious the two had a good relationship. They just liked trading verbal jabs.

“So it is a deal? I will collect your writ from the Duchess and bring it to you with your first ten weeks’ wages. If you want anything, I can bring it back from the city for you.” Maveith said patiently.

Trek seemed undecided before nodding. He just walked away and didn’t say anything else. “Not a social butterfly, is he?” I said softly.

Maveith looked at me and tried to puzzle out my words, “No, he flies on his own winds. He probably just spoke more words in the last few minutes than in the last six months. Our next stop is Lyonis. He will not be so easy to convince.”

We continued through the northern woods, moving northwest. It was late afternoon when we reached our destination. Maveith was impressed that I had been able to keep up with him and still practice my silent movement. Without my armor, it felt like I had limitless endurance. Lyonis’ cabin was more conventional. A small log cabin nestled in the woods. As we approached, a short man exited the cabin. He had one arm in a sling, reddish brown hair, and a massive beard.

Maveith called from a distance, “Lyonis! Can we approach?” The man located us and waved us to him. As we got closer, it was not just his arm but also his

head that had a wound of dry blood. “What chewed you up?” Asked Maveith with concern when we were close enough.

The man was pale under the filth covering him and had probably lost a fair amount of blood. He looked relieved to see Maveith and had not even given me a second glance. He must have had a concussion because his eyes were unfocused. Maveith asked again, “What creature did you fight? Did you win, or is it still out there?”

He put effort into focusing on Maveith, “Klinton called me to help with a monster problem. A few days back, the heavy rains to the north have forced a few toward us. He didn’t know what it was, but we tracked it some thirty miles from here. It was a Manticore. It surprised us and got Klinton. I barely escaped. That was...two days ago? I think.”

Maveith was on alert. “It might have tracked you after it consumed Klinton. You should have called Lyonis and me to help. This is why only four of us are left...now three of us,” he said seriously. “Let us get inside and lock the door and deal with your wounds for now.”

Maveith and I scanned the surrounding woods as we made our way into Lyonis’ cabin. I seemed to have terrible luck. My armor was at Maveith’s house, and I was possibly facing another dangerous creature from this world.

Chapter 87: Manticores

We entered Lyonis’ small cabin. It was not as orderly or as well constructed as Maveith’s. It also had a strong smell of ammonia, like dried urine. He had a single table and a small bed in his cabin as his only furnishings. Maveith sighed deeply at the mess and smell, “Tell me what happened from the beginning.”

Lyonis sat on his bed, cradling his arm. “Klinton said he found several mauled deer with their guts eaten. He thought a dire wolf had moved south after that torrential rain. We tracked the creature to the rocky hills. It was sunning itself on a rock, and we were not sure what it was. We didn’t see the second one coming from above. Klinton took a tail whip to the chest, and the barbs pierced his heart. He died quickly.” Klinton was shaking slightly at the memory.

He compartmentalized the trauma and continued, "I got my spear into its hindquarters and ran into the trees. The beast and I fought among the trees. I was only saved as the one that had been resting started to eat Klinton. The one I was fighting was larger and returned to claim its kill, I think. I ran as fast as I could here."

It was quiet for a time. "Manticores are all over Stone Mountain Island, where I am from," Maveith said heavily. "They are rare in this part of the world. I know some things about their nature."

Lyonis nodded, "The only time I had seen one before this was at the New Year's Games in the capital when I was a child. It took seven men in the arena to take it down, and not all of them lived."

I looked back and forth between the two wardens, "I have never seen one. What do they look like?" I asked.

The gray-skinned man sighed, "Manticores are as malicious as they are ugly. Their body is as large as a horse but akin to a lion." He looked at Lyonis, "That is why you confused the prints, Lyonis. A wolf's and a lion's prints are very similar."

The goliath folded his legs under him and sat so he would no longer have to duck the low ceiling, "A manticore's head is a grotesque thing, though. It looks like an ogre's head with a wide maw full of sharp triangular teeth made for cutting flesh and covered in a mane of foul-smelling hair. They can also attack with their claws and a barbed tail. They fly as well, with thin, leathery wings made more for gliding than flying. If they are mature enough, those tail spikes on the tail can be flung like arrows and contain a corrosive poison. Small amounts of the poison are not fatal but target your muscle tissue, weakening you and creating excruciating pain."

"Have you ever hunted manticores?" I asked Maveith.

"No," he grunted, "Climbing the mountain to find a nest was for warriors only. I was too young to hunt one before I left my people," some sadness crept into his voice. "On the bright side," he cheered up a little and talked about harvesting a manticore, "The tail barbs of a full-grown adult make excellent arrows. Their hide can make excellent armor. And the wings make prized cloaks and pouches."

Maveith shifted on the floor and removed a pouch from his belt, and he had a familiar vial of myconid powder. "I think we will head to Trek's house tomorrow, and then we will all go to the city and seek the aid of your mage commander."

Lyonis immediately perked up, agitated, "You want to bring a useless legion company out here!" He was angry but, in his depleted state, lacked real energy to show it.

"Cool yourself, Lyonis. We can not handle a pair of manticores ourselves. The new Duchess is prepared to give you a free writ to live here," Mavieth growled at the man. Lyonis relaxed some.

Maveith looked at me with seriousness, "Lyonis does not like legion mages. They were responsible for the deaths of his family."

"Cursed legion mages were more concerned about protecting the Imperial buildings than saving the lowly citizens of my town. My family was burned alive by the flames of a rogue fire drake training to be part of the Dragon Legion." His veins were bulging, and his anger had risen again at the telling. Even I knew there were no right words to say.

Maveith calmed him, "Lyonis, relax. His mage commander was not one of them. I already asked." Maveith had already tested the waters in preparation for recruiting the other wardens into the Duchess' service. "We will sleep tonight and make our way tomorrow. I will spread the powder and return shortly. Which direction did you come from?" Lyonis pointed in a direction, and Maveith nodded.

Maveith left the cabin, and I was alone with Lyonis. "I am sorry for the loss of your friend." I finally said.

He grunted and tried to study me, but his eyes wouldn't focus. He must have a concussion. I thought about offering him one of my lesser healing potions but hesitated. The man finally said, "Klinton wasn't the best man, but he didn't deserve to die like that. The nasty weather has stirred all kinds of ill tidings. Probably some mage was playing with power beyond his control."

"It was the Bartiriaden mages. They were angry at losing Macha to the Duke's army," I informed him. I decided not to tell him that the Telhian mages had torn down the city and likely killed dozens, if not hundreds, of the civilians.

"The torrential rains were not the only incident. Numerous foul weather erupted across the Empire. They say a lot of the crops will be lost this year."

"And the people will suffer—not the First Citizens or the nobles. Just the people that keep this Empire afloat!" His anger had risen, and his pale face was turning red again.

"I completely agree," I replied, trying to calm him down. It seemed to work as the warden eventually lay prone on his bed and fell asleep; his anger had consumed his remaining energy.

Maveith returned an hour after leaving and did not look happy. Lyonis was asleep, so he spoke to me softly. "I caught sight of one of the beasts, maybe four miles north of here in the twilight sky. It was circling, and I am assuming its partner had taken down prey. It was probably waiting its turn to feed."

"What does it mean? Are they tracking Lyonis here?" I stirred uneasily.

"Yes, but they are not the best trackers. They mostly spot their prey from the air and swoop down on it. They will fire a barrage of barbs and then barrel into their prey. My guess is that since they wounded Lyonis, they think he will be an easy kill. They are not the smartest of creatures." Maveith seemed uncomfortable at the prospect of fighting.

"Should we leave tonight, then? Before they find us?" I asked, ready to grab my pack and leave.

"No, clouds are moving in. It will be too dark to make our way without a glowstone. And a glowstone would be a beacon. Hopefully, the neutralizing scent powder I spread will prevent them from locating us." He did not sound too optimistic. We were only twenty miles from the city, but I could not think of a way to safely reach it. The weasels were also going to be out, so it made sense to remain where we were.

"Get some rest, and I will keep watch." He moved to one of the windows with a chair. When he sat, the chair strongly protested his weight.

I would have liked to use my amulet, but if someone did come tonight, then I wanted to be able to respond. I removed a large hot meat pie from Maca. At this point, there was no point in hiding my space from Maveith. Maybe Castile had already told him anyway. His surprised look said he was unaware, though. The scent in the room was such that Lyonis drooled in his sleep, and

Maveith kept giving me side glances. I ate half of it before giving it to a confused Maveith.

I explained, "I have a small spell form for a dimensional space. The size of the herb crate I had when you found me."

His eyes narrowed some, "And you made me carry the crate all the way back to the city for you, legionnaire?"

I shrugged, "You looked capable enough, goliath." I returned with a smile. He grunted but hid a small grin at being dupped. At least now he had a chance to enjoy a good meal.

He quickly finished the meat pie. "That was amazing. Do you have any wine to wash it down?" He had a joking tone, not thinking I did.

I had the bottle of wine from my interview with the Chancellor. I produced it, and his eyes went wide. He quickly dumped the water from his canteen and emptied half the bottle into it. Returning the half-full bottle to me. He sipped on the wine and smiled. "It is excellent."

I drank from the bottle, still not appreciating the wine. After Maveith finished his wine, he softened a little. He admitted, "We will have to fight them tomorrow. Come to the window and listen." I did as he instructed.

"I don't hear anything," I said after straining for minutes to hear.

"Exactly. The insects, night birds, and creatures know a true predator is in the area. If it were just the weasels, the insects and night birds would be active. No, the manticores are close. I do not think they will assault the cabin. They prefer to attack from range with quills before moving in for the kill." Maveith looked at the other warden. Lyonis was drooling but sleeping soundly. I handed Maveith a lesser healing potion.

He turned it in his hands, reading it. "For him?" I nodded. "It will cure his head wound and bring his senses back but not heal his broken arm. Are you sure?"

"If you are right, we need everyone as capable as possible," I confirmed.

He moved, woke him, and administered the potion. Lyonis fell asleep again. "Thank you, Eryk. I do not have many friends, but I count Lyonis among them." He faced me, "Tomorrow, at first light, I will rush into the woods to draw

them out. I will circle back to the cabin, and maybe we can fight one of them together. Lyonis should be able to swing a blade. If we can disable the larger one, we may scare the smaller one into fleeing.”

I did not sleep at all that night as I waited for dawn with Maveith. We woke Lyonis, and he went into his root cellar to feed us. He was much better and talking clearly. “I should be the one to run out there, Maveith, and circle around to draw them out. I can not use a bow, and you can.”

“You are too weak. The healing potion drained your frail body already,” he let out a soft chuckle to indicate he was teasing the man.

It was not long before Maveith opened the door. The fresh air outside rushed in with the morning light. We didn’t see anything suspicious. He pointed, “I will enter the woods there and circle around and come back from the right. I will take a position there behind that rock and use my bow. When it comes into club range with me, rush out and attack it.” He sounded more confident than I think he was.

He took a deep breath and sprinted across the small clearing into the trees, and I could see his large body moving among the thick trunks. A commotion in the woods came from the left as he moved right. A large creature pursued him, but it only looked like one. Where was the second creature?

Maveith ran his circle, came out from the right as planned, and slid on the wet grass to take shelter under a tree and behind a rock, pulling his bow. The creature that followed him out was as grotesque-looking as he had described. The mashed, semi-human-looking face was covered in a tangled mane of dark brown, shaggy hair. Dried bits of flesh and blood hung from the mane. The first arrow Maveith fired landed solidly in the shoulder, and the creature wailed.

In response to the wail to responding, screams of anger came from over the cabin. Maveith turned and looked. Even at almost thirty yards away, I could see the color drain from his face. “Two more above the cabin!” He fired an arrow above us, and a wail erupted, and then a storm of quills landed around Maveith. Three ended in his upper torso and one in his calf. He immediately began pulling them out.

The two new manticores landed between us and Maveith, their backs to us. They were much larger than the one that had chased Maveith through the woods. From behind, I could tell one was clearly male, and one was female.

Maveith was in big trouble. The smaller one struggled to move with the arrow in its shoulder, but these two parents were unhappy.

“Come on, legionnaire, they are not going to kill themselves!” Lyonis moved, and I moved with him. The female turned her head, and I really wished I had my armor on as she raised her tail and whipped it at us, releasing a half-dozen two-foot-long barbs.

I activated my air barrier, and all four barbs were halted in the air disc. The female turned to face us, and I noticed it was not as messy an eater as its child. Its mane was clear of debris. Lyonis had stumbled with two quills in his body. He was incapacitated with pain. I had no choice but to take one creature down immediately. I pulled a pilum into my hands and pocketed a lesser healing potion before using my dimensional ability.

The female looked too confident at my approach. That was until a good portion of her chest was moved into my dimensional space. The creature strongly resisted my removal of her organs, and I knew she had much stronger aether resistance than a human. I still was able to overcome her aether resistance. Her expression became shocked as she stumbled, then collapsed. The familiar bottoming out of my aether happened, but I barely stumbled, expecting the slight dizziness. I was already rushing to take the male from behind.

The pilum is an interesting spear. The tip is basically a two-foot metal rod made for piercing shields. I threw the pilum from fifteen feet away with all my strength. Even I could not miss this close, and I did not want to get any closer with the threatening tail barbs. My aim was a little off, but it had the effect I wanted. The creature reared and howled as the pilum entered three feet into it from behind. It spun and bit the wooden shaft, shattering it but not removing the true cause of its pain lodged deep.

I moved left to see Maveith struggling with his bow, but he fired another arrow and hit the male in the chest, joining his first arrow. It was unphased and focused on something else. The male was trying to reach the remainder of the spear, spinning in place like a dog chasing its tail. It would have been comical, except we were still in extreme danger. Lyonis was on the ground, in pain from the manticore poison, and not going to contribute.

My only remaining weapon now was my short sword. I circled to join Maveith, who was leaning on the rock for support and trying to get another arrow strung. I reached Maveith and handed him the potion with the stopper off.

While he drank, I watched the angry male give up and turn his focus on me. The female was dead, and their child had Maveith's arrow lodged deep in its shoulder and was crying for its parents, having difficulty walking.

Maveith rasped, "Give me a moment, and I should be able to draw my bow again."

The manticore then did the unexpected. It spoke.

Chapter 88: Battered and Bruised

The manticore's voice was guttural, as I would expect from its flat ogre-shaped face. He was not talking to me, but Maveith was speaking in a language I could not understand. It was a few harsh phrases before Maveith responded in the same language. Two exchanged words, and my grip got sweaty on my hilt. The smaller manticore was lying down in misery, and I think Maveith's first arrow did more damage than I thought.

His arrows were as thick as my thumb and longer than my arm. It must have penetrated the chest cavity, and the arrowhead had done serious damage. On the other hand, the arrow he had shot into the adult male had barely penetrated six inches and was already ripped out by its maw. My pilum had entered through a much softer part of the hide. Standing next to the goliath, I asked, "What are you two so chatty about?"

Maveith said another phrase in the harsh language and then addressed me, "It speaks the language of the stone giants, not very well, but it has some grasp on the speech. They were a mated pair from Stone Mountain Island. A half dozen of their kind were summoned by a mage and released north of here to cause havoc. It recognizes my race and is trying to bargain for its life, knowing we honor our word. It is offering its treasure if you heal it and its child."

Lyonis was moaning near his cabin door, trying to pull himself inside and unable to fight. A manticore quill was in his shoulder and another one in his hip. The manticore ground its sharp, angular teeth in impatience and discomfort. I could tell movement was difficult for it with the long pilum piercing it. Maybe it couldn't fly. Its body would ungulate in flight, and, like its suffering offspring, the long rod of the pilum was just too painful. The beast looked at its mate and spoke again.

When it finished, Mavieth asked, "It thinks you poisoned its mate and is worried you poisoned it as well."

I exhaled, "Yeah, let us go with that." Maveith looked at me sidelong, not taking his eyes off the creature twenty feet away.

Maveith spoke slowly, "How did you kill the female?"

"I gave her indigestion," I quipped. The female was on her side, leaking a steady flow of blood from her mouth. I asked seriously, "Are you going to be able to kill the male? I am all out of aces."

There was silence, and I figured Maveith was trying to puzzle out what I meant by aces. He slowly spoke, "The potion gave me my movement, but I think the manticore could reach us before I pulled my bow again."

"Stall for time then. Keep asking him about his treasure. What is in it? Where is it? How long to reach it," I instructed Maveith. It would take me about two hours to accumulate enough aether to open my dimensional storage again. When I could do that, then I could kill the monstrosity. As it stood now, the large adult manticore could rush and maybe kill both of us.

Maveith had recovered slightly with the lesser potion but was still hindered, "I will see what I can do." He began an extensive back-and-forth with the beast while Lyonis got himself inside his cabin and closed the door. I doubted Lyonis was going to be saving us. The young manticore was frothing blood now, and I guessed the lungs were filling with blood. With time, the blood should drown him. The manticore, seeing its offspring struggling, started to get impatient.

I do not know what triggered it, but the manticore charged. Maveith was ready and barely got an arrow off, but it was a leg strike, not the chest. I swung my own blade. I targeted the head but misjudged the speed of the lunge. I hit the shoulder, and I was flung backward as it plowed into both of us. The manticore was focused on Maveith but did have the presence to whip its tail at me as I tumbled away.

I was fortunate only to take a single quill in my shoulder. As I tumbled, the quill worked its way free, but not before tearing muscle and flesh and dosing me with its poison. It felt like a horse had kicked me, and the burning in my shoulder spread, making it difficult to move my right arm. I gained my feet and rushed to help the Maveith.

Maveith was trapped under the creature, which was raking him with his claws. Maveith was stabbing with a small skinning knife, causing the beast to bleed freely down onto him. Maveith grunted, and the manticore growled and roared in ferocious combat. The rage and fury of the beast did not allow it to see me coming again at it.

I targeted the back of the neck with as powerful a swing as I could with my good arm. I cut the hide and connected it solidly with bone, but it was not strong enough to break the bone to reach the spinal cord. My second swing was met with a paw swipe that tore the blade from my hand and broke my wrist. The distraction of my attack gave Maveith room to jam one of his arrows under the jaw and up into the brain.

The thick arrow did not snap as it disappeared into the head. Maveith twisted and grabbed a second to repeat the action. The manticore was alive but could not focus as Maveith added a third arrow to the collection. He pulled himself away from the creature that was swooning on its feet. Its ugly face showed confusion. Maveith took his club and, with a two-handed overhead swing, brought it down on the beast's neck.

A large crack told me the goliath had shattered the spine and killed it. Both heaving for air we watched as the creature slowly toppled. The ground thudded from its impact as it was easily over a thousand pounds. Maveith was heaving deep breaths and had multiple claw marks bleeding freely on his chest. When the manticore's chest stopped inflating, he looked over at me.

"Well, Eryk. Looks like we won." He fell to his knees. I went to him, one of my arms was painful to use from the poison, and the other had a broken wrist. "Help me inside. I need to lie down briefly, and we should check on Lyonis."

I assisted Maveith, and he leaned on me a little heavily. He had to weigh more than three hundred pounds. The door was barred shut, and it took Lyonis a few minutes to open it, "We won?" He asked in disbelief.

"Maveith crushed the beast's spine. It is dead. I will go make sure after we get Maveith on the table to rest," I explained. Maveith was laid out, and Lyonis used red aloe on the wounds to prevent infection. It looked like he was going to live.

"I am going to make sure they are all dead," I told the two, but Maveith was already off in dreamland, and Lyonis was having difficulty standing.

I reached the male manticore and watched it intently, making sure it was still. I didn't have to open my dimensional space to retrieve items completely. However, I had to wait ten more minutes before I had enough aether to produce the essence collector. I placed it on the creature and had to wait another minute for some aether to activate it.

The familiar blue wisps formed and congealed into a major glossy black sphere of essence. If I was not mistaken, the channeling attribute. It determined how fast aether was restored to an aether core. I eagerly did the female next after, getting a second major glossy black essence.

I approached the young manticore, but it was still breathing foamy red blood. I moved and sat on a log to watch it and wait for it to expire. I was in no rush. I would have preferred to put it out of its misery, but one wrist was broken, and my other shoulder burned in pain. I also wanted to conserve my aether, so there was no healing for the moment. I popped one of the large black pearls into my mouth.

A chilly feeling extended from my stomach and kept going past my body, into my surroundings. I felt like I was momentarily experiencing an out-of-body experience, and then my senses snapped back. I realized I was feeling the aether in the environment, just briefly. I did not feel any different after the sensation passed, and continued my death watch on the young manticore. The beast finally expired as the sun was setting. It had held on for hours, forcing itself to breathe. I stood, walked over the creature, and stabbed it in the ribs with my sword. There was no reaction as the blade slipped between the ribs.

I set the collector and activated it. The blue wisps seemed thinner and uncertain as they collected in the center of the collector. A minor essence eventually formed, but it was not black. It was azure blue with white swirls. It was a magic affinity. I smiled as I moved both essences to my dimensional space for later consideration.

With the last creature confirmed dead, I could start using my aether to heal. I focused on my shoulder first. The poison had damaged my muscles, and I needed to repair them first. I had recovered a fair amount of aether in waiting for the manticore to die. I closed the wound, the scab flaking off and showing new skin, and then repaired the muscles. I did as Larita told me and just focused on what needed healing. After I was done, I tested the arm and was happy with my healing.

Next was the wrist. It was swollen so much that my hand looked like a club. I felt out the bone with my healing senses, and it took a lot more aether than I thought it would to set and meld the bone together. I tested and then reinforced the healing again, using all my aether. The swelling was already diminishing, but it was going to take time.

I returned to the cabin to find both wardens sleeping, Maveith on the table and Lyonis in his bed. I set a chair by the window to listen to the night insects and owls. I, too, soon fell asleep.

Chapter 89: Harvest

I had not meant to fall asleep. But after staying up all night and the fight with the manticores, my exhaustion overtook me. My dreams were filled with talking manticores flying all over the kingdom and spreading the word of my abilities to all who would listen in the coarse language of the stone giants. Soon, all the Hounds in the Empire were pursuing me to be dragged before the Emperor. I woke when I fell off my chair and scrambled to my feet.

The early dawn light was just showing—or maybe I had only slept a few minutes, and it was evening. I still felt exhausted and stiff, so hours had passed. Maveith and Lyonis were still sleeping—and still breathing. I removed a massive piece of hard salami from my space and started to cut chunks off to eat. I filled my canteen with water as well.

As I ate, I looked at my wrist. Most of the swelling was gone, and I worked to tighten the loose skin with some aether. Soon, it looked like the wrist had never been broken. Maveith stirred and coughed. I stood to check him out. His chest looked a mess with over a dozen claw marks. Globbs of red aloe were smeared on each one, but most had not closed yet.

“Your staring is making me uncomfortable, Eryk. I am sure it is not as bad as it looks,” Maveith said softly. But he tried moving and decided the table was more comfortable.

“I was staring at the table. I was amazed it could hold your weight,” I joked. “I have some salve to close your wounds,” I handed him the vial.

He reached up and took it gratefully. He sniffed the air and noticed the hard salami. It had been almost a five-pound link, and I had eaten nearly a quarter

of it. "Fine, you can have that as well, Maveith," he grunted as he reached, stretched his chest wounds, grabbed it off the bench next to the table, took a massive bite, and chewed.

"A bit salty. Do you have any more wine," he said with a grin.

"My storage space is limited. You will have to make do with water. Do you want help with the salve?" I asked, stretching my stiffness away.

"I can manage he said while chewing. Lyonis is in worse shape than me. He is not going to be able to move for days. If you have any more..." he gestured at the potion.

"No, I used up my healing potions already," I held up my wrist to indicate I was already healed.

"We should harvest the manticores this morning. I doubt any predators touched the carcasses, but it will not be long before they brave the clearing to do so," he said with a grunt as he got himself seated in a chair. "Also, I should tell you what the creature told me before it attacked."

I perked up, "There really was a treasure?"

Maveith laughed and immediately regretted it, "Maybe. It said it had killed some other humans, and its lair was twenty-five miles northwest of here. I'm not sure if that is true or even the direction or distance. The beast's grasp of the giant tongue was not impressive. But he did tell me more about the mages that portaled them here."

Maveith paused and started treating the wounds on his chest, wiping the aloe off and applying a thin line of salve to close the wounds. He appeared to be doing the deepest cuts first as he worked. I waited, and he started talking again, "There were five manticores pulled through the summoning gate. The elf mage bound them to obey, and he ordered them to cause chaos. The other two went north while these three came south."

"Elf mage? A Bartiradian? Who did they kill?" I asked and realized I was thinking more about the idea of treasure they might have hoarded than actually concerned about the manticore's rampage.

"It sounded like a merchant caravan. But there are no trade roads this far north. My guess is that the creature was lying," Maveith said, and he had somehow eaten the rest of the salami while administering it to his wounds.

He stood and inspected the repairs to his chest. He then closed two punctures from the quills and hobbled over to Lyonis. He used the remaining salve to close the other warden's wounds. When the small vial was empty, I was amazed at how far he had stretched it. He did not heal his shallower wounds, so they oozed a little as the scabs cracked when he stretched.

Maveith gave me a hard pat on the back, "You are a good friend to have, Eryk." His 'pat' left a stinging sensation on my shoulder. He started dressing, "Come, and we can harvest the manticores together. We will let Lyonis rest."

Maveith was not moving well as we exited the cabin to the fresh air. Lyonis cabin smelled terrible, and the fresh air reminded me of that fact. The manticores were all where I had left them last evening. Maveith scanned the area before moving to the male specimen. "He is large even for a male," he noted while kneeling at the tail.

There were still a half dozen of the two-foot quill spikes and new ones that were partially growing out the end. Maveith tested the tail and sighed, "The poison sack is drained," he lifted the tail and pointed to a rubbery sack below the spikes. "When the beast releases its quills, the sack will spurt the poison on them. It is worth excellent coin to an alchemist, hunter, or assassin."

"You know a lot of assassins, do you?" I quipped, trying to be funny.

Maveith was focused and responded off-handedly, "Just a few." I could not tell if he was joking.

"The quills make excellent arrowheads; each mature quill can make maybe four arrowheads with a skilled fletcher." Maveith was pulling the remaining quills out carefully and stacking them. I went and gathered the quills that had missed us in the fight. They were flat and stiff and looked more metallic than bone.

"Are these metal?" I asked, dropping them in the pile.

"Yes, mostly. These creatures rely heavily on aether to survive. They need the flesh of beasts for sustenance and iron to replenish themselves. They have even been known to chew on metal when hungry. It also makes their flesh

inedible, but we can obtain many other valuable things from the body,” Maveith replied as he finished with the female’s barbs.

“I thought you never hunted a manticore before? How do you know how to harvest one?” I asked as he started to cut open the beast’s stomach.

“My father was the tanner in my village. I worked with him growing up. He taught me my skills. We were tasked a few times with harvesting manticores brought in by the hunters. But this is the biggest boy I have ever seen.” He had reached the testicles and carefully removed the scrotum. “This will make a fine pouch once it is treated and worked. It is also a status symbol among my people to wear it. I will prepare it and make you a nice coin purse out of it that you can wear with pride.”

“Uh, thank you,” I said, unsure how to feel about the offer.

“It is not a problem. I will make you a fine cloak from these wings. Usually, during the fighting, the beasts are grounded, and the wings are mostly destroyed in the process. Come and help, and I will show you, Eryk,” Maveith insisted. He had been using my name instead of legionnaire for a while, so I assumed I had gained his trust.

I knelt as he explained what he would normally do for such a kill. Remove the organs to keep the meat safe from spoiling. This creature had no useful meat, so that step was not required. Removing the hide was not that difficult, with Maveith’s strong hands tearing it away from the fascia. Maveith joyfully said he would make new pants from the male hide as he worked.

The wings were next, and they felt like soft-worked leather as I helped the goliath remove the skeleton. It took us three hours to harvest the male and another two hours to harvest the female. The young one Maveith decided was not worth the effort. It had been a messy eater, and it smelled like rotting meat. At least the adults groomed themselves a little, but they also smelled foul.

When we finished, we were both covered in gore. Dried and congealed blood was everywhere. Maveith had smiled most of the time; probably, this brought back fond memories of working with this father. We were resting and drinking water, and I asked, “So why did you leave Stone Mountain Island?”

The goliath winced at the question. He considered his answer and told me his tale. “My father was the tanner in our village, and he was well respected. I

never knew my mother, but I also had an older sister. Her name was Zorana. She was pretty, I am told, even by your ridiculous human standards. The island is a hostile place,” he pointed at the manticore, “those creatures are just one of the dangers. I was out with Zorana and a friend of hers, Myra, who I fancied. We were harvesting clams by the rocky shore. We were surprised by an orc raiding party. I was further back on the beach trailing them.” He swallowed hard. “My sister was killed, and Myra was taken.”

He paused, and I waited to hear what happened to him. “I ran,” he finally admitted. “I was initially paralyzed with fear and did not think they spotted me. And I ran after Myra was netted, and Zorana took a head wound defending her.” He looked at me with shame in his eyes.

He sighed, “I couldn’t face my father for my cowardice. I walked to the nearest port city and took the first ship I could. I was young, a little bigger than you are now, but much stronger.”

I did not know what to say. Coward is not how I would describe Maveith. I asked, “And you never talked to father? To tell him you were okay? He might have thought you were taken like Myra.” After some awkward silence, I added, “Maybe your sister lived from the head wound and was taken as well?” I probably was not helping his conscience.

“I think about that every day. I replay the scene in my head, desperation on her face, seeing her club batted aside and the orc blade connecting with her head as she stood over Myra, entangled in the net behind her. I doubted they wasted a healing potion on her. She would not have been worth the cost of it,” Maveith said heavily. I was going to suggest maybe one of the orcs was a healer, but I did not think it would help the man.

“No, I never sent word to my father. I could not lie to him and embarrass him with the truth,” Maveith stood. “We should wash up. And these carcasses need to be dragged at least a half mile from Lyonis’ cabin.” Maveith was in no shape to be dragging a thousand-pound manticore into the woods, but he made a rope harness and proceeded to do just that. It was like his story reminded him of his penance and reason for exiling himself.

I checked on Lyonis, who was still sleeping, and then pulled the smallest manticore into the woods, with Maveith pulling the female on his second trip. The ropes bit into me, but my four-hundred-pound beast was half the size of the mother. Even then, Maveith easily outpaced me with his long strides. His

lesser wounds opened, and he strained in the effort, but I was fairly certain that he would have declined even if I offered him a potion.

He walked away, not looking back after untying his ropes. I took a moment to do some cleaning and dropped the manticore innards, a human heart from the Bartiradian soldier, out of my space. I still had the dead elf in my storage and planned to dispose of him soon. I followed Maveith to a small lake near the cabin. We waited on the shore for a few moments, studying the environment for danger before entering the water to bathe.

We cleaned ourselves and our clothes as best as possible before air drying until the sun started to set. We talked about skinning animals and the process of curing and drying hides for various purposes. I was glad to take Maveith's mind off his sister by asking questions.

Maveith indicated we should head back to the cabin, "Tomorrow morning, you should return to the city. I will stay with Lyonis. It will be a week before he can take care of himself. Tell the Duchess I will return then."

"If I head straight south, I will find Sobral?" I asked, trying to picture the map.

Maveith responded in his deep voice, "No, we moved further west. But you will encounter the road and river. Just take the road north, and you will reach the city."

That night, I took an oblivion pill to get a good night's rest. Maveith was still limping in the morning, and Lyonis was finally awake and eating. I headed out alone after sharing a meal with them.

Chapter 90: Announcement

I proceeded through the woods using the sun and a blue moss to guide my direction of travel. The blue moss, Konstantin told me, only grows on the north side of rocks and trees because it needs the light of the blue moon, Poseidon's Tear, to grow. I did not understand how the moon could only appear in the north sky at night, but I took him for his word as it seemed to work as a navigation tool.

Mid-morning, I took a few moments to bury the Bartiradian elf woodsman. I removed a section of earth, placed him in the grave, and then added the earth

back on top of him. I was not sure of his customs, but I hoped my efforts would at least end one of my disturbing dreams.

I tried to practice my skill at moving silently in the woods, but the effort and the slower pace made it frustrating, so I focused sporadically. With my armor left in Maveith's stone abode, I tried to head in its direction. It was not like anything at all looked familiar as I walked. I did pause to harvest mushrooms. They were quick and easy and did not slow me down much. I ate one of the ration bars and used the leaf wrapping afterward.

It was late afternoon when I thought I was close to Maveith's home by the distance I had traveled. At least I found some areas where blood grass had been harvested. It might not have been me who gathered this particular grass, but it tickled my memory. Every tree looked the same, but it felt like I was close. I soon found a heavily trodden path made by a large man. It did not take me long to follow it to Maveith's small, hidden home. I was quite proud of myself for finding it.

Lifting the bar on his door took some effort, but I managed. I entered his home, looking forward to a night's rest in the silky weasel pelts. I could reach the city in a few hours in the morning. My armor was still in the spare room; next time, I would just store it and not leave it behind. It might have prevented my shoulder from being injured by the mantichore's quill.

I ate from Maveith stores. I used the bacon fat to fry onions, potatoes, and salted meat. I was sure he wouldn't mind. I ate well and cleaned up after. It was night outside, and I went into the guest room after ensuring the front door was secure. I lay in bed and opened the time affinity book for spell forms. I finally had time to review my options so I could work on a new spell form.

Time Affinity Lesser Spell Forms (10-25)

Compress Sleep (10)

Hasten Mind (10)

Seize Momentum (20)

Echo in Time (25)

Time Affinity Major Spell Forms (25-40)

Hasten Self (30)

Slow Aging (40)

Age Target (40)

Probable Future (40)

Time Apex Major Spell Forms (40-70)

Slow Bubble (50)

Flashback (60)

Ageless (70)

Stasis (70)

I read the descriptions of the lesser spell forms first. The first most commonly selected spell form was hasten sleep. This allowed you to rest while using your aether to recover your mental state. It did not affect your body, only your mind. Each aether invested gave you about four hours of rest in a single hour. So you could get a complete rest and mental recovery in just two hours. It also doubled your aether recovery while you slept, getting four hours of aether recovery for two hours of sleep.

Hasten mind was very interesting as it allowed me to think faster. It did not make me smarter, time just passed much faster in my head. At the lowest affinity of ten, you would get to think about five times faster. The text noted that every ten points in affinity that time doubled. So, with my ninety affinity, I could get ten minutes for every second in real-time. The problem was it only affected my thinking and not my body. It would make reading books a breeze.

Seize momentum was even more intriguing. This required you to touch an object and steal all its inertia. So, if you timed it right, you could stop a sword before it cut you. Then again, you could lose some fingers if you were even a half a breath too late. The amount of aether depended on the size of the object affected. The only interesting thing about this spell was that the object would be frozen momentarily based on a person's affinity. The only reference I had was someone with an affinity of thirty in time could hold an object just over a heartbeat after stealing its momentum. Did that mean the object would remain in place for a minute with my ninety affinity?

The final lesser spell form was echo in time. This spell form allowed the castor to focus on an area and replay what happened in the past. How far back they could view depended on the person's affinity. At a twenty-five affinity, they could look back as far as a month. They had an entire reference book for using this specific spell form. It was also a common spell clairvoyance castor's learned. The time version was slightly more powerful, being able to look further into the past. If the affinity scaling power held, then my ninty affinity could look back almost eight years ago.

The middle tier listed in the book started with hasten self. Unlike hasten mind, hasten self affected your entire body. At a thirty affinity, you moved fifty percent faster. At forty affinity, it became twice as fast. According to research, you could go more quickly, but the world still worked on the body normally. It noted an example of a mage with a fifty affinity in time who went blind every time he used hasten self. So it was a useful spell, especially in combat, but it had a ceiling. I kept thinking back to a bug being splattered on a windshield.

We were definitely getting to some good spell forms. Slow aging sounded promising. I read it three times to make sure I understood the description. There was a similar spell, but you would need to keep it active all the time to get its benefit. The spell form was much more effective as it required either your aether core to be full or trickle aether through it if your core was not full. Your aging slowed to a tenth of its normal at a forty affinity in time. If it scaled up like other spell forms, then my aging would be 1/320th normal.

Getting three hundred years for every one year was appealing. I could live to be twenty-thousand...or even older. Of course, the spell form required aether all the time, but there were exercises to train yourself to direct aether constantly to a spell form, even while sleeping. So only when my aether bottomed out would it stop. I laughed aloud, as that was a common occurrence for me.

The next spell form was age target, and it did not work well on living things. I knew that was due to object's aether resistance, but I should be able to overcome those defenses with a ninty affinity as I did with my space affinity. I did the conversation, and each aether I invested would age a target of about eight years. I did not see how that would help me in combat or life. Maybe growing plants, but there were probably better spells in the nature affinity for that. It had to have applications if the spell was in this book.

A little more reading, and it was used mostly in alchemy. Potions that required brewing times of days could be done in minutes. I did not think I was destined to be an alchemist.

Probable future was almost completely combat-focused. The spell form gave the mage a quick view of the next twenty seconds. In a large-scale battle, they would know troop movements before they occurred and know if a defense failed. It was all experienced from the mage's view and left them with a sizable headache afterward. Using it multiple times in succession could make the mage go unconscious. It was an incredible power, but it did not fit me.

The higher spell forms had to be incredible. The first did not disappoint. It created a bubble of time around the caster. Anything entering the bubble was slowed down, giving the caster time to react. The size of the bubble was fixed at ten feet. How slowly the people and items in the bubble moved was related to the caster's affinity in time. At sixty, that was 80% of their normal speed. With my ninety affinity, it would be 40% of their normal speed, and the best part was there was no aether resistance to overcome. The bubble was fixed!

The cost in aether was a problem, and each second required a relative aether point. The bubble was also fixed in space once activated. If the caster left the bubble, it would end. Still, I could imagine being a terror on the battlefield with this or fighting monsters with ease.

Flashback was even more powerful. It sent the caster back in time with the knowledge of the future. It was related to how much aether was invested in the spell form when activated. With my available aether, I could go back about—10 seconds if my core was full. In battle, this was immense, especially if I was avoiding a killing blow. But you would still need to realize you were about to die to activate it.

The next spell form was called ageless. It worked similarly to slow aging, except when you channeled aether, you did not age at all. It did have some drawbacks. It kept your body in the same state. That meant you could not alter your physical attributes through anything but essences. You could always stop aether channeling to the spell form to age. The second drawback was it took more aether to maintain than slow aging—almost five times as much. This meant I would recover my aether slower when it was active. Slow aging only used a trickle of aether.

Stasis, listed last in the text, was an interesting spell form. It created a bubble of stilled time around an object or the caster. Time halted in the bubble based

on how much aether was invested. The bubble size was also limited by the amount of aether invested. The stasis could be broken if the object was moved. I was not interested in becoming Sleeping Beauty, so I did not bother puzzling out the math based on my affinity and available aether.

I did not know if these were all the spell forms available to the time affinity, but they were the most popular. My ninety affinity might have more powerful versions of these, but I did not have time to wait. I needed to start working on something now.

I reduced my choices to time bubble or slow aging. Ageless was better than aging, but with my high affinity, they were about the same. And if I increased my time affinity with essence, I could slow my aging even further. Time bubble was incredible, too. It could be a lifesaver against a powerful foe or against multiple opponents. Then again, I had my dimensional space for one-on-one combat.

I was very tempted to live forever. But could I watch friends and family age and die around me? Also, just because I aged extremely slowly did not mean I couldn't die. It seemed like almost every week, I was almost getting myself killed. Time bubble could be learned as a normal spell. Of course, I couldn't cast it yet. But I had been hearted to get my first essences to improve my magic attributes. I could get my magic attributes high enough to cast spells effectively with enough time. I needed the time...slow aging was my choice.

I had spent hours reading and examining the book and only got a few hours of sleep. I would have to ask Maveith if I could have these giant weasel pelts. They were too comfortable a bed. I put on my armor and exited Maveith's home. It should only be a few hours to the city, and I would see if they missed me.