

A Soldier's Life

- Chapter 97: Another Giant |

Chapter 97: Another Giant

The blue light of the moon lit the road below us, maybe a quarter mile away. Creatures started scurrying across, fleeing the destruction behind them. “No glowstones!” Adrian warned us unnecessarily.

Two deer and then two large boars crossed the road, fleeing for their lives. Branches were shattered as a behemoth burst onto the road behind the fleeing creatures. It took me a moment to process what I was seeing. Adrian whispered harshly at Lucien, “Keep the horses quiet!” A massive bipedal giant was on the road. In one hand, it held a small boar, and in the other, a club. Its head made no sense until I realized it was not one head but two. Adrian told us all, “Stay low; it is hunting the forest creatures. It will pass us by.”

It stood in the road, seemingly confused by the clearing and looking both ways, one with each head looking in each direction. Blaze whispered, “What is it?”

Adrian answered as we all crouched low, “An ettin—a two-headed giant. I’ve never seen or fought one before, but I heard they are a nightmare to fight. Each head controls an arm independently, but that is all I know about them.”

We watched as the ettin decided its next move. Adrian commented, “He is a big boy, easily over fifteen feet and, my guess, over two thousand pounds. We should be fine and will ride out when it gets far enough away.” As if he cursed us, the horse Decimus had been riding whinnied. The mare started to get scared, and it was because the foul smell of the ettin was blowing in our direction. The ettin’s heads were feverishly scanning for the source of the noise.

“Dragon shit. Lucien, tie that horse to a tree. We will leave it behind, and it should satiate the ettin’s hunt,” Adrian ordered.

“Maybe it won’t find us,” Blaze added, and then the horse panicked and neighed louder. Both heads quickly looked at us up on the hill. That horse was never getting another apple from me. The ettin charged toward our hill, intent

on harvesting more food tonight. Lucien had only saddled two horses while Decimus had been tying the riding horse off. Blaze was firing arrows even before Adrian ordered it.

“Take the horses down the far side of the hill, but leave that riding horse behind!” Adrian ordered. He was not panicked, but his voice was stressed. The riding horse was not cooperating, and its lead line was pulled free. I heard Lucien swear at the alchemist for not trying the line tight. The riding horse bolted down the far side of the hill. Our hopes of leaving behind a target for the ettin dashed.

You could feel the ground shake as the ettin lumbered toward us and up the hill. We only had a few dozen seconds. Blaze no longer had a line of sight on it. Lucien was leading the remaining horses away with the petrified alchemist.

“Blaze retreat as well,” Adrian ordered. “Take a few shots if you can from a distance, but get the alchemist to Sobral. Eryk, go with them. I should be able to frustrate it long enough to delay it. Tell Delmar I am sorry about not returning his runic sword.”

I don’t know why I didn’t follow the order, but I said, “I still need some practice with my wind barrier. It would be a shame to waste the opportunity.” I took a defensive stance next to Adrian.

I thought I sounded pretty cool, but Adrian just said, “Fool,” and prepared himself. The trees parted in a cracking of branches and flurry of leaves, and the ground shook, and the two-headed giant raced up the final stretch. The giant was wide and thick. Its ugly faces reminded me of the manticore and ogre. I did not have time to think as it was about to reach us.

“Back up. I will trip it with my air discs,” I said, and Adrian nodded. I laid two air discs side by side about three feet off the ground. Adrian and I retreated, and the trap worked. With five arrows in its chest, the ettin tripped in its run at us. I dove to my right to avoid the behemoth crashing down. The left head focused on me, and the boar in its hand was flung at me.

I was surprised, but it only took a thought and push of aether to summon another disc in the path of the projectile. The limp boar crashed into the shield and halted its flight. The air shield broke and was a lot bigger than I had thought, but it never reached me. The massive ettin thundered into the ground, shaking trees. A wave of foul air hit me, and all I could think was this was worse than the ogre.

Adrian had already closed and slashed at one of the heads on his side with his runic blade. The head screamed in anger and panic as the creature swiped widely at Adrian, who danced away. I did not hesitate to outline a box inside the creature's upper chest and move it to my dimensional storage. I overcame a strong resistance, and my aether bottomed out. I was getting accustomed to the slight vertigo in losing all my aether. The ettin had been getting to his feet, and was currently on all fours. It paused, both its heads suddenly confused. It crashed back down into the earth, shaking everything again.

Adrian was breathing heavily on the other side of the downed creature. "Did you kill it? Or is it playing dead?" I asked with my spear in hand and kneeling behind the boar.

Adrian said nothing and studied the creature, "I don't think it would play dead; it didn't seem smart enough." Minutes passed as we waited. Adrian offered, "Maybe the arrows Blaze got into its chest pierced its heart when it fell on them?"

That sounded very plausible. "Blaze the giant killer then," I returned and let out a laugh.

"You shared in the victory, Eryk. Nice thinking with the air discs," Adrian returned happily and finally started to relax.

My adrenaline was finally wearing off as well, and the creature's smell was overwhelming. Adrian considered and said, "Gather the rest of the things in camp. I will go get the others."

I objected weakly, as I wanted the essence from the giant, "I am fine with getting them. I am the scout, after all."

"No, you stay," Adrian said, holding his nose. "You won't have to search the dark woods as a reward for helping kill the creature." It was obvious Adrian wanted to retreat from the smell.

I wrapped a bandana around my nose and mouth as Adrian hurried off, calling into the darkness in a moderated voice. Sure that he was gone, I produced the collector when I had restored enough aether and approached the corpse. The stench came through the mouth covering. I placed the plate, activated it, and waited. Blue wisps of glowing smoke swirled toward the disc. A major essence formed in the moonlight, and I needed to use a glowstone to see that

it was light green. I had thought the giant would yield a physical essence, but instead, I had an essence for the mental attribute of perception.

I considered adding it to my collection. I had consumed the second glossy black essence to enhance my aether channeling during the ride to Lorvo. I still had the minor essence of empathy but was holding on to it in case I needed to sell it. The idea of consuming this green ball from something that smelled so bad made me hesitate. I got myself upwind and then let the sphere dissolve in my mouth. Holding my nose even though it was unnecessary.

I suppressed my gag reflex and let the essence do its work. I had a slight brain freeze, and my eyes ached for a time before normalizing. Maybe things appeared a little sharper in my vision. I was not sure, though, under the blue moonlight. Unlike the ogre, the ettin had clothes on. Not really clothes but hides. He had a bandolier of pouches now trapped under his body—except for one. I collected everything in the campsite, sat upwind of the creature, and waited. It had been almost two hours before they returned with the horses. They also caught the riding horse that had escaped and altered the ettin to our presence.

We quickly packed the horses, and before we left, I asked Adrian, “Are ettin normal in the Telhian Empire?”

“No. They are from another continent. If I had to guess, then this is another summoning by the Bartiradian mages. They are trying to disrupt cities and roads as much as possible to draw the legion companies from the war. When we reach Forgabua, I will report the killing.”

“Should we search the pouch?” I asked, pointing it out. Adrian took out a glowstone as the moon had waned with the night. He approached, covering his nose. He took a belt knife, cut it free, and dragged it to us.

The horses were already ancy from the smell, so we walked a distance away before opening the sack. “Probably made from the stomach of something it killed,” Adrian noted. He cut the bag open rather than work the cord that cinched it shut. I was expecting chunks of meat or bones. Instead, a myriad of colorful gems spilled from the bag in the light of the aether stone.

The alchemist, who looked sick for most of the encounter, moved in immediately interested. He smelled strongly of urine, and I assumed he pissed his pants. He started going through the pile using a glowstone, “Uncut and raw stones. I use a few in my work. Let us see, some amethyst, citrine, and

garnets here.” He sounded disappointed. “Ah, this is an emerald, I believe.” He held the glowstone behind it to confirm the green color.

Adrian was done waiting, “Blaze, pack it up and load it all on the horses.” The alchemist put the emerald down and reluctantly let Blaze collect stones. “My guess is the ettin liked shiny things. Some species of giants act like no more than petulant children. We will let Castile decide what to do with them.”

“Some decent stones in the bag. I am not a jeweler, but maybe two or three hundred gold there,” the alchemist offered hopefully. “The yellow citrine stones are of some use to me in my alchemy. The others, not so much. I use ruby and sapphire dust mostly.” No one was listening to his rambling as the wind shifted and the ettin smell came to us.

“Should we search the other pouches under its body?” I asked reluctantly.

Adrian looked, considering, “You are welcome to it. Anything recovered would be yours.”

“I think I will pass,” I said, remembering the stench that Mateo had for days after the ogre.

Lucien and Blaze were not as reluctant and took up Adrian’s offer. They worked under the light of the glowstones while we moved a safe distance away. Since everyone else was awake, I took the time to get some sleep, spreading my bedroll on the ground.

I was awoken with a soft kick to my boots. “Eryk, we are heading out. Sun is coming,” Adrian said.

I sat up to find Lucien and Blaze still working, covered in gore. “Did they find anything,” I asked while rolling up my bedroll.

Adrian nodded, “Another sack filled with merchant silver bars and coins. They think there might be a similar sack of gold and have been going hard at it the last hour.”

“Guess I missed out,” I said, unconcerned.

“Well, they plan to share it with you. After all, you were the one who stayed behind to help me fight it.” Adrian called to them, “Twenty minutes, and we ride out whether you find it or not! And you ride twenty yards behind us!”

We waited an hour after sunrise until they finished. They had cut the ettin's arms and legs off and rolled its torso. The other two pouches had rotting meat in one and white ivory fangs in the other that the alchemist thought were from a species of large cat. They were disappointed there was no gold. Still, they had 60 gold worth of silver, almost thirty-eight pounds in merchant bars and coins.

Blaze noted from a safe distance, "It was a lot lighter than I thought it would be when we rolled it." I nodded, glad they had not searched its chest cavity and found the hollow space inside. I was the last to leave and dumped the ettin's internals from storage before mounting Titan and following.

Lucien and Blaze were still happier than a pig in shit, and they smelled like it too. Maybe worse. It was so bad that even the horses did not like them riding on them. We stopped at a wide stream and gave the two an hour to clean off. Like Mateo's ogre encounter, the smell lingered, and they were forced to remain twenty yards behind as we rode.

We stayed in a town that evening about fifty miles south of Forgabua. The red-skinned Decimus got a lot of stares, but I could already see his red skin tone fading. It was no longer glossy red, and he confided in me that the coloring would take nearly a month to return to normal.

Lucien and Blaze ended up staying in a barn on the edge of town while we took to the modest inn in town. I do not think the horses appreciated the two joining them for the night when I came to give them apples. I even gave an apple to the Decimus' riding mount that had almost gotten us all killed. My forgiveness lay in the fact we lived, and I got an essence from the ettin.

I had my own room in the inn, and the bed was relatively comfortable. I put on the amulet and spent my time in the dreamscape, divided between studying the three books on Tsinga and working on my spell form for the time affinity.

We made the fifty miles to Forgabua the next day, pushing the horses and Decimus' aching body. I could see Decimus regretting his life's decisions as he ran out of potions that relieved achy feet and killed fungus. Still, he mentioned he would rather be in a city tonight than have another night encounter with a giant ettin—not that Decimus participated in the battle.

Chapter 98: Spoiler

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Renna walked the halls of the Mage College. She really could not believe she was here and, truth be known, didn't want to be here. She had recently arrived and was left on her own to acclimate, as High Mage Livian had said. The school was currently out of session for the New Year holiday. She was enrolled in the newest class of Aspirant Mages.

An Aspirant Mage was one who had the potential to cast true spells, learning to manipulate their aether to create spell forms in the air. They also needed to have demonstrated spell forms for at least one affinity. Once she cast her first true spell, she could be called a Mage. There were two higher classes of mages. A Master Mage who had demonstrated mastery over multiple spells, and finally, a High Mage whom the Emperor raised for their unparalleled mastery of magic in a specific affinity.

She had spent the last five months working with High Mages to help inscribe her spell forms on her aether core. Now that she had all four of her powerful spell forms, she was to attend the Mage College in hopes she would realize the ability to cast actual spells. She had sufficient potential in her attributes, but that still did not guarantee it would happen.

Her spell forms made her powerful on her own, even if she never learned to cast true spells. She flashed back to when she found out she had high affinities. When she was fifteen, she had been too ill to travel to the city for the tablet testing. She should have traveled on her sixteenth the following year, but her mother lost her sister in childbirth, and she missed again to comfort her mother. Then, everyone seemed to have forgotten she had never been tested after that. It was rare for someone to have enough potential to be a Mage, so she had dismissed the possibility herself.

On her eleventh summer, Renna had been apprenticed to Helena, her town's only basket weaver. She spent her mornings learning the different basket weavings and honing the craft. During her afternoon, she was sent harvesting materials. Mostly the flax and bulrush. The harvest of two large bundles never took more than two hours if she was motivated, giving her time to relax. Her favorite pastimes were swimming, collecting river stones, and talking to shepherd Byron as he tended to his sheep. Byron and she would be married as soon as he could build himself a house and obtain a flock of his own. The small, smooth river stones she gathered every day would one day line the paths of their house.

She had been cliff-jumping at the swimming hole just outside the village when she wondered what it would be like to really fly. Shockingly, it happened on her eighth jump of the morning. She had closed her eyes, expecting to hit the water, but never did. When she opened her eyes, she was thirty feet over the pond. After that, learning to move freely in the air had been exhilarating.

She kept it a secret, not wanting to be called to serve in the wars the Empire was constantly fighting. She was caught by the miller's son when she was flying low over the trees a few weeks later. He had been jealous of Byron and her relationship and reported her ability to the Magistrate. Soon, a tablet was rushed out to test her, and the Magistrate was shocked by the readings. Renna was a powerful Elemental, having powerful affiliates in the four elements and also in nature.

She was sent immediately to the nearest city to serve the Empire as all citizens with potential were. She spent some three weeks waiting under the Count's care for her fate. The Count doted on her, and she lived in luxury, every need attended to by a half dozen servants. She was finally told she would receive the highest level of training to imprint her spell forms before being sent to the Mage College in the capital. She was also to be wed to one of the Emperor's sons, although no decision had been made on which one.

Three days later, an old and wisened-looking mage came to collect her and train her in her first spell form. Master Mage Dacian was not happy to train her, and he made that clear. "A farm girl with no common sense been given power beyond comprehension. If the Emperor did not ask me personally to train you, I wouldn't do it."

"Yes, Master Mage," she said respectfully. She knew not to correct him and tell her she was a basket weaver.

"Well, I will get you started on your path, and you can ask me questions in the evening. You are lucky, as Earth magic is the strongest of all the common affinities. You are going to learn a powerful spell form that will allow you to compress the earth into stone. This can be used in hunting monsters, building fortifications, and also in building some of the most impressive structures in the Empire." He explained during their first meeting.

"That is going to be my job. Building things for the Empire?" Renna asked her first mentor.

“Ha, no. But you might be asked to help here and there. I hear one of the Emperors younger sons needs a new wife. Once you complete your time at the Mage College, you will bear him children in hopes the affinities you carry will transfer to them,” the gruff old Mage said.

“I was to marry Byron, the shepherd I grew up with,” Renna responded hesitantly. She was not naive and knew she would probably never see him again as her fate had been stolen from her.

High Mage Dacien laughed at her, “Girl, you are too good for a shepherd. You will understand that once you attend the College and learn to cast true magic.”

The two weeks with Dacian were not that bad. Every evening, he gave her two hours to ask questions about the magic books he had loaned her. He also had her focus on the spell form for compressing earth and stone. He came to her one morning, “Come, girl. Word has come of a bulette in the south. A little fresh air and your first lesson in hunting monsters!”

They traveled through the portal gates, and Dacian bought two horses for them to ride out and meet a mage company. When they arrived, she was surprised the mage company was led by a woman. It was her first time meeting legionaries, too. The legendary defenders of the Telhian Empire looked impressive in their crimson armor. Besides being fit and muscled, they seemed like normal young men she knew from her village.

She was bunked with three of them: Felix, Mateo, and Eryk. They joked with each other, and Eryk showed interest in her magic. He was a foreigner and was struggling to learn the Telhian script. So she read to him, and they spent time together. He was friendly and nice to her. Not at all intimidated by her powerful potential.

They rode out to fight the bulette, and Renna was afraid the entire time. Dacian thought battle was the best way for a spell form to be forcibly imprinted. He would make sure she had her chance to be put in harm's way. At least she could fly. A bulette couldn't, according to the Mage, but he warned her it could jump really high. When they found the bulette already dead, Master Mage Dacien was angry but didn't show it. She knew him well enough now, though, to see him simmering. He had wanted an earth essence from the bulette. With it dead, he cast off Renna to the care of the mage company.

“Go and learn some leadership skills from Mage Castile. You may be expected to command legionaries one day,” and then he was off, riding back to his research and to practice his spellcraft.

She liked being with the legion company much more than Dacian. She even felt they liked her and were impressed with her flight ability. They searched the mountains to find griffins and locate a lost baron’s son. Her new friends, the weird foreigner Eryk, the young Felix, and clumsy Mateo, treated her like a sister. She thought any of them would make a better husband than the Emperor’s son.

They found a dungeon and the remains of the baron’s son’s party. Their camp was in a cave and set outside a dungeon entrance. A lost dungeon. She had only heard of dungeons in stories before and never thought she would see one herself. They stayed in the cave, and she set up her bedroll next to Eryk. She felt safe near him for some reason.

The next day, they hunted the griffin. The beast was not far, and she watched Mage Castile down the creature with her shadow chains. She was impressed. Mage Castile commanded her magic and men with poise and confidence. One day, she wanted to be just like her. A second griffin fled with its clutch of eggs.

The griffin was harvested, and she watched the legionnaires cut the corpse into pieces fast and efficiently as they soon smoked and salted meat. Renna watched from the side as they worked together and marveled at the comical interactions and efficiency. A few men were sent into the dungeon, returned quickly, and met with Castile and her two leaders, Adrian and Delmar. She liked Adrian, who had an innate charisma to him. Delmar, not so much, as he was uptight and always on the men about supplies.

Eryk returned with the scout, and he had a griffin egg. The entire company rejoiced as it would be a big payday outside of their normal wages, and there could be a reward for finding this dungeon. The mood was incredibly celebratory, but Castile had decided to explore the dungeon and see if anyone was alive inside. It was very unlikely, but they decided to look.

Eryk, the young legionnaire, had been selected, and she was worried for his safety. She knew from stories that dungeons were places where powerful monsters resided and dangerous traps. He could be dead in just a few hours, and she would never see him again. It would be like losing a friend she had not gotten to know yet.

She was panicked when Eryk did not emerge with the others. They found Justin, the baron's son, but at what cost? The scout, Konstantin, she thought his name was, told her, "Don't worry, the boy is alive. He is just a bit slow." Thankfully, Eryk emerged last, and she was relieved.

The walk out of the mountains was awful. Justin Cicero was a terribly selfish person, and the tension he caused was felt throughout the company. It was so bad that Mage Castile sent a few men with him to deliver him to a city while the company traveled north. Renna was to accompany them and make her way back to High Mage Dacian.

The trip was unbearable. Justin was constantly complaining, and the legionnaires humored him. She learned the secret plan was to return as slowly as possible so Castile could report the dungeon before Justin. She hoped they succeeded in the ploy. At least she got to spend more time with Eryk on the ride, just in the evenings when they were setting up camp.

It was an adventurous ride, to be sure. They fled a troglodyte, avoided a treant, and saw other creatures in the distance during their ride. She was happy to see the safety of the city walls of Varvao. Justin immediately abandoned them in disgust, and she knew he would get some revenge on Castile in the future. The man was too spiteful not to try something.

Before leaving, she told Eryk, "I hope our paths cross again. Remain safe in your travels." She really had meant it but doubted she would see the foreign legionnaire again. He would either be dead, or she would be walled up in Citadel and married to one of the Emperor's son.

Only a week later, under Dacian's guidance, she imprinted the spell form for compressing earth and stone. Dacian seemed more pleased with himself for getting her to learn it than her actually learning it. "You will be visiting High Mage Zyna now. She is a competent fire mage and has the favor of the Emperor. Make sure and tell her how superior my training was compared to hers," he said with an arrogant smile, trying to be funny.

"Yes, High Mage Dacian," Renna replied dutifully. She left, thankful her time with the condescending Mage was over.

The trip to join Master Mage Zyna was quick. One portal and a three-hour horse ride. Master Mage Zyna was tall for a Telhian, standing over six feet. She was also a Baron of a small region in the north of the Empire on the coast. Her estate was humble, located in a modest fishing town. Renna was

confused as it was not what she expected from one of the Empire's most powerful mages. Zyna appeared middle-aged, but that did not mean much for the favored ones of the Emperor. There were rumors of a powerful mage in the Emperor's service that could halt a person's aging.

"Welcome, Renna. My servants will see you settled, and then we can talk," Zyna waved to a servant who directed Renna to follow.

The room was in a small wood and stone tower on the estate and had a view of the ocean. The bed and furniture were exquisite, and everything about the room told her a young woman used to live there. Maybe Zyna's daughter in the past? She made herself at home before she was summoned to dinner with Zyna. She quickly changed into her only set of clothes, which were clean but not up to the standard of the nobility.

They were the only two at the table, and much of the food was harvested from the sea. Zyna explained each dish. Giant crab and clam stew, rainbow salmon, and kelp salad. Everything was good except the salad, which Renna found slightly salty. She preferred when the kelp was used to wrap rice and meat into rolls and then dipped in a variety of sauces. With dinner finished, Zyna gave her first lesson.

"Fire is the ultimate elemental affinity, Renna. Fire can destroy, create, or protect. Fire gives heat in the winter to keep the people alive, and the sun's inferno spreads light to grow the food we eat. Fire, unchecked, can erase cities and melt flesh. You need to decide how you will use this most powerful gift," Zyna advised her with a motherly seriousness.

"Yes, Master Mage," Renna said obediently.

Zyna frowned, "Fire is power. You need to decide how it is to be used. For your spell form, I have decided to let you choose. I was ordered to have you imprint the spell form for wave of fire so you can assist on the battlefield. But the fire is subservient to no one. You must choose your own path. You have four weeks to choose and imprint your spell form. Then I will send you on to High Mage Livian to learn your water spell form."

Renna studied and thought long and hard about her path in her fire affinity. Zyna was definitely not what she expected. Zyna was firm but let Renna make her own mistakes and never talked down to her like Dacian had done daily.

She enjoyed her time on the coast, and the salt air was refreshing. Even the salty kelp salad grew on her after enough meals. It only took her three weeks of study and effort to imprint her spell form. She thought it was powerful and useful.

It was called consume flame. It was only a mid-tier spell, but her high affinity gave it a range of almost fifty feet around her. The spell drew in all fire and most of the heat in the area, allowing her to direct it to a corridor. She could put out fires in a city by directing the heat upward or canceling other fire mages on the battlefield. If no fires were present, the spell would greatly cool an area around her and cause frost to form as it stole the heat away.

Zyna seemed to approve of her choice, which made Renna feel good. Zyna told her as she was leaving, "There will be some backlash to you learning the wrong spell form from fire." She smiled reassuringly, "Just tell them I directed you to learn consume flame. I will take all the heat for the decision." Her play on words made Renna smile. She liked Zyna and wished she had grown up with her as a mother and mentor. She never found out what happened to the girl whose room she used during her three weeks at the estate. The servants told her not to brooch the subject with Zyna.

She was then sent off to learn her final elemental spell for water. They had not told her she would be learning any spell form for nature, so she hoped that would again be her decision.

High Mage Livian lived in the capital and even taught classes at the Mage College. When Renna showed her flight, hardened earth, and consume flame spell forms, she just nodded as each was demonstrated.

"They should have never sent you to Zyna for instruction. She is too lenient. I am not. You will imprint the spell form summon rain. Your affinity is strong enough to give you a vast area of effect. You can slow an army with mud or save the fields from drought. You will be useful to the Empire."

Although Livian was firm, she was fair. She explained things in much more detail than Dacian and was always patient but did not like stupid questions. She had a month to learn summon rain as the New Year was approaching, and with it, she would be enrolled in the Mage College.

She succeeded during that time, having become well-practiced in learning a spell form. She was moved from Livian's villa in the city to a small room at the Mage College. The corridors were empty as the students were off celebrating

the New Year, and many of the Mages were sent to the Eastern Border war with the Bartiradians. She wondered if Eryk and the others were there, fighting for their lives.

She had a few days to herself before she would face her biggest challenge yet. She would have to fit in with the nobles of the Empire as most students at the Mage College were from the nobility. Master Mage Zyna advised her to keep to herself and not show off her power. High Mage Dacian had advised her she needed to assert herself early and demonstrate her strength. High Mage Livian said she needed to learn as much as possible in her seven short years at the College.

She nervously wandered the halls, familiarizing herself with the College. Soon, she would find out if she would become a true mage.

Chapter 99: Good Showing

We rode through the gates of the city just before sunset. I had tempered my healing so my aches and pains would not need to be faked. Adrian registered our travel with the gate guards, and then we moved into the city. Adrian handed out orders. "Lucien and Blaze, go to the public baths. Do not head to Legion Hall until you at least smell bearable. Lucien, report the ettin kill at the Legion Hall."

Lucien groaned, "That is right, the Legion Hall in Forgabua does not have baths."

Adrian turned to me, "Eryk, go get a bunk room in the Legion Hall for you, Mateo, and Lucien. See if they have another horse we can borrow. I will take Decimus to an inn and stay with him tonight."

Blaze asked, "Why don't we all just stay at the inn? It would be more comfortable than the Hall." He sounded hopeful.

Adrian considered, "Are you offering to pay legionnaire?" He leaned in close, "I am staying with him to ensure he does not change his mind about serving the Duchess. However, inns in the upper city should cost around two to three gold for five rooms. Still interested?"

Blaze countered, "Why does it have to be the upper city? An inn by the outer wall is just as good—and cheaper."

"Because first thing in the morning, I am visiting the local Scholarium to recruit a Scholar for the Duchess," Adrian replied slickly. "You all can wait for me in the Legion Hall." Adrian trotted into the city smugly. I couldn't blame him. Whenever I almost got myself killed, I wanted to pamper myself a bit too.

Lucien patted Blaze on the shoulder, "Let's try and get the giant stink off of us and log the silver with the Legion Hall."

"You don't get to keep it?" I asked, confused as we parted ways.

"We do, but best to pay the taxes on it. Especially since we have to exchange the stamped merchant silver. We don't want the Empire thinking we robbed some merchants," Lucien commented.

It took me asking two people, a baker and then a wool merchant, to find the Legion Hall. I should have assumed it was near the Citadel. The Legion Hall was wood and reminded me more of a church on the outside. A high steeple challenged the Citadel to be the tallest building in the city.

The stables were in a secure courtyard in the back, and no one was available to help. I unsaddled Atlas, rubbed him down, laid hay in the stall, and filled his water trough from the well. I gave him an apple and hoped after the long, hard ride he could get some needed rest.

Entering the Legion Hall, it was a massive room with a high ceiling. The massive wooden posts supporting the structure were carved all the way to the ceiling. It was just like a church without the pews and large stained glass windows. I passed a few men lounging in padded chairs, their sweat stink lingering. The clerk at the desk waived me over, "Yes, legionnaire?"

"Three from Castile's company for the night on Duchess Veronica's business," he quickly noted it down. I asked, "Have there been any monster attacks in the area recently?"

He looked from his book with a sour expression, "Always," he said deadpan.

"Unusual activity," I probed.

He gave it more thought, “A wyvern in Alhao and some manticores near Parvas. Are you tracking anything in particular?”

“No, we just encountered an ettin on the road from Lorvo. One of my companions will do the formal report.” I replied.

“An ettin? Are you sure? That is a two-headed giant,” the clerk said doubtfully.

I held up my hand and counted slowly, “One, two, yep, definitely two heads.” The clerk soured, and my attempt at humor was obviously over his head. As was my patience for his lack of belief in my statement. Lucien could handle the report. He directed me to the east wing of the facility, the second floor. The first floor was a kitchen staffed by a half dozen old women. They were cleaning up from dinner. I ordered meals for Lucien, Blaze, and myself before heading up to the barracks room.

The barracks room had forty bunks and windows down the back courtyard. None of the bunks were occupied. There were plenty of blankets, no pillows. I dropped my saddle bags and pack and made up a bed by the window. The courtyard had a dozen legionnaires practicing with spears and swords under bright glow stones. The sun had set, and I hoped their practice would end soon. Then maybe the clerk had put us here because of the noise. I guess I should have been friendlier.

I collected the meals in the kitchen and brought them up to the bunk room. It was some type of shepherd’s pie. The beverage was a weak wine that was fruity. I finished eating and was wondering what was taking Blaze and Lucien so long. The clang of sword and spear on a shield was getting annoying as I lay on the thin hemp mattress. I went to the window and watched them from above.

The group was a mage company as their young mage was watching their training, and the legionnaires all looked fresh in shiny metal armor. Since they had metal armor, it meant these were all volunteers and not conscripts. Brutus and Flavius were volunteers, and I was surprised they were still in our company.

I used my healing to make sure I was all healed up and headed down to the practice yard with my shield and sword. I considered heading to the baths but would wait until Lucien and Blaze arrived. Twenty legionnaires and the mage commander were spread out in the yard. One of the lieutenants approached, “Legionnaire, are you here to train?”

I thought that was obvious, but I nodded, "We are passing through on an escort mission for a Duchess. My companions are at the baths, and I can not sleep with all the racket."

He looked up at the barracks window and back at me. He spoke softly, "Sorry about that. Mage Sylvester is new and was assigned to this city after two other mage companies were pulled for the eastern border. He does not have a lot of experience. I am Xavier," he extended, and we clasped wrists.

He turned and indicated to the company, "The other lieutenant is Solomon. We both were assigned to the new mage, and he had us training the men non-stop. He doesn't understand half the things we fight are not human."

"I am Eryk, can we spar then?" I asked. I was more interested in adding more variety to the dreamscape amulet.

He grimaced, "I was the sword champion of my legion class six years ago. Perhaps you would prefer a less experienced opponent?"

"No," I started to apply the wrap to my blade. He just nodded and did likewise. I noticed his blade was too shiny as he wrapped, so I assumed it was an artificed blade like Adrian and Konstantin. We soon faced off; he was quicker than me and just as strong. He scored six successive hits, but I got a feel for his style.

He then completely changed his style, a grin forming on his face. "I grew up in a count's household. I have held a sword since I was five," he deflected my blade with his shield.

I would have been frustrated if I was not intent on studying him. He was better than Konstantin, well, more refined anyway. He had less wasted movement and planned his moves well in advance. It was not long before we were both sweaty. I could see he was tiring as the one advantage I seemed to have was superior fitness. Xavier paused the exchanges to get a drink, "Don't you ever slow down?" He drained his canteen.

"I only picked up a sword for the first time seven months ago," I replied, taking a ladle of water nearby.

"Seven months? Never would have guessed. You are better than everyone here with the exception of Solomon and myself," Xavier complimented me.

Two of his men overheard and disagreed, "Let us have at him then? Why keep the conscript all to yourself, Xavier?"

I shrugged and faced them, "If I defeat you two, then let me train with the master swordsman."

The first man telegraphed his attacks as clear as day. I easily blocked his attack with my shield and knocked his forehead with the butt of my sword. The loud crack knocked him out, and he collapsed. "Shit!" I said nervously.

Then I remembered there was healing magic. Mage Sylvester came over and kneeled before his unconscious man. "It is fine. I have some lesser healing magic. He was sloppy with his footwork. I am Mage Sylvester, and Xavier did not mention that I have beaten him more than once in combat."

"You are a fair swordsman, Mage Sylvester. But without your magic tricks, you would lose to me every time," Xavier countered his claim with a grin. Sylvester healed the concussion, and the embarrassed man walked away. The other man did not seem willing to remind me he wanted to challenge me.

"I was enjoying watching you two. The conscript is a fast learner. Did I hear you say seven months?" The mage commander questioned.

Nodding, I answered, "Yes, but I have some competent teachers in Castile's company."

Sylvester looked surprised, "Mage Castile? Heard about her humiliation in Macha. Though, can not say I am sad to hear of Durandus' death."

I held my tongue in defending Castile as I was not sure how the mage would respond. "Durandus got himself killed. Castile had nothing to do with it."

"I have no contention with Mage Castile. Who are you escorting for a Duchess?" Sylvester asked.

"You must have a spell form for listening," I surmised. He had been on the other side of the courtyard when Xavier and myself had talked.

The mage put on a genuine smile, "How observant of you. Xavier took almost a week to figure it out. Please continue with swordplay." He stepped back and did not press the issue of who I was escorting for a Duchess. I was glad of

that as this was the first time I interacted with another mage company. I did not want to give away things I shouldn't.

I spent the next two hours practicing with Xavier, never using my air shield. Xavier was good, and I kept healing his bruising strikes on me. It was getting late into the night, and everyone was exhausted. I even got some glancing strikes on Xavier as he fatigued. Mage Sylvester called, "That is enough for tonight. We patrol the eastern road tomorrow after mid-day meal!" The exhausted men almost collapsed.

"Thank you for your time," Xavier said while wiping his face of crusted salt. "Truthfully, I did not expect much from a conscript. You have to be one of the toughest men I have practiced with in a while."

"What he means by that is you can take a beating," Solomon interrupted. "Just glad it was not me." Xavier and Solomon left together to talk about their men.

I went up to the barracks rooms to find a sleeping Blaze. He stirred on seeing me, "We just got in. Had to wait for our clothes to be boiled in lye and dried. Lucien brought the horses over and will file the report for the ettin." I pointed to the cold dinner, and Blaze said, "Thanks, but we ate at the baths."

Lucien came into the room, "All set. They are going to send out a patrol to confirm, but word was sent to the Legatus Legonis office. The Hounds will probably be sent to see if they can find where it came from. Good news, Eryk, I have your share of the silver." He tossed me a small cloth bag. "Nine gold, six silver."

"Is Adrian getting anything?" I asked, moving the small pouch to my space.

"No, but he will always drink for free when I am around," Lucien said, and Blaze nodded. "You were both ready to sacrifice yourselves so we could get away."

I did not contradict them. I nodded and asked, "Any baths opened this late?"

Blaze chuckled, "They closed the baths when we entered. Should be baths on the other side of the city, but traveling the streets in the dark..." He left it unsaid.

I sighed, stripped, and took a prone position on the bed, rolling a blanket for a pillow. When my companions put out the lights, I removed the amulet. I wondered how Xavier would fair against Konstantin in the dreamscape.

Chapter 100: Reunion with an Old Friend

In the dreamscape, Xavier and Konstantin had some good fights. Xavier won almost every time, though. But this may have been my subconscious effort to put Konstantin in his place; I did not know how much my desire affected the outcome. After watching for a good hour, I joined them. I would fight one while the other watched and then gave me feedback. Then, I would switch.

I was not sure how much I was getting from this practice, but I knew that muscle memory translated into the real world. The best part about all this work was I was getting a good night's sleep as long as I did not make too many additions to the environment.

I spent seven hours in the dreamscape before exiting. I found my companions sleeping peacefully. I took their uneaten meals down to the kitchen. The old women were just starting breakfast and scolded me for the uneaten food. They did allow me to take some rolls stuffed with hard-boiled eggs and a spicy paste. As I entered the street, the sky was turning gray with the new day. People were already starting their day, filling the street, and after a few questions for directions, I was at the baths.

Smoke billowed from a chimney; inside, I found these baths worked slightly differently. There was a steam room, a shower, and then into the hot soaking tubs. I gladly paid the silver for the bath and cleaning. I was resting in the tub when Xavier, Solomon, and Sylvester entered.

Sylvester spoke for the group, "Legionnaire Eryk, you are up early. I thought you would be recovering from last night's—lessons."

"I am," I indicated the hot water. I hoped they wouldn't notice I had no bruises.

"Fair enough," Xavier said, sitting down across from me. He let out a sigh of contentment as the hot water embraced his body. Once they were all seated, he asked, "When are you off today?"

“Adrian will come and get us in the Legion Hall when he is ready. He is staying at an inn with our charge,” I replied.

The mage commander, Sylvester, asked, “Did your company really kill an ettin? I saw the report this morning.”

“It was more luck than anything. Our bowman got a few arrows into it, and it tripped and drove the arrows into its heart,” I replied, trying not to sound smug.

“Extremely lucky as they have two hearts,” Solomon added contemplatively. “Fought them once before escorting a Duke to Tegairosia. They have thick hides, take a massive beating, and still fight on.”

“We must have been really lucky then,” I said quietly. I tried to get off the topic and asked the mage a question, “Mage Sylvester, are there more creatures out and about than normal? I heard the Bartiradian mages are summoning them.”

Sylvester nodded, which got Solomon and Xavier’s attention, “It is true. The Elven High Mage Traeliorn Kelran, a master summoner, is sneaking around the Empire. Maybe one or two of his apprentices as well.”

Everyone was silent. I broke the silence by asking, “How does summoning work?”

The mage stretched, and he did have a warrior’s body, although extremely lean. He said, “It is complex magic. It weaves displacement and mind magic together. The mage opens a portal to the creature and entices the creature to come through to perform a task. The more powerful the mage’s affinities, the more powerful the creatures he can summon.” He stood, “That is not all there is to it. He needs to locate the creatures to summon them, have enough aether to do it, and also make sure the creature does not kill him if it resists his efforts to control it. It is powerful and dangerous magic, and as far as I know, there are only two summoners in all of the Telhian Empire.”

Sylvester stepped out, and an attendant boy handed him a robe to dry in. His two lieutenants rose to follow him. Xavier said as he left, “I hope we have a chance to practice together again.”

I left the bath and returned to the Legion Hall. Adrian had not arrived, and I tackled getting another mount. The stables only had our three horses, so I did

not think the Legion Hall had any more. I confirmed at the desk. Mage Sylvester was doing a foot patrol with his unit to train them and did not have mounts. I was referred to a horse trader outside of the city. Lucien was awake and decided to come with me when I informed him.

The horse merchant was a good mile outside the city walls, but I did not mind walking. As we walked, Lucien told me where he grew up. "My father broke in horses for tilling fields. He worked for a very minor baron, and a disease swept through the herd. The baron lost his estate shortly after going bankrupt. The new owners had no use for my family. I was ten back then. My father got a job as a farrier in the city but couldn't support my mother, two sisters, and me. When I was twelve, I left to work the fields."

"How did you end up in the legion?" I inquired.

"Dumb mistake. A few of the young fieldhands tried to sell the harvest on the side. We were caught. It turned out for the best. The other three caught with me went into the regular army and were dead within the year. I just finished my ten years, I am debt-free, and Castile convinced me to stay another term," Lucien said cheerfully. I noted that it took Lucien two terms, ten years, to repay his debt.

We arrived at the stables and pens. Dozens of horses ran the fields nearby. One brown horse darted toward the fence and started neighing. It looked familiar. I walked toward the mare, and I couldn't believe it. "Ginger? Is that you, girl? What are you doing with a horse trader? Lucien, I thought she was a legion horse."

"She was; look at her hindquarters," Lucien said as Ginger aggressively nudged my chest in greeting. Three long, deep scars were prominent.

The horse trader, a middle-aged man, approached us. "She just healed, but some muscle damage. Legion traded her to me, and I will be foaling her next month. She can't run well but is strong and will be a good broodmare for a few years."

I asked incredulously, "Why not get a healing mage?" I produced an apple into my hand and gave it to her. Lucien eyed the apple suspiciously, but I could have easily taken it from the kitchen. She munched happily on it.

The horse trader answered, "The Legion didn't care enough, I guess."

“How much?” I asked.

“Eryk, she will not be able to keep up,” Lucien noted.

“There is the old healer in Sobral. I will pay him to fix her up. How much?” I asked again.

“Twelve gold,” the trader said, seeing my interest.

Lucien scoffed, “Twelve? Try five.”

“She is a trained Legion warhorse with a great temperament,” he retorted.

I let Lucien bargain for me as I fed Ginger two more apples. The final cost was six gold. Which was good as a battle-trained horse would go for over forty gold. Lucien inspected the scars, and it was as the trader had said. They were deep and had been healed with some healing salve, closing the wound but not repairing the muscle. Lucien got a riding horse for the Scholar as well for five gold. It was a little more than he wanted to pay for a nag, but the mare only needed to make it two hundred-plus miles to Sobral.

We stabled the horses at the Legon Hall, and I gave each an apple. Lucien asked, perplexed, “How many apples do you have in your space?”

I might have been too liberal with them in front of Lucien since leaving Sobral. “I added a few yesterday, but I have just a few left now. Most of my space is crammed with Decimus’ equipment.” He nodded, but I think he was suspicious. I rubbed down Ginger, and she enjoyed the familiarity of me caring for her.

We waited for Adrian in the barracks room. Lucien and Blaze started playing a dice game, and I watched, trying to calculate the odds. Adrian walked in just before midday. “Get the horses ready. We will be leaving after the mid-day meal.”

Lucien stood, “Adrian, do you have a moment?” Lucien walked over to Adrian, and they whispered for a bit. Adrian looked over at me twice during the conversation. Finally, Adrian turned and left.

Lucian came to me, “You can keep your horse, Eryk. If she can not keep up, we will leave her behind.” He winked conspiratorily, “The nag I bought for the

scholar should be fairly slow, though.” He patted my shoulder and started collecting his things in the room. Lucien was a good man.

We met Adrian and our new traveling companion in the stables. The Scholar was an older man and seemed rather frail as if he had never exercised a day in his life. I did not know how he was going to ride over two hundred miles to Sobral at our pace. Adrian seemed to realize this as well. When we were finally on the road, the Scholar seemed to be a competent rider and at ease with the saddle.

A few miles later, he was beside me and introduced himself, “I am Scholar Favian.”

“Legionnaire Eryk, Scholar,” I replied.

“I have not been riding for a few years, but the memory returns quickly,” he said with a smile. “I am actually looking forward to this assignment. Ancient Elvish writing has always been a passion of mine. I wanted to travel to Esenhem but was always worried I might be considered a spy while I was there and one here when I returned.” He laughed at his joke, but I did not think he was jesting.

“There are a number of books from Caelora in the Duchess’ library,” I said.

“So I am told. That is why I am making the trip.” He shifted in his saddle, “Did you know there is actually only one Elven dialect and written language? It has remained unchanged for thousands of years although the calligraphy has changed with time. Can you believe that? Over fifteen human tongues are spoken on Desia, and just one Elven, even though there are three different elven races!” He said excitedly.

“It probably has to do with a standardized education system. If all the teachers teach the exact same thing, then it will propagate without variation in the language,” I replied.

Scholar Favian’s jaw would not work as he digested my words. I figured I had said too much, but I thought it was obvious and wanted to sound smart. I broke the stupor of the Scholar, “Is the elven tongue complex?”

“What?” He said, distracted, “Your observation is remarkably—accurate. The Elven Scholariums are remarkably more structured and strict than the Telhian. Most children in the Empire are taught for only a few years before their

education is ended. Most can not even read efficiently. Elves are taught for twenty years!"

I just nodded and let him continue to talk about the shortcomings of the Telhian education system for the next two hours. My question about the Elven language was now buried in the Scholar's expose. I was able to hand him off to our red alchemist, and they got into a deep discussion about the origin of the names of herbs used in alchemy.

I got to ride next to Adrian. "That Scholar loves to talk. Hopefully, he is what Castile wanted," Adrian mumbled to himself. He looked at me, "What do you plan to do with your horse? We don't always ride, you know."

I was stumped as I had not thought that far ahead. I felt connected to Ginger and didn't want her used by the horse trader as a breeding mare. I also wanted to see her healed.

Adrian interrupted my thoughts, "Well, she should be able to keep up. We will make Sobral in six days. It's a day later than planned, but there's no need to press. The alchemist is the one slowing us down. He is in rough shape, and I think he might cry if I ordered a gallop. Scholar Favian may look frail, but he used to be a messenger rider for the army when he was younger. I suggest you do not ask him about it, or he will spend hours retelling his youthful glory," Adrian said, recalling a conversation he had with the Scholar.

After a few minutes, I asked, "How rough will the ride be?"

"Not very. This is one of the old trade roads before the portals and is still heavily used. There are still dozens of towns along it. We should be spending most nights in an inn. Maybe not the luxury accommodations you normally seek, but better than being outside," he smiled, knowing my penchant for being clean. I also think he felt good about his assignment almost being done.

A few hours later, dark storm clouds appeared overhead, and it started raining buckets. The packed clay and dirt road quickly turned to mud, and the rain was so heavy that visibility was limited to a few dozen feet. I think Adrian had just cursed our easy ride back to Sobral.