

A Soldier's Life

Chapter 91: Konstantin (POV Path to Legionnaire)

Konstantin walked through the city gates from his small house outside the city walls. He enjoyed his job teaching language and history to the children. Not many parents in the city sent their children after they learned to read and write. They would rather have them apprenticed in a trade. So, it was rare for children older than ten to be in his classes. In his opinion, the school was more of a means for the mother to get some rest from raising their child.

His small schoolhouse was situated against the outer wall of Barvima. Barvima was a city set away from the coast in the northeastern reaches of the Empire. Its only claim to fame was a dungeon nearby that the Adventurer's Guild administered. Konstantin did not see the allure of risking your life for treasure from a dungeon.

He arrived at his schoolhouse, happy to see his classroom already full. Even though he was a strict disciplinarian, his young students revered him. He was a great teacher who taught reading, writing, and basic math in the morning, then history and literature in the afternoon. He quickly counted forty-nine full seats, with only six open. He knew every student by name and was glad to see Maria back in class today. Her mother was a seamstress, holding her back more often than not to work in her shop. She waved at him, smiling. She was a brilliant young girl, and he hoped she would do amazing things.

The Imperial Scholar, Javier, stood at the door smiling in his blue robes, "Another good showing for our young teacher. At this rate, you will be making more coin than me." The scholar was here to count and subsidize the education of the children. The Imperial College paid Konstantin three silver a week and an additional copper for every student he taught each day. His was one of seven schools in the city. But he believed his school was the most popular. He taught six days a week, and usually earned around six silver, a high wage for a teacher.

Konstantin smiled at Javier, who was here just as much to count the students as to make sure what Konstantin taught aligned with the expectations of the Emperor's wishes. This morning, Javier was not just here to count, and he

repeated a warning, "Do not teach about the Duke's grandfather's loss in the Third Southern Campaign. I am reminding all the teachers."

Konstantin was young, just twenty-six summers, and had only been teaching for less than a year. "How can we not tell it as it actually happened, Javier? Will me not telling it change the fact that it did happen?"

Javier grimaced, "The Duke runs this province and sent word down. If you do not want to lose your tongue or worse, gloss over the Duke's grandfather's mistakes." Konstantin nodded but planned to teach the material as it was. He had studied in three libraries and knew the Empire rewrote a lot of the history. Piecing fact from fiction and finding the missing pieces intrigued him. Thinking his job done, Javier left to count the attendance at the other schools for the day.

Konstantin knew a lot about the expansion of the Telhian Empire. He knew of the old Empires they conquered, the battles that were fought, the Dukes who commanded the armies, and the victories and failures of those armies. The Empire grew from the seed of the First Legion into one of the most dominant kingdoms in all of Desia. You were doomed to repeat your mistakes if you did not learn from them.

That day, Konstantin made one of the biggest mistakes of his life. He taught the Third Southern Campaign as it had happened. It was one of the biggest losses the Legion of the Lion had, losing over five thousand legionnaires and fifteen thousand army soldiers when they got trapped in a mountain pass. The Duke that commanded them fled with only a thousand men and most of his mages through an improvised portal.

It was a week before the Duke's grandson took his revenge. Two Hounds arrested Konstantin for aiding the Esenheim Kingdom. Esenheim was the elven nation across the channel. He passed the Truthseeker's interrogation at his trial but had been held almost a month before his trial.

However, when he returned to Barmiva, he had been replaced, and Javier informed him he would not find a teaching job anywhere in the Empire. Konstantin worked as a lumberjack for two years. A dangerous job where he ran from all kinds of monsters and watched companions and friends die. A particularly brutal attack by a gnoll raiding party left his arm shattered and him unable to work.

He took out a loan to have his arm healed by a healer. After seven months, he fell too far behind on the payments and was forcibly constricted into the army. Due to his physique that he developed as a lumberjack, he was allowed into the legion training camp instead of the army training camp. Every day was a struggle to remain on top, and he was slowly forged into a fighter. He was surprised that he had a knack for fighting and graduated fifth in the class of legion conscripts.

His first assignment as a legionnaire was guarding the portal in Varta, a large coastal city in the Western Empire. His commander at the time was an ancient legionnaire. Whenever they were not guarding the portal they were practicing. Konstantin found himself apt with a bow, extremely proficient with the sword, and growing steadily in mastery. So much so that a mage company commander passing through recruited him.

Mage Commander Cassius took him into his service. Cassius worked heavily with the Hounds as his magical spell set made him an incredible tracker. They routed out creatures in cities and towns. Mostly creatures capable of mimicking humans or living deep beneath the ancient cities of the Empire. They hunted humans that were affected by lycanthropy, doppelgangers, specters, trolls, and even an entire nest of kobolds in his time with Cassius. Cassius was a highly intelligent and competent mage and admired by his men. He also had access to healing spells, so they rarely lost men while hunting.

As Konstantin had matured as a legionnaire, he became friends with his companions. While working with Cassius and the Hounds, Konstantin also imprinted his own spell forms. The first of which was his minor affinity for healing. The spell form allowed him to obtain a full rest after just four hours of sleep. His strongest affinity, air, got him some minor force magic for moving small objects. His lesser affinity for nature got him an awareness spell form to determine what plants were safe to eat. It allowed him to sense any organic poison.

After a few years, his company returned to Barvima, where Konstantin used to teach so long ago. This visit was at the Hounds' request to hunt a rogue necromancer in the city. The Hounds were skilled but always called on specialist mage companies when their quarry exceeded their skills. This was one such case. Animating the dead was against Imperial Law.

Two zombies were found outside the city, but the Hounds had no leads. When Konstantin arrived with Cassius' company, his mage commander quickly

located the necromancer in a network of ancient tunnels deep below the city. They were not aware of just how many animated undead the deranged mage had made from an ancient dwarven catacomb. The necromancer released his creations into the city in a distraction in an attempt to flee.

Cassius' company caught up to the necromancer anyway, and Konstantin sent the pale death mage to his final rest. But all was not well, as half the company had died in the expedition, and the necromancer cursed Cassius. Cassius' body aged rapidly, growing older by a year every day. The wave of undead unleashed had also wreaked havoc on the city. In the clean-up, Konstantin found one of his past students, the seamstress Maria, had been killed along with her two infant daughters.

Konstantin became bitter as he watched Cassius grow old and die over the next months. The healing of mages of the Empire could not stop the curse imprinted on his aether core. When Cassius passed in his sleep, Konstantin was ready to retire from the Legion. He had repaid his debt and no longer wished to see his friends die. He only needed to finish out his current year of service, his 12th, before ending his time in the Legion. He was in the East Legion Hall in Telha, the capital of the Empire, when he took a pear from a crate, and his nature spell form tingled, telling him it was not safe to eat.

He quickly learned this spell form extended to any plant-based poisons. He had discovered a shipment of poisoned fruit intended for the Imperial Legion Hall. The shipment had been split between the three Legion Halls in the capital. The owner of that shipment was Antonia Segreto. Konstantin had just saved hundreds of legionaries from being fatally poised.

Antonia Segreto was the merchant who sold the fruit but not the one who had poisoned it. After she was cleared, she questioned Konstantin in private and then made him an offer. She was of the Praetorian Guard. The Praetorian Guard were the Emperor's most loyal subjects who helped him police the Empire from within. This was an attempt by the Empire's enemies to weaken the Legion and discredit her as a traitor.

She attempted to recruit him, "Konstantin, don't you wish you could do more? Have a greater effect on the Empire's fate?" Antonia asked him.

"I am content with the work I have already done, Master Merchant. I have killed dozens of threats to the Empire. My time of service is coming to an end," Konstantin replied to the merchant queen. He knew she was powerful as she

was one of the few who was allowed by the Emperor to trade with the Elven Nation of Esenhem.

The tall woman had gray streaks in her dark black hair. She walked around a seated Konstantin like a predator. "You have worked with the Hounds regularly. What if I could get you to be one of their number?"

"I am too old to be trained by the Hounds," Konstantin laughed as he was almost forty. He had worked with them many times, and they operated in small groups and were elite fighters with a variety of spell forms.

"Age is not a requirement. Being competent is," came a voice from behind him. An athletic man stepped from the shadows. His lean and muscular body made the aged, wisened face appear out of place. "I am Cornelious. One of the trainers for the Hounds. Your spell form for detecting poisons is something I am interested in."

Antonia was smiling as Cornelious continued, "Antonia has a few favors she wishes to call in, and the Emperor has granted them. Your discovery of the poison in the shipment might have just saved the Empire. She," he nodded to Antonia, "wishes you to be trained as a Hound."

"And what if I decline your generous offer?" Konstantin said, unconvinced.

Cornelious looked to Antonia, who answered, "Give me ten years of service. I will buy you a villa in any city to spend your boring years after service. Because that is what your life will be like after the Legion. Boring."

Konstantin sat and thought. He had wanted to retire and raise a family before he got too old. Now, he would be almost fifty by the time he was free of the Legion. Antonia placed six large red spheres on the table. They rolled around briefly. Konstantin knew what they were. Apex essences. Constitution, if he was not mistaken. Amelia continued, "Now let me tell you a secret about essences..."

Konstantin spent three years with the Hounds. It made him rethink his entire perception of the Empire. The Hounds hunted people as much as they investigated monsters. He hunted soldiers, legionaries, spies, and insurgents. Most of the time, their quarry was definitely guilty of abandoning or opposing the Empire. But there were always cases where he had his doubts. And when the Hounds hunted you, it was not to bring you in for a trial.

Konstantin became a skilled woodsman and tracker. He worked with the same four men for his entire service, reporting directly to Cornelius. The men he worked with took too much joy in pursuing, capturing, and killing. He was quickly souring on his life in the Hounds. That was when news arrived that Duke Artorius had died. The Duke had been the one who had ruined his life when he told the truth about his grandfather in his class so long ago.

Shortly after this news, Cornelius said his time in the Hounds was over and that he was to report to Antonia. Antonia smiled as he met her in the gardens of a small villa in Barvima a few weeks later. "Konstantin, how have the last few years treated you? Cornelius said you are a quick learner."

Konstantin considered his answer, knowing he was trapped in her web until his service expired, "I learned a lot. Why did you summon me? Is it time for me to serve as your agent?"

Antonia smiled, "I thought you would be in a better mood now that Duke Artorius is dead."

"Did you kill him?" Konstantin asked, half serious.

Antonia had a musical laugh, "Be careful what you ask. Just know he fell out of favor with the Emperor for his incompetence." She circled the gardens with him, "What do you think of this villa?"

"It is quite beautiful. Not many villas have gardens this large in their inner courtyard, and I can see a number of useful plants among the trees," Konstantin said, studying the surroundings.

"I was hoping you would be a little more impressed than that," she said, frowning. "This will be yours after you finish your field service for me. Of course, you will be an agent for me in this city after you move in."

Konstantin stopped, "So, I will be serving you for life and not just seven more years?" His tone hinted at anger.

"Don't look surprised. You knew in your heart that would be the case." She indicated the villa, "This is an investment for me. You will be my eyes and ears in the city when you retire here to start a family. The essence I gave you means you can still sire children aplenty," she said harshly. She stepped back, "I assumed you understood what I offered and what I expected of you?"

Konstantin sighed. He was not surprised. He did not think she would have followed through on her promise of giving him a villa. She watched him as he processed the information. He nodded acceptingly.

“Good, now I plan to assign you a legion company with an interesting mage commander. She has run into some opposition from Duke Octavian. She is in desperate need of a good scout, and you are going to be it. She is very active across the Empire, so you can expect to be busy,” Antonia began.

“What is your interest in her?” Konstantin interrupted.

Antonia had added a few more gray hairs since the last they met. Her face remained impassive but still had a powerful presence, “Her spell repertoire is of interest to me and others. For now, just report her actions to me.”

“For how long will I be attached to her company?” Konstantin asked, resigned to his assignment.

With a little impatience, she answered, “Until I tell you otherwise. Now her name is Mage Castile...”

Chapter 92: Reporting In

The city of Sobral did not seem any different. It felt like I had been gone months and not just four days. As I walked into the city, maybe the city guards looked more professional with clean uniforms and armor. I reached the Citadel’s main gate and was not stopped as I entered. A voice rang out from my right, “Soldier! Why did you not question that man?” An angry and abrasive Firth came storming out of an archway in the wall.

I was slightly shocked as the old legionnaire had actually shaved and looked unrecognizable. If he had not screamed for me to hear his voice, I would not have known it was him. He also wore the Duchess’ Citadel guard uniform, not his legion gear. He must have rotated from laying the province’s white marble border markers. He was now training the Citadel guards.

He seemed to notice me now, “Eryk?” He looked me over. “Konstantin and Flavius went looking for you yesterday morning. Where have you been?”

“Flavius is back?” I ignored his question. The last time I had seen Flavius was on the back of drake, seated uncomfortably behind Master Mage Sebastian. They were off to search for his brother’s collector, which was secured in my dimensional space.

He held up his hand to pause our conversation, and Firth took a moment to scold the two guards, “Even if he is wearing legion armor, he could still be a spy. This boy could have gotten himself killed in the woods, and then they could have taken his armor. Unless a Duke comes riding in leading a hundred legionnaires, question everyone!” He looked me over, “Come Eryk. I will walk you to Castile to make sure you don’t get lost on the way,” he said, smirking at his own jab.

I took a jab at him, too, “Not only are your clothes and face clean, but you also don’t smell like a horse’s ass. How can I be sure it is not you who is the spy who replaced my good friend Firth?”

“Good friend, eh?” He laughed, “Well, friend, anyway.” He thumbed the clean uniform, “I have to keep up appearances while I am out here yelling at the general incompetence of the Duchess’ guards.” He spit out something he was chewing on into the bushes. “They have been worried about you, you know. Expected you back the following day after your walk in the woods with the half-giant. Konstantin was quite upset you were sent off with the half-giant.”

“He is a goliath, not a half-giant,” I said, defending Maveith.

“Same difference,” he spat, cleaning the rest of his mouth in the bushes before entering the Citadel. Firth informed me of the events as we walked the Citadel, “Flavius arrived yesterday morning. He rode here from Macha after the mage released him. Not sure what happened with Master Mage Sebastian in the swamp, but the Emperor ordered Sebastian to remain there.”

“The Emperor’s in Macha?” I said, shocked.

Firth was confused, “What? No, you fool, just some of his advisors who speak for the Emperor. The Emperor has not left Telhia in fifty years. Chancellor Marcel from the Scholarium, I think he said. Flavius said half the idle Legion Companies joined Duke Tiberius in Macha for his next push into Bartiradian lands.”

“So they are starting to excavate the ruins then?” I stated.

“How did you...?” His eyes flashed in realization, “Ah, I should have put that together. Yeah, the rumor is they are moving under cover of war to dig up some ancient city.” Firth was better connected than I thought to know that much.

We were walking down the halls in the wing of the Citadel where Castile was quartered. “Konstantin was not happy with Adrian sending you off with the goliath. He convinced Castile to go look for you, and poor Flavius left with him not four hours after arriving in Sobral.”

Firth stopped at the door and banged on it loudly without decorum, “Castile, your wayward apprentice has returned. And he looks alive and well.” He turned to address me, “When you have time, find in me in the practice yard. Konstantin said you need to practice with your new magic trick in a real fight.”

Well, at least Konstantin had not changed in four days. I entered the study and halted. The Duchess wore a thin silk blouse and shorts, not her normal dress. Castile was dressed similarly; both were dressed for casual comfort. On the tables, dozens of books were spread everywhere, open to pages. Castile did not look up from her book as she said, “Report?”

I stood at attention and responded, “One of the wardens was killed by a manticore. And...”

“What?” Castile barked in surprise, standing. Castile and the Duchess both locked their eyes on me, demanding clarification.

“It is a beast as big as a horse with the body of a lion and the head of...” I started to respond.

“I know what a manticore is!” Castile said irritably. “Where is it located? We can call the company in from laying stones to deal with it.” Castile cracked her back, preparing. I could see her mind churning in preparation, “Do you know where it is laired?”

“It is dead. Well, three of them are dead. The other two went north. The male manticore said there were two others, and they went north. I’m not sure if I believe him as he didn’t seem trustworthy.” I was trying to explain but was having difficulty putting my thoughts in order as both the Duchess and Castile were mouths gaping in their casual wear.

The Duchess smiled reassuringly, "Start from the beginning, legionnaire. Eryk, right?"

I nodded and began over, "We visited Trek, the first warden, the day after we left. He agreed to your terms, Duchess. We met the second warden, Lyonis, and found him injured at his cabin. He and the fourth warden, Klinton, thought they were tracking a dire wolf that had been forced south from the flooding. It turns out it was a manticore. A second manticore surprised them, and Klinton was killed."

I took a breath, and the Duchess handed me her glass. I drank and found it to be a sweet wine. "Thank you," I handed her the glass back empty. "Maveith planned to come back to the city for help to fight the manticore, but they found us at Lyonis' cabin that night."

I took a moment to put the events of the fight in my head in order correctly. "Maveith ran out to draw them to the ground and get them to waste their tail barbs. He shot the small one, but the mated pair cornered him. We had not expected a third one. Lyonis and I attempted to surprise them from behind, but Lyonis was struck, and the poison from the manticore prevented him from fighting further. I managed to surprise the female with a trick, which let Maveith get an arrow into the adult male."

"When did the manticores talk?" Castile interrupted my retelling.

"I am getting to that part. The female went down from a lucky blow, and I injured the male with a pilum from behind. With its mate likely going to die and its offspring with an arrow in its lung, the male tried to bargain with us. It talked to Maveith in the stone giant tongue. I did not understand anything that was said."

"Stone Giant? It must have been from Stone Mountain Island, then. Was it hunting Maveith?" The Duchess interrupted, enthralled in the story.

"No, it said five of them were summoned by an elf mage well north of here. Two manticores were directed to wreak havoc north, and these three do the same south," I answered.

"It could be one of the mages who released the elementals that caused the weather disturbances," Castile guessed. "A Bartiradian infiltrator specializing in summoning. Not something we are likely to get help dealing with the Emperor expanding the Bartiradian campaign in the east."

“Should we report this?” the Duchess asked, deferring to Castile.

Castile sat in the chair and thought for a moment. “I will write a report and hand it to you, Duchess. Whether you turn it in is up to you, Veronica.” Castile spent a few moments making notes while we waited. She talked while she wrote, “If you do submit this, Veronica, they may task my company with finding the two missing manticores summoned by the Bartiradian mage since we are the closest and resources are being sent to the eastern front.”

I waited patiently as Castile finished the report and handed it to the Duchess. I thought it strange they were on a first-name basis now. How much had happened in the four days? The Duchess took the report, folded it, and stuck it inside the cover of a book. “I have been absent-minded lately. I am sure I will remember where I put that report you submitted in a few weeks.” They both smiled at each other knowingly, and I felt out of place. Castile turned to me.

“So all three manticores are dead?” Castile asked, confirming with me.

“Yes, Maveith broke the neck of the male, and the other two bled out,” I confirmed. I decided not to take credit for any of the kills as I had gotten a lot from taking their essences. I would let the Maveith take the credit and hope the Duchess never questioned him on what actually happened.

The Duchess stood, poured some wine in the glass she had loaned me, and drank, “I will come up with a suitable reward for the goliath. Should I give your legionnaire some consideration as well, Castile?” She was asking Castile as if I was not in the room.

Castile studied me, and I kept my face impassive. “Maybe some new legionnaire armor.”

Now curious, the Duchess turned to me, “The manticores did not injure you?”

“Just a scratch, Duchess. Maveith and Lyonis took the brunt of their attention,” I said, deflecting the question and not wanting to lie.

The Duchess turned to Castile, “Are we going to wait for Konstantin to return, or will you send him now?” She had pointed at me absently.

Castile turned and addressed me, “Eryk, you, Adrian, Lucien, and Blaze are going to Lorvo. We are recruiting an alchemist there to come to Sobral, so you

will escort him here. On your return, Adrian will stop at the College in Forgabua to recruit a scholar.”

“Is there a portal there?” I inquired, not quite sure how far it was.

“Yes, but we are sending you on horseback. Lucien is preparing four of the Duchess’ horses. It is about three hundred miles to Lorvo, and another one twenty to Forgabua, and then two hundred fifty miles to return here. The roads should make the travel relatively quick. Adrian knows I expect you back in just over two weeks’ time.” Castile explained patiently.

I was not looking forward to long days in a saddle. That would be forty miles a day on horseback, and the memories of learning to ride and the pains associated flashed back to me. I let out a smirk because, this time, I could heal myself.

Castile noticed my smirk. “I am glad you are looking forward to it,” Castile said, returning to her books. “Adrian should be ready to ride first thing in the morning.” It was an informal dismissal.

The Duchess smiled knowingly, “You can take a bath and have Lareen service your needs. She has been distraught at your absence.”

I nodded, looked at the books as I left, and paused. It was not Latin. The writing made no sense; seeing my confusion, the Castile explained, “It is Elvish. The scholar Adrian is recruiting should be able to help us make sense of them. They are books from the ruins of Caelora.”

Veronica stepped next to me, seeing my interest, “We are hoping to find clues of natural resources in the area. Caelora is the undead city of specters you passed on the road coming here. These books were recovered by the mage who used to rule Sobral and were in the library.”

She didn’t seem to mind me paging through the book in front of me. It was short, just thirty or so thick pages. There were illustrations on the opposite page from the writing. They were fantastical creatures, so I assumed this was some type of animal compendium.

“Do you read elvish?” The Duchess asked, surprised at my intense focus.

“No, I was just looking at the pictures,” I closed the book, slightly embarrassed, and excused myself. A hot bath did sound extremely inviting. If

Adrian pushed us on the ride, it might be my only bath for the next two weeks. When I entered, Lareen was not in my room, so I started to draw a bath myself. The water was warm, at least so the pipes were being heated. Thirty minutes later, I was sinking into the semi-hot water. And soon fell asleep.

Chapter 93: Duchess' Library

My combat senses awakened me as the bathroom door opened with a creak. The water was still warm, so I had not slept too long. My eyes spotted my maid attendant in the archway. Lareen was in her heavy green dress, "You are back." She said cautiously, and I detected a note of—maybe happiness.

"Just for the night. I am off on a mission for two weeks in the morning," I turned the knob to add more hot water, but it had turned cold. I asked, "How do you know when the mage is working to make the water hot."

"She is not a mage; she just has a spell form that can heat metal," Lareen said, entering the room and starting to separate my clothes and armor. "Your clothes are filthy!" Her nose was scrunching, trying not to smell them. It was cute and somewhat humorous.

I tried to impress her, "I tried to get them as clean as possible after we fought and harvested the manticore." She looked up, eyes narrowing me in study, trying to figure out whether I was lying. If I told her there were three manticores, she definitely would not believe me.

She did not call me a liar, and she just nodded slowly. She studied my clothes. "I suppose I can get most of the stains out. Or I can call on Cassie. She has a spell form that can clean anything." She was talking to herself, absorbed in sorting my dirty clothes.

"Do you have a spell form too?" I asked, moving over to lean on the edge of the tub to face her.

Lareen flushed a bright red, "I do." She did not answer immediately, and I just stared at her as she worked. She finally revealed, "It is not very impressive. It is actually fairly useless."

"I have never heard of any magic being useless. Tell me," I encouraged her with a smile.

She flushed again, "I...I can dry things. Well, just things with water. I can pull water to my hands from nearby."

"That is awesome! Can you show me?" I said excitedly. She perked up at my excitement.

"It is just a lesser water affinity spell form," she admitted. She quickly retrieved a bowl and filled it from the tub. She knelt on the floor in front of me, the bowl of water between her knees. She then pulled a thin stream of water between her hands, forming an orb of water between her palms. "This is all I can control at once." She was focused on the water, "The spell form is called shape water, but I have so little affinity my volume is limited." The water turned into a butterfly and slowly flapped its wings as she concentrated, squinting her face in intense focus.

I clapped loudly, and the butterfly splashed to the ground. She quickly used her spell form to return the water to the tub, blushing the entire time. I asked, "How did you come into the service of the Duchess?"

Lareen stood but faced me, "We all went to school at the Imperial Palace in Telha. My father was a Baron, my mother..." She paused, "My mother a servant. If I had been born with a strong affinity he may have recognized me but since I was not..." She swallowed hard. "I was his ninth child and not important."

"He cared enough to make sure you had a good education," I noted. Lareen was definitely well-spoken and had a poise to her.

"All children of dukes, counts, and barons are educated in the palace from age ten to seventeen. I felt fortunate, being sent even though I was a bastard." I gave her a sympathetic look as she continued, "The seven years we spend there are to show us royal etiquette and familiarize ourselves with our peers," she said without enthusiasm. I remember seeing a class in the Imperial Gardens when I followed Chancellor Marcel to his house. I guessed by Lareen's expression and tone her time there was not enjoyable.

I changed the topic slightly, "Does everyone have a spell form?" I asked the young woman. She had loaded a wicker basket with my clothes and set my armor aside to clean later.

She nodded, not making eye contact, “Most. Usually, it is more impressive than a lesser spell form. Those who can cast spells move onto the Mage College after the Emperor’s school.”

“Have you seen the Emperor then?” I asked curiously.

She made eye contact, “Many times. He would stop in and watch classes. Also, we would see him at major functions we would attend. Sometimes, the Emperor favored some of the children, like Duchess Veronica. When she turned twenty-five and completed her time in the Scholarium, the Emperor raised her to Duchess and gave her this new province,” she said reverently.

“How did you come into her service?” I asked.

“Not being recognized by my father, I had few options. Serving a Duchess is the highest station I could hope for. Most of the attendants in the Citadel under Duchess Veronica’s care went to the Emperor’s school. Some graduated with her, and some, like me, a few years after. But we all knew her at the Imperial Palace.”

“The Duchess is twenty-five?” I asked, having heard her age before and she nodded. “How old are you then?”

“Twenty, twenty-one next New Year’s Celebration,” she said, surprising me. Maybe it was because everyone was much shorter on Desia that I had misjudged her age.

“You look much younger,” I said, expecting it to be a compliment, but she scowled a little. I added quickly, “You are very pretty.” That seemed to save me a bit as she smiled before leaving to launder my clothes.

I did some yoga before drying and putting on clean linens. I planned to use the amulet tonight but decided to wait until Lareen was asleep and in her small room. It seemed odd that the Empire’s best-educated young men and women were made into servants. It just seemed like a major waste. My stomach rumbled, and I went down the back stairway to the kitchens to swipe something.

The kitchen was busy with activities preparing for dinner, and I was ignored. I could probably wait for dinner, but I had missed lunch. I quickly identified an older man who seemed to be directing the chaos. “Cook, can I get a little something? Anything is fine to hold me till dinner.”

He looked me over, "Lareen's charge? Back in one piece, I see. Give me a minute, and I will prepare you a plate." He weaved through the cooks, sliced a large baked potato in half, piled on a mound of shredded meat, and then covered it in a white sauce. He put two massive rolls on the side and returned to me with the plate. "Will this hold you for a few hours till the evening meal, legionnaire?" He had a friendly smile. The plate easily had over five pounds of food on it and smelled amazing.

I nodded, "Can I get some butter for the rolls and something to drink?" I asked, my mouth watering in anticipation.

The cook snapped his fingers, and a full-sized stick of butter was on my plate a few seconds later from another cook, and a pint of ale appeared in my hands. The Citadel guards were more organized, and the cooks seemed to be increasing their production as well. "Thank you—" I didn't know his name, "I am Eryk."

"Clyde," he held out his hand, and we shook wrists after I put the mug down. "Lareen is a good woman; she speaks highly of you, legionnaire. More so than what the other attendants say of their charges." I was speechless. I nodded dumbly, picked up my mug, and left. I should have figured servants talk to each other.

I took my plate to my room, and twenty minutes later, the plate was clean, my belly bloated, and I regretted my life decisions. I had been lying on the bed, rubbing my belly and trying to will the pain to recede. Lareen walked in with my clean clothes and noticed the plate, "I would have gotten you food if you asked."

"It is fine," I waved her off. "I do not think I will need to eat dinner. I will just stay here and not move for a few hours."

"If you are sure, I can let the staff know," I nodded, but I probably should have waited. Lareen was gone and returned a few minutes later. She busied herself cleaning the bathroom while I waited on the bed for my stomach to push my meal into my intestines.

I drifted off once or twice and missed Lareen saying something. She repeated herself, "Since you are not going to be at dinner, is there anything else you wish to do this evening?" I looked out the window, and some light of the day remained.

I thought for a minute and asked, "The Duchess has a library. Am I allowed to use it?" Lareen's face showed disappointment, but she nodded affirmatively.

"Yes, your armor is clean. The bathroom is clean, and your clothes are ready for you. I can bring you to the Duchess' library if you wish," she said, somewhat bothered. I complimented her on her work, but she still seemed a little perturbed.

I followed her to the Duchess's wing of the Citadel. The library was the room adjacent to the office where Castile and the Duchess met me this morning. The library was impressive. It was three stories tall, and rectangular, and one wall was entirely paneled glass looking into a small garden below. I could see into a few other rooms across that did not have curtains drawn. All the rooms were vacant, though. Two wide wooden staircases on either side went all the way to the third floor. Each floor held hundreds of books. More books than I had seen in my time in Desia so far. The familiar scent of aged paper assaulted my nose.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Lareen said as I stared up. "Most of the books were left by the Mage who once ruled here. He was a bit of a collector. He even sent expeditions to look for lost libraries and to other Empires."

I walked the shelves with Lareen trailing me. Most of the books on the first floor were in Latin. When I reached the second floor, things started to become muddled. Only one in four books was Latin. The third floor did not have a single book whose binding I could read.

"Are you looking for a particular topic?" Lareen asked.

"You are familiar with the organization?" I asked, surprised.

Her face hardened, "I know how to read and spend some of my free time in here," she said, annoyed.

"Can you show me where the books on spell forms are located? And maybe other kingdoms on Desia as well?" I asked.

"The magic section is that alcove," she pointed confidently. "The histories of the other kingdoms are on that wall." She pointed at an entire wall of books over ten feet high with a ladder to access the higher books.

I walked to the wall and began scanning titles. "Are there any maps of all of Desia? I was wondering where Stone Mountain Island is located. The goliath warden was from there."

Lareen went confidently and pulled three wrapped scrolls. She unrolled them while I stood over her shoulder. Maybe I was too close as her hips pushed back into mine. I ignored the contact and studied each of the maps as she unfurled them. The first was just the Telhian Empire. The second was a map of the continent. The third was the world of Desia. I was surprised at how big the planet was. The map was fairly detailed, and if the key was correct, the equatorial line was over 26,000 miles. Was that bigger than Earth? I did not remember.

There were three continents on the map. And dozens of large islands. I was leaning into Lareen to look closer when she exhaled and pointed a finger, drawing my attention to a place on the world map. "It is here." I followed her finger and, in small script, Stone Mountain Island. According to the key, it was not a small island, about five hundred miles across. And it was completely on the other side of the world. Maveith had gotten as far away from his people as possible. Not wanting to continue pressing into Lareen, I gently moved the reluctant woman aside to study the map.

I studied the map enthralled. I wanted to memorize every detail to add this to my dreamscape. I went back and studied the other two maps as well before stepping back. Lareen was waiting, flushed. I needed to be alone in the library. "Lareen, thank you. I am going to spend a few hours here. Can you...get me a crate of apples? Bring them to my room so I can pack them for the trip."

Lareen looked around, confused. "After you get them, you can join me back in the library. I just don't want to forget about the apples for the horses." Lareen nodded, disappointed, and left, and I quickly went to the magic section. It took a moment to replace the time affinity spell form book. There was no book for void affinity or worlds affinity. There was a book for displacement affinity. It was just as monstrous a tome as the time affinity. It was three compiled volumes as well. I should have given Lareen something more involved to keep her occupied.

I paged through it, sitting next to the shelf with a glow stone for light. Turning each page, focusing intently. My heart was racing at the chance of being discovered. I got to the end and replaced it on the shelf. I stood and stretched. I searched for a book on my dreamscape amulet, but after ten minutes, I gave

up. I moved to the wall of books on other kingdoms in the world. Maybe the lines of nations changed over time, but I was looking for one nation in particular—Tsinga.

I found three books on Tsinga. One was the history of the Duchy of Tsinga, the second was a bestiary for Tsinga, and the third was focused on the religions of the region. I was halfway through the first book when Lareen returned.

She walked over to me, smiling, “I got you your apples in your room. Anything else?”

“I am just going to look through a few books, then head to my room. I am expecting a long ride tomorrow.” I replied but was focused on the book. Lareen went and stood by the door. I was tempted to look for books on Other Worlders, but with Lareen watching me, I just paged through the three books on Tsinga and two books on the Kingdom of Keisia. The Duchy of Tsinga used to be part of Keisia but was now independent.

I returned the last book and hoped to find time to return. “I am done,” I announced. “Thank you.” I approached Lareen with a sincere smile. We returned together to my room.

“Are you sure you do not want something to eat? You said you would take meals with me in your room?” She reminded me as I inspected the crate of apples. She had gotten over a hundred apples.

“That sounds good. Something light and that you would like,” I said, holding up an apple to the light. “These apples are perfect.”

She smiled and left, and I quickly moved all but ten apples into my dimensional space. Ninety-two apples. Lareen returned with a bottle of wine, a roasted chicken, and some candied yellow carrots. She made another trip for place settings. And then we sat and ate. I was eating the greasy dumbstick a little messily, and she laughed at my contented noises.

“What?” I asked, savoring the crispy skin and dark meat.

“You have no decorum, legionnaire,” she giggled.

“Well then, teach me. How does one eat with the Emperor?” I put down my drumstick and placed my palms on the table.

Lareen smirked, "You asked..." The next hour, I was schooled in the proper way to eat with someone who had higher social status than me. Most of it was waiting for them to take the first bite. One ridiculous thing was that if the Emperor did not try a course at dinner, then no one could. Lareen remembered one dinner she was at when he was not hungry, and no one got to eat anything. It was fun as she teased me about my mannerisms and my posture. It almost felt like a date. The sun had long set by the time the meal was finished. Lareen cleared the dishes to the kitchen, and I went to bed.

I put the amulet on under my shirt, waiting for her to return and go to her quarters before using it. It seemed to take forever, but she finally returned. I think her hair was wet as she went into her small room.

I immediately went into my dreamscape. Oscar was happy to see me. I only had one task tonight. I wanted to add all the things I read in the library to the shelves in the amulet. I started by working on one wall and enlarging the three maps. I studied them briefly, making sure everything looked good. Then, I added the spell form book on the displacement affinity. Then, there were three books on Tsinga and two on the Kingdom of Keisia.

I gave Oscar a pat, and if my theory was correct, I was about to get one major migraine when I returned to the real world. I inhaled and exited the dungeon. I hated that I was right. My head throbbed, and my eyes felt intense pressure behind them. I groaned and rolled to my right, surprised to find someone next to me.

My hands explored a naked Lareen under the covers with me. "Do you want me out of your bed?" She asked softly.

"No," I replied and kissed her, pulling her body on top of me.

Chapter 94: Back in the Saddle

"Wake up legionnaire. Lucien wants you down in the stables," A gruff voice said, standing over my bed.

It was still dark, but the voice was familiar. I asked, "Adrian, why didn't you knock?"

"Tace wood door. And I got a set of keys to all the legionnaire rooms," he jingled the keys as emphasis. "Get up and help prepare the horses. Say your goodbyes. We should be back in two weeks." He walked out, having issued his orders.

Lareen had one leg draped over me and was snuggled into my side. That had really happened last night. She came to me and had been an enthusiastic participant. It had been enjoyable for both of us. "Are you awake?" I asked.

"No. I don't have to wake until the first light." She pulled her body in closer, seeking my body heat as the room was chilly with no fire.

I extracted myself but left my prized griffin down pillow behind. I quickly dressed with the light of a glowstone. When I was in my full gear, I looked at Lareen, who had fallen back to sleep, hugging the griffin pillow. Should I wake her to say goodbye or just leave? I leaned in and kissed her until she stirred some. When she was semi-conscious, I broke the kiss. "Thank you. I will be back in a few weeks," I whispered. Her eyes were closed, but she had a smile on her face.

I left the room and went to the stables. Lucien was there in the predawn saddling horses. "Eryk, good. Adrian and Blaze are bringing out the saddle packs. Get those two mounts ready," he indicated two gray mounts; one had a black mane, and one had a white.

I was a little out of practice but quickly remembered as the muscle memory returned. Lucien inspected my work and nodded, "Good work. Now let me tell you why I selected these mounts for our trip. We must travel forty miles daily to get back to Sobral on schedule."

I thought about it momentarily, "Are the alchemist and scholar going to be able to ride that many miles?"

"Probably not. Adrian will try to push the horses on the way to Lorvo. After that, he will back off," Lucien said after a moment. "Now long-distance mounts have three features you want to look for: age, body type, and temper." For the next thirty minutes, Lucien showed me the signs to identify the age of a horse, whether its body was conditioned for endurance riding, and a rehash on finding a horse's temperament. Blaze arrived with two heavy packs, and then Adrian did as well. We all got them onto the horses and secured our weapons.

I was taking two short swords and a spear. That did not include the hidden arsenal in my dimensional space. Blaze had four small quivers with his bow and short sword. Lucien had a mace and a short sword. Adrian had his long sword. As soon as the sky turned gray with the first light, we were riding out of the gates of the Citadel and then the city. We tested the horses at a light gallop for a mile and then walked them for a mile. We repeated this four times before stopping and letting them drink. The road was packed with clay and dirt, which was easy on the horses. I slipped each horse an apple and praised them for their work. My horse was dark gray with a black mane and tail. He was also the biggest of the four since I was the largest man among us. I decided to call him Atlas since he was carrying my heavy ass around.

After the break, I was riding next to Adrian. "We will reach the city of Loule tonight. Castile asked me to work with you on your new spell form. An air barrier of some sort? Can you demonstrate while we ride?" he asked as we were at a walk.

"Yes, air discs." I almost made one appear in his path but did not think knocking Adrian off his horse would endear him to me. "They are stationary and can take some abuse before being destroyed." I halted Atlas and dismounted. I was standing two feet off the ground, holding my reins.

Atlas was looking, and I think he was confused. I mounted and continued to ride. Whenever we were on a walk, Adrian asked questions much as Konstantin had puzzling out uses in combat for my spell form. We had a quick spar at our second water break for the horses.

"Is that Delmar's runic sword?" I asked as he unsheathed the silvery blade.

Adrian smirked, "Yeah, he loaned it to me after losing at dice. When we return to Sobral, I must return it to him." He slashed the air. I didn't know Delmar and Adrian gambled. They rarely mingled with the company. "Come, let's see how you fare," he commanded impatiently to use the loaned weapon.

Adrian's sword cut through my barrier much easier than a regular sword. It still slowed its progress, but I thought it was unfair that he had an extra advantage.

"If your opponent has an artificed weapon, Eryk, you just need to place it where they are not likely to strike it. Your biggest advantage is your opponent can not see the disc while you can." Adrian advised after a few engagements.

The break was not long, and Blaze was eager to try shooting arrows at my barrier, but Adrian said there would be time for that later.

The trip went surprisingly quick, just nine hours of riding and breaks to make it Loule. My healing spell form made the soreness fade when it got too unbearable. My companions were uncomfortable as their bodies remembered how to ride, so I mimicked their stiffness and aches to keep my healing ability secret.

Loule was a walled city surrounded by farms. It looked prosperous and had a high degree of activity in the late afternoon, easily twice the population of Sobral. We rode into the city unobstructed and made our way straight to a Legion Hall. We got looks but no stares. The Legion Hall was not impressive. A granite building with an attached wooden stable. The Hall had four bunk rooms with twenty beds each. An old hunch-backed man ran the Hall. Adrian talked to him before returning to talk to us.

“We are the only company here. We are free to take what we want from the weapons and food stores. Eryk and Lucien, stable the horses and then meet us in there.”

I went with Lucien, laid out the straw, and helped him rub down and check the mounts before feeding and watering them. Lucien left first, and I gave them each mount an apple for their hard day. I could tell they had already started to expect it. I missed Ginger, but Atlas seemed like a fine mount.

Adrian and Blaze were in the storage room going through shelves of equipment. Much of it was rusted and not cared for. Adrian, seeing me, commented, “Mostly trash. A few legion companies came through here on the way to the eastern front with the Bartiradians. They took anything useful for the campaign.”

Blaze was holding a pair of throwing knives, “At least we don’t have to pay for it.” Blaze referred to the fact that when conscripted legionnaires took new equipment, we had the debt added to our accounts. If equipment were just replaced, we would not have to pay for it. Castile had paid for any equipment, so the men did not need to, but her accounts had been seized as punishment for the losses in Macha as determined by the Tribunal, and she had not replenished her funds yet.

Blaze picked up some throwing knives, checked their sharpness, sheathed them, and added them to his pack.

I went to the foodstuffs. Much of it was bulky items, ceramic jars of items like fermented cabbage or pickles. As I was searching, the others left, and I was alone. Not that there was anything I really wanted in here. I broke the wax seal on a ceramic jar labeled fermented cabbage. One whiff and I was definitely not taking this. I tried the pickles next. They looked normal, just smaller than I was used to. I tried one. It was a bit soft but tasted like a sour pickle. I pulled two five-gallon ceramic containers into my dimensional storage.

I was about to leave but noticed an old jar in the back. I pulled it out, and it was heavy. It was labeled fermented carrots but did not swish, and the container did not match the other fermented vegetables. I broke the wax seal to find a thick sludge inside. I touched it and realized what it was. Honey! This was a lot of honey, maybe three gallons. It had crystallized some, but it was still good. I moved it to my dimensional space.

I still had a lot of food from the first Legion Hall I visited, but a little more couldn't hurt. I also took a massive cast iron cauldron with a lid—maybe weighing seventy pounds. It was more for a kitchen but could cook for the company in a pinch if I ever revealed my storage. It could also be a weapon if dropped from the proper height.

I would have liked to add arrows, but there were none here. I found the others eating pies Adrian had purchased from the tavern next door. "We need to return the dishes, so don't break them," Adrian warned, handing me a pie. I started in on mine, but it was terrible. The meat was not identifiable and was chewy and fatty. At least the lard and flour crust was decent.

Adrian reminded us, "We will get an hour of training in the yard behind the Hall before sleep tonight. I know you are all sore, but we should get some practice fighting together. The next stretch of road has been known to harbor bandits occasionally."

"How far?" Blaze asked. He was also not pleased with his dinner as most of the gristle chunks of meat remained uneaten.

"One hundred and forty miles to Telhas. I want to make it in three days. From there, we have to take the old road west to Lorvo, another hundred miles. It is a wild road, not well traveled, and could run into any number of creatures. Since we are on horseback, I plan to run and not fight if anything finds us," Adrian advised us.

We went to the training yard, which was overgrown with many weeds and bushes around it. The old man who administered this Hall did not maintain it well. The practice session was focused on me and my air barriers. I found Lucien's mace was slightly more effective at disrupting it than a normal sword. I also learned how quickly Blaze could shoot arrows. He fired thirteen arrows in less than thirty seconds. The scary thing was he did not once miss his target at thirty feet. I did notice that his eyes looked a little hollowed. From that, I guessed he must be using a spell form to help with his aim, draining his aether. I was not sure if he even realized what he was doing.

I got my own bunk room and was already missing my pillow. I had left it in my room in Sobral with Lareen. I hoped Lareen at least appreciated it. I used the amulet for just two hours, focusing on learning the time affinity spell form of slow aging. When I left the dreamscape, I did not have a headache at all. I was sure I had figured out part of the device. As long as I did not add things to the dreamscape, I would not get migraines on leaving.

The next question about the amulet was if what I created was permanent. Would the maps, chair, Oscar, and everything else still be there if someone else used the amulet? Maybe when I found someone to trust, I would find out. Adrian had us up before dawn again and on the move.

The next three days of travel south to Telhas were long days in the saddle, interspersed with practice. The variety of attacks and facing multiple opponents helped me develop my use of the discs in combat. We did not encounter any bandits, but a farmer did try to recruit us to kill some giant vermin eating his crops. We told him we would post the request to the Adventerurs Hall in Telhas.

There was an Adventurers Hall because a dungeon was about ten miles south. The farmer cursed us, calling us, "Useless Legion Scum Who Couldn't Wipe Their Arse Without Approval From the Emperor." Adrian took the insult without retort, and we left the farmer screaming at us as we rode away.

Adrian commented irritably, "He just wanted us to solve his problem for free. If we had time, we would have helped. Now, he will have to pay a few adventurers some silver."

We reached the city of Telhas. Telha was the glorious capital city of the Empire. Telhas was the ugly sister she did not want anyone to know about. The city had wooden walls and very few stone buildings. Adrian commented,

“The region is bereft of stone, so all the stone was quarried elsewhere and transported at great expense.”

We soon learned there was no Adventurer’s Hall in the city. Adrian was angry that he had to pay a silver for a message to the Adventurer’s Hall to deliver the posting for the farmer. There was also no Legion Hall in the wooden-walled city, so we got rooms at the best inn in the small city. The room smelled funny; it smelled like someone had vomited and not been cleaned well.

We spent the prior two nights in an abandoned cabin and a farmer’s outbuilding. So, I was looking forward to using my amulet for a few hours tonight. I was sharing a room with Blaze, who complained about the mattress, “This mattress has more lumps than Lysander’s gravy. I would rather be sleeping on the ground.” But he eventually fell asleep anyway.

I retrieved and placed the amulet on. A happy Oscar barked and circled me, and I paused to give him some attention. Oscar followed me as I walked into the first dungeon room with the ankheg. I created a copy of Konstantin, Blaze, Adrian, and Lucien. I had practiced fighting with these men often, so I felt their manifestations would do them justice. I started with Adrian...

Chapter 95

I lost to Adrian twice before I defeated him during our third fight. The dreamscape creation mimicked the real-world Adrian so well that even his facial expressions and mannerisms reminded me of him. I was wondering if this was perhaps something more than an illusion that the amulet drew from my mind.

“Adrian, where were you born?” I asked after finally defeating him.

The facsimile of Adrian shrugged, “That is not relevant to our practice, Eryk. Are you ready to go again? You need to produce your air discs without announcing the cast to your opponent.” He waved his hand to demonstrate what I was doing. I was putting my palm flat in the orientation of the air disc. It helped me orient the disc in my mind. I didn’t really need to.

I returned to my questions about the constructs and pressed him for something I did not know about him, “What are the names of your parents?”

Adrian looked over at the others for help. They had been standing and watching us. However, Konstantin had been constantly shouting out advice. No one moved momentarily, and then Adrian said, confused, "I do not recall. Should I know?"

I relaxed some. "No. Forget I asked. Take a rest. Konstantin, how about..." The manifestation of Konstantin was already walking forward, loosening his wrist by spinning his short sword, eager to engage. I also noticed his enchanted sword in hand, which he did not have the first time I created a likeness of him here. The amulet was definitely drawing from my memory.

The fight with Konstantin was short as he used my air shield against me. He grabbed the invisible edge to pivot quickly. His sword cut easily into my exposed neck. It happened so fast I did not have time to freeze the environment. I blinked and found myself back in the entry room. I had just died in here, and I was—reset? I touched my neck reflexively. That was a bit unnerving.

I walked back into the first room where the ankheg was, and it was as I had left it. Konstantin did not look regretful for having just killed me. And my dead body was not here. Konstantin barked, "You should have expected that, Eryk. If your opponent knows your tricks, they will use them against you. Again?!" I liked this dream creation as much as I liked the real one.

I fought Konstantin again and lost, this time pausing the environment before his sword pierced my heart as I was on my back on the ground, having tripped when he tangled my legs with an improvised bola. He seemed to be getting better and learning from me.

I realized that I was not fatiguing, feeling injuries, or had a limit on how much aether I could use. I focused on adding these elements into the dreamscape practice. Although I did not want to feel pain, it made sense to include it while I practiced so I could expect it in the real world. Limiting the number of shields was smart as well to get used to my limitations.

I started to rotate who I was fighting. Konstantin always seemed to beat me no matter what I tried. He seemed to be a step ahead. Blaze was easy to beat with my air shield. Lucien was an even match for me, but multiple shields usually put the match in my favor. He did crush my forearm with a lucky blow. After a moment of shock, it was the most intense pain I had felt in the dreamscape. The pain intensity varied, though, like it was trying to find the

appropriate amount from my memories. So, the amulet was adjusting to my knowledge to get things right as I had never had my forearm shattered before.

The more I learned, the better the...Illusion? Simulation? Constructs? I could see why this was such a valuable artifact. It would still need constant 'updating' from the user to fill in the blanks, but it was a great place to practice. I estimated it had been more than six hours, so I left the dungeon. The room was dark, and Blaze was still sleeping. I heard his heavy breaths a few feet away. I had a very small pressure behind my eyes, which made sense as I made small changes to the dreamscape. I felt fully rested, which was very encouraging.

I quietly dressed and planned to saddle the horses before everyone else woke. It should give us a head start on the day's ride. We were headed west on an old trade road. Blaze woke, but realizing he had time to sleep, he just rolled over and ignored me. The horses were excited to see me, and I gave them a quick rub down before saddling them. They each then got the expected apple from my dwindling supply.

Lucien arrived just as the sky was turning gray in the sun's first light. "All done?"

"I couldn't sleep and needed to do something," I explained. Lucien nodded in understanding.

He quickly checked the horses, "Looks good. We can spend more time at breakfast if Adrian lets us. I think Adrian is planning to back off on our pace some. He is feeling the saddle pain like the rest of us." I nodded in agreement and followed Lucien back to the inn. Blaze and Adrian were seated and waiting for breakfast. We sat with them and filled mugs from a pitcher.

Adrian took a draft of his mug, "When we meet the alchemist, Eryk, you will need to show him your dimensional space. You need to impress him with the quality and freshness of the ingredients."

"I thought he already agreed to work for the Duchess?" I sipped my own mug and nearly gagged at the bitterness of the ale. I was getting the impression this inn owner did not like legionnaires. First, the foul-smelling room, and now this terrible ale. I decided I would rather eat a ration bar than trust whatever breakfast was served.

"Agreed is a strong term," Adiran admitted, drinking his own beverage like he lacked taste buds. "The Duchess received a message sending from Lorvo that there were two competing alchemists in town. Our job is to convince one of them to relocate." An overweight man in a filthy leather apron brought out plates of biscuits covered in a gray gravy with chunks of... I think black mushrooms and meat.

I took an apple and ration bar from my pocket and crunched into the apple. "So I just need to show him some of the things I collected in the woods?" Blaze was eating and seemed satisfied with the meal, but I was not even tempted. Lucien was scraping the gravy off and focused on just the biscuits. Adrian took a test bite and then continued eating, accepting the morning offering.

Adrian ate while he talked, "The alchemist we are targeting just graduated from the Imperial College. He had come into some conflict with the already-established alchemist in the city. The Countess of the city asked Duchess Veronica to resolve it. Having two alchemists in one city is a blessing, but these two are causing problems."

Blaze finished his plate and asked, "What if he does not want to relocate?"

Adrian said calmly, "He will not have a choice. Horses ready?" He addressed Lucien, who nodded. Lucien ate his biscuits and gravy, but none of the meat and mushroom chunks hiding inside the gray ooze.

Our packs were secured, and we were on the road moments later. Lucien was right; Adrian was at a much more sedate pace. It was not long before we reached the trade road. It was not well-traveled but easy to navigate. We were all riding abreast, and Adrian was in the middle.

Adrian started talking, "The locals say we are at the tail end of the goblin migration season. Other than that, some giant spiders, gnolls, and giant elk. It is out of rutting season, so the elk will likely not bother us."

"They also mentioned an owlbear after the second round," Lucien added from the right. I guessed they had spent time drinking while Blaze and I went to sleep.

Adrian waved his hand, "The way it sounded from that drunk merchant, I think the owlbear was a companion of someone in these woods. It did not attack him; they always attack when spotted." Adrian sounded confident.

It was mid-morning when Adrian pointed into the dark woods, "Look there, about two hundred yards. Some webbing in the trees. Most likely a giant spider nest." The woods were shadowy, but I could see the strands hanging from the trees. We walked past and stopped when we came to a clearing in the road near midday.

"We will eat and then do some practice in rotation. Eryk can cycle through all of us to get practice with his spell form," Adrian announced.

Lucien and I checked the horses while Adrian remained on guard. Blaze pulled out some hard cheese and jerky for everyone from the saddlebags. As we ate, we all remained vigilant. Blaze asked, "Where are we going to sleep tonight?"

Adrian answered while standing and limbering up, "There are two fortifications spaced equally along the road. Merchants use them, and so will we. Now, Eryk, let's practice."

I do not know who was more shocked, Adrian or me, when I blocked his blade with my sword, protecting my air shield and then using a second air shield to catch his arm, preventing his defense. My wrapped sword slapped into his calf as I quickly backed away. I had practiced the maneuver in the dreamscape and was surprised it went so smoothly.

Adrian rubbed out his leg and turned serious, "No magic shields this time."

I held my own in the next three exchanges with a normal round shield. I had, in fact, gotten better overnight. I was more confident in my instincts and quicker in my reactions. The same was to be said when I fought Lucien and Blaze. Everyone seemed perplexed at my skill advancement as we folded camp and rode down the old road. I remained quiet.

We reached the fortification before sunset. It was just a walled-in area. The stone wall was only fifteen feet high, but the interior was fifty by fifty, with plenty of space for a caravan. There was even a stable inside for the horses on one wall. The entrance was a single ten-foot-wide archway. Adrian walked the interior, "I was hoping the doors would still be here. It looks like the roof and doors are long rotted away. The last merchant caravan didn't even clean the stables."

Lucien motioned to me, "Let us clean what we can and get the horses fed and watered, Eryk."

The evening was spent cleaning the stalls, cleaning general debris out of the structure, and hauling logs to make a barricade over the entrance. It was not easy work, and we were sweaty and tired by sundown. We slept in our bedrolls near the barricade, with pairs of us taking turns on watch. Although the night was full of unusual sounds, nothing disturbed the barrier all night.

We rode hard the next day to the dismay of Lucien and his concern for the mounts. Adrian did not trust the condition of the next fortification and didn't want to have to put in another few hours of work to prepare it. We reached it at midday, and it actually had a door, but Adrian did not stop. We rode on, planning to make Lorvo before nightfall.

Lorvo was in the center of the Telhian Empire but was fairly remote. As we reached the outskirts, I learned that it produced much of the wine in the Empire. Vineyards stretched into the distance along the road worked by men, women, and children. Large carts trailed them as they picked basket after basket and dumped them inside the cart.

When we reached it, the city seemed out of place with high white stone walls. We rode into the city, and the guards had bright white tabards and stopped us diligently, asking questions about our business. Adrian handled them, and we rode toward the center of the city and the familiar central fortification called the Citadel in all cities.

This Citadel was also white stone but with a glossy finish, unlike the outer walls, which I think might have been painted. The Citadel was marble. We turned off before reaching it to ride into the courtyard of the Legion Hall.

The Legion Hall in the city was three stories and also of white marble, just not polished. Four young boys came to take our horses. The courtyard was busy with a handful of legionnaires exercising and practicing. Lucien commented, "A huge difference is when you are connected to the rest of the Empire with a portal."

Blaze asked hopefully, "They have a Displacement Mage?"

"It won't help us," Adrian informed him. "Forgabua does not. Nor do any city on the return trip. The only reason a city this far south has a portal is so the First Citizens can get their wine in a timely manner." His tone was slightly condescending.

The Legion Hall was orderly and clean. We all walked with Adrian to the counter, "Mage Castile's company. One night stay for four legionnaires on Duchess Veronica's business in the city."

The man behind the desk nodded and made notes in his ledger, "The baths will be open till midnight. Then we close them for cleaning. If you need any gear replaced, my assistant can help you." He turned and pointed at a young man who looked eager to please. "Bunk room two on the third floor is currently empty."

Adrian spun and motioned for us to go up the stairs, "The stable hands will bring our bags to the room. We will take to the baths, and then Eryk and I will locate the alchemist." He pulled three large gold coins from his pouch, "Lucien, see about getting him a horse. Check to see if we can requisition one before buying one. Blaze, check our food and ensure we have enough for the horses and six people for six days. If not, get some from the stores in the Legion Hall."

The baths were white marble, and Adrian commented that a quarry was near the city. This city produced both wine and quality marble, so it was not surprising the Count who ruled it appeared to be wealthy. I did not have time to luxuriate in the baths as Adrian had us dressed in borrowed togas and off into the city while our clothes and armor were cared for by the attendants. It was my first time wrapping a toga, and Adrian was amused at my initial difficulty. A toga was a single sheet folded around the body and secured on one shoulder.

Adrian talked to me as we walked while he focused, "The Legion Hall was fairly bare. Normally, this city is packed with men, and two or three mages are quartered here. There are no mages besides the Displacement Mage elsewhere in the city. The Emperor must be serious in his campaign to the east."

"Will that affect us?" I asked as I walked. It felt a little odd to be walking around in a toga-style robe.

"Unlikely unless the war gets out of control," he muttered. His harsh tone made me drop the topic.

We passed large buildings that seemed to be dedicated to pressing grapes and fermenting the resulting juice. Many people had purple-stained hands from their work. Adrian had been to the city before but still asked for

directions. The alchemist shop we were looking for was a gray stone building near the upper city. When we entered, we both paused, a little shocked. The alchemist had bright red skin. He was working on a chemistry set spanning two full-length tables that would make any mad scientist envious.

He did not even notice us as we entered the shop. Adrian cleared his throat. The man in a red hat spun, a wild look in his eyes. As if needing to vent, he yelled, "Look what that bastard did to me!" He indicated his red face and hands. "I look ridiculous!" He calmed down, "No matter. I will get him back ten-fold for this one!" He forced a smile, "Now, what potion, remedy, or salve can I interest you in today, good men?" He was not wearing a red hat. His bright white teeth and his smile on his glossy red face reminded me of the devil.

I leaned into Adrian and whispered, "Maybe we should try the other one."

Chapter 96

The red-skinned alchemist looked ridiculous. His skin looked like red paint, with a slight glisten to it, but this being a magical world, I doubted it was actual paint. He waited patiently for us to ask for our pleasure. I had asked Adrian if perhaps it would be better to try and recruit the other alchemist.

Adrian muttered softly, "No, this is the one Castile said to bring back. Let me do the talking."

Adrian stepped forward, "Alchemist Decimus, I am here to extend an offer for you to come and work for Duchess Veronica of the Sobral Province. You came highly recommended by Instructor Othello at the Alchemist College." I took the time to guess the man was maybe in his mid-twenties, about the same age as me. However, his glossy red coloring and lack of hair made it hard to be sure.

Decimus' eyes went wide, "A Duchess? Wait, where in Pluto's realm is Sobral? Nevermind." He waved off Adrian, "I don't want to work for a Duchess anyway. Politics is a good way to get yourself killed. It is nice to hear one of my instructors thinks I am worthy of a positive reference."

Adrian grimaced as he had to work to convince the man, "She is only hiring you to brew tier-one potions. She is prepared to offer you housing within her Citadel and ten gold a month as compensation." Decimus appeared stunned

at the offer and seemed to consider it. One hundred gold a year did seem like a lot of coin. Although for what potions actually cost, I guess it was not that much.

“Shit,” I muttered quietly to myself. “I chose the wrong profession.” I had not had the option to be an alchemist, but it felt like that needed to be said.

Decimus looked torn. He turned around and ignored us while thinking. He checked on three separate apparatuses working on his potions. As he worked, he asked, “Where is Sobral?” There was a bite on the line, and Adrian knew it.

Adrian responded, “About three hundred miles northeast of here. It is on the banks of the Agantero River.”

“How far from Parvas? Does it have a portal gate?” Decimus asked while pouring a blue liquid into a yellow one to make a green mixture. He took a funnel and began to pour portions of the green liquid into the familiar test tube-shaped vials used for potions.

“A hundred miles by road to Parvas. There is no portal gate in Sobral.” Adrian could sense he was losing the alchemist’s interest. He tried to get him talking, “What are you working on?”

“A foot salve for healing achy feet and killing fungus. My own creation. Works on most muscle aches, but I advertise it just for feet,” he said proudly. “Never knew people would pay so much just to not have stinky feet.” The alchemist chuckled to himself. He addressed Adrian, “No portal means rare ingredients would have to come by road. I chose Lorvo because of the abundance of ingredients and anything not found locally, and I could get from elsewhere in the Empire through the portal.”

Adrian pointed at me, “We have an herbalist with a dimensional pocket spell. He will be at your disposal to collect what you need.”

I gave a short wave and a half-hearted smile, not realizing I qualified as an herbalist. I was not particularly happy about being loaned out to serve as the alchemist’s errand boy. Adrian motioned for me, “Show him, Eryk.”

I walked forward to a free space on the bench. I moved out the mushrooms I had gathered when I left with Maveith and the rarer ingredients the sisters in Sobral City could not use. Decimus immediately got interested. He quickly

sorted the ingredients and mumbled to himself as he did so. He smelled, tasted, and spit. He snapped stems and crushed berries, checking their freshness. He eventually looked up at me, considering again. "If you make this one my assistant, I will go with you."

"Legionnaire Eryk has other duties he needs to help with. While he is on patrol, he can gather your ingredients," Adrian offered.

"You are legionnaires?" He said, studying us in our togas. We had not worn our distinctive red armor to meet with him.

"We are legionnaires from a mage company in extended service to the Duchess," Adrian confirmed.

The alchemist looked at both of us, "There is not enough incentive for me to relocate. The monthly coin, while generous, is still short of what I can make here."

Adrian had been prepared for this: "The compensation is for a quota of healing salves and lesser potions to be produced monthly. After the quota is fulfilled, the Duchess will only tax your additional sales at twenty percent."

"Is that including the Empire tax?" Decimus asked, interested again.

"No, the 10% tax is still owed to the Empire, but the province tax will be twenty percent for you, half the standard for alchemists," Adrian explained. Suddenly, it appeared Decimus was teetering on the edge of accepting. Adrian pushed a little more, offering, "And you can have use of Eryk as an assistant one day a week."

"Wait, what?" I started to ask.

"Agreed!" Decimus added eagerly. "When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow morning," Adrian said, sounding somewhat relieved.

"That is not enough time to finish my current processes and pack all my equipment," the alchemist whined.

"The Duchess has ordered you a tier two alchemist set from the Alchemist College in Telha. You can still pack and pay to have this all shipped to

Sobral,” he indicated to the maze of glassware, burners, funnels, and ingredients.

“There is over two hundred gold worth of equipment here that I paid for!” he sounded a little outraged.

Adrian was growing impatient and looked it over. “Start packing now. Eryk will take what he can in his space, and you can have the rest shipped to Sobral.” He did not wait for a reply and left.

Decimus turned to me, “How big a space do you have?”

I looked around and found a wooden crate a little smaller than I was using to know when my space was full, “You can fill this.” It would only take maybe a tenth of his things. I asked, “Why do you need my help anyway?”

He was looking at the box and his setup, trying to decide what to pack. “Your dimensional space is quite substantial. Even better than I hoped.” He started to disassemble one setup that was not being used, “Alchemy is a dangerous profession. Especially when you experiment with new formulas, they usually tend to explode. With you by my side, I can be more—adventurous.” The white-toothed grin on his red face made him look absolutely demonic.

Great, I was a bomb disposal specialist. I helped him pack the crate as tightly as possible and moved it to my dimensional storage. He did not stop his current projects and was constantly checking on his distillation and filters. I had done some chemistry in high school, so I understood the basics of what he was doing. Decimus then told me to leave as he pulled out other wooden crates and carefully packed things for shipment.

I walked back to the Legion Hall to find Lucien rubbing down the horse he had acquired. I spent some time with him as he explained the whole process of selecting this specific horse for our alchemist. It was just a smaller riding horse and a bit old, but it came from the Legion stables, so it did not cost us anything. Horses in the legion were generally loaned out as needed if they were available at a Legion Hall. Lucien said all the surplus heavy war horses had been sent to the Eastern front to assist in the war effort against the Bartiradians—another sign the Emperor was gearing up for an extended campaign.

Lucien put me to work the entire afternoon getting the horses ready for tomorrow. He did not like that we were pushing them so hard. Even though we

were traveling on easy terrain—almost always roads—the horses were losing weight too fast. Most of the work we did was changing their shoes. Lucien was a good farrier and liked to work on his own mounts even though this Legion Hall had a farrier. I was also getting pretty good, and the horses seemed to prefer me to Lucien. But maybe the horses just preferred me over Lucien because of all the apples I handed out.

We all ate together in the Legion Hall that evening, and Adrian let us know what he had been up to for the day. With a rare smile, he said, “The Count of the city has paid us fifty gold to take the young alchemist off her hands. He was bickering with the old established alchemist in the city, and his shop frequently rang from small explosions.”

“Wouldn’t all of his equipment have been damaged?” I inquired.

“He has a spell form to repair items. At least that is what the instructor at the College told Castile. He is supposedly brilliant but reckless. The best the Duchess could afford,” Adrian admitted while cutting into some lamb chops.

“And I have to work with him?” I said, slightly worried.

Adrian let a grin escape, “You did say you had chosen the wrong profession. Maybe he can teach you to be an alchemist.” For the rest of the meal, I had to deal with everyone saying that I would make a much better alchemist than legionnaire.

That night, I used my amulet in secret to start reading up on the Duchy of Tsinga to learn about the nation I was supposedly from. It was a very humid country, and there were a number of jungles where the Tace wood was harvested from. It was an old Empire fractured from the Kingdom of Keisia long ago. The beast races were common in the lands, and the country was not as wild as the Telhian Empire, which seemed to have claimed a massive amount of land but lacked the military strength to tame it because they were constantly fighting wars at their borders.

My biggest hurdle for being from Tsinga was that they did not speak Latin there. I would need to either learn the language to keep my guise or purchase a translation amulet for the language. The latter option sounded much more appealing to me. I studied the maps and texts and decided I would say I was from a remote fishing village near the city of Tsuengy. Tsuengy was sixty miles west of the capital of Wanoi, and its only exports were listed as fish and tace wood, which I learned grew only in jungles and swamps.

There were many small enclaves of villages throughout the Duchy. It seemed the city of Tsuengy had absolutely nothing remarkable about it, and its population was under five thousand. It was highly unlikely I would ever run into anyone from that region. I was about to leave the dreamscape when I swore. I stumbled across a description of people from southern Tsinga. They were short, even shorter than Telhians, and usually had darker skin. I just hoped we never ran into someone from the faraway nation before I left the Legion.

I exited my dreamscape; my head was clear, and I felt well-rested, having not made any changes to the environment. I sent the amulet to my storage and slept for a few additional hours. In the morning, we ate, saddled the horses, and went to collect Decimus in his shop. He was still packing. We all thought Adrian was going to yell at him. Instead, we all worked together to get things into crates. We had to wait another two hours as he contracted the crates to be shipped to Sobral. Adrian tried to show patience, but we all knew he was close to exploding at the alchemist's delay of our departure.

It was well after midday before we were finally on the road. It also appeared that Decimus was not a very good horseman. Lucien spent all his time trying to help the alchemist get comfortable in the saddle. We had a hundred-mile ride to reach Forgabua. Adrian reluctantly held the pace slow, knowing the poor alchemist was going to suffer from his first extended ride.

As evening approached, we had only made it fifteen miles from Lorvo. Adrian ordered our camp to be set on a small hilltop just off the road. I felt uneasy the entire time we were setting up camp and eating. The bemoaning alchemist was not my worry. He was liberally using his green concoctions on himself to alleviate his muscle pain from the four-hour ride. Lucien and I were ordered to the first watch. The clear sky gave the large blue moon, Neptune's tear, illuminating the area and not requiring glow stones to see.

A shrill cry cracked the night not three hours into our watch. We did not even have to wake Adrian and the others as they were already stirring. Blaze asked, "What was that?"

Adrian had his blade in hand and was adjusting his helm. He said grimly, "Nothing good. Lucien, get the horses ready. Blaze and Eryk to either side of me."

"What about me?" Decimus asked, pulling on his boots frantically.

“Help Lucien with the horses,” Adrian said impatiently. The woods down the hill and across the road cracked as something large broke large branches in its inevitable path toward us. It was going to be one of those nights.

