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 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 Ducness 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 work to do 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.  He asked as he worked, “Where is Sorbral?”

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.  “What are you working on?”

“A foot salve for healing achy feet and killing fungus.  My own creation,” he said proudly. “Never knew people would pay so much just not to have stinky feet.”  The alchemist chuckled to himself.   He addressed Adrian, “No portal means rare ingredients would have to come by road.  I choose Lorvo because of the abundance of ingredients locally, 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.  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, snapped stems, and crushed berries. 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 legionnaries?” He said, studying us. We had not worn our armor to meet with him.

“We are legionnaires from a mage company in extended service to the Duchess,” Adiran 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 slaves and lesser 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 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 take. “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 a little 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.

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. 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 working to get 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 the 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, offended.

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 very humid, and there were a number of jungles where the Tace wood was harvested from. It was an old Empire fractured from the Kingdom of Keisinia long ago. The beast races were common in the lands, and the county 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. 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 export was listed as fish and tace wood, which I learned grew 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 Tsinga. They were short and usually had darker skin. I just hoped we never ran into someone from the faraway nation.

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 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.

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, 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. Konstantin 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 own concoctions on himself to alleviate his 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, the opportunity to shed a lot of light on the area.

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