

Chapter 59: Politics of the Empire

Cornelius' men moved out to serve as a screen as we entered the woodlands. I moved close enough to overhear Konstantin talking to Cornelius at the rear of the formation.

"...cannot seriously think this failure is Castile's fault. The Duke's army was to attack as soon as the Bartiradians set up camp outside the gates."

Cornelius had a softer voice than Konstantin, and I strained to hear. "That is why I was sent, as a favor, Konstantin. My three best squads of Legion Hounds are here, and Duchess Veronica has called a Ducal Tribunal so Octavian cannot hand out punishment to Castile on the spot."

Konstantin argued, "That makes no sense! The city only fell a day ago! How could a Tribunal have been called and your Legion Hounds be here already?" His voice started loudly and faded at the end.

Cornelius confirmed Konstantin's thoughts. "The Duke's army was never going to reach Macha until it fell into Bartiradian hands. That is why Baron Hephaestus abandoned the city to join the army. He is in Duke Tiberius's pocket and was aware of the plan."

"And Gregor and Durandus?" Konstantin asked softly, seeing the bigger picture.

"Gregor is not well-liked but was apparently just a disposable piece on the board. When Durandus insulted Duke Santino by not marrying his daughter and paying for her First Citizenship, he sealed his fate. Before we learned Durandus was killed, Duchess Veronica thought I would also be rescuing him." Cornelius walked past me as he moved toward the front of the formation. His aged face and white hair seemed out of place on his athletic build.

I moved back, planning to talk with Konstantin, but Cornelius spun and spoke loudly as he walked, "We dispersed a gnoll camp on our trek through the woods. They should not bother our large group, but remain alert. These woods also used to be home to a herd of centaurs. No sightings in the last two years, but that means close to nothing." With his warning given, he moved off to join the screen. For an old man, he moved with surprising grace.

I was not the only one seeking clarification from Konstantin. Castile and Delmar had fallen back to walk with him, and I ended up in front of the trio. Konstantin started with, "That is Cornelius. He trains the Legion Hounds for the eastern part of the Empire. He was my instructor, and I worked for him as a Hound."

Confused about the procession of Hounds, Castile asked, "Why did he not have me killed immediately?"

Konstantin took a moment to gather his thoughts and then spoke, “He is here at the direction of Duchess Veronica. I think she is a new duchess, one of the Emperor’s many great-granddaughters.”

It was quiet for a few minutes, and although I wanted to ask a question, I remained silent. Delmar asked, “The Ducal Tribunal?”

Castile added to Delmar’s question, “I assume the Hounds are here to protect me from Duke Octavian and Duke Tiberius until a formal Tribunal of Dukes?”

Konstantin answered, “Cornelius did not say when the Tribunal will be held. If I know him, though, he has a plan to exclude Octavian from the Tribunal. I’m not sure what favors this Duchess Veronica has given for his help. Cornelius’ help is never given freely.”

Castile hissed, “If he can manage to exclude Octavian from the Tribunal, I will give him my firstborn.”

Delmar asked quietly, “So, we are just going to go along with this?”

Konstantin replied in a casual tone, “If we attack the Legion Hounds, the Emperor will send ten times these numbers after us. It is best to follow politely. Besides, almost everyone is injured.” Adrian was meandering back to the group now. He was also in obvious pain, his arm still in a sling, and walking on a broken ankle. We were not moving at a pace to accommodate the injured, so one had to admire his pain tolerance.

Castile sounded angry. “They could have given us a few lesser healing potions, at least.”

Konstantin barked a loud laugh that made a number of heads turn. He said conversationally, “I was a Hound at one point in my service to the Emperor. You never make your quarry stronger. Rest assured, they will get us to our destination, even if they need to put their lives on the line.”

Castile moved past me with Delmar. Adrian hobbled behind them. This gave me a chance to walk with Konstantin. He opened the conversation, “You look to be in fair condition, Eryk.”

I went with Castile’s explanation for my healing. “Castile gave me a lesser healing potion to hold for her. I was supposed to use it on her if she was incapacitated.”

“Did she now? And you used it on yourself?” Konstantin remarked with some skepticism in his voice.

“Yes, after my tumble down the stairs,” I responded smoothly. I tried to turn the conversation. “What is a Ducal Tribunal?”

Konstantin grunted, “There are sixteen Dukes who control the sixteen provinces outside of the Imperial Province, which is the Emperor’s Seat. The Dukes are the higher law, and three of them can sit in judgment of any mage or First Citizen. The three members of a Ducal Tribunal are

assigned by the Emperor himself. Whatever game Duchess Veronica is playing at, it is dangerous. She is in charge of the Sobral Province, the newest and smallest province in the Empire. If I remember correctly, it has a modest city on a river, and that is it.”

“Is the Duchess an ally of Castile?” I inquired.

“Not that I am aware of. But if she is opposing Octavian, there will be a reprisal for her action,” Konstantin mullied. He then looked at me. “The politics of the Empire are more deadly than the Bartiradian Army. My advice to you is to stay as far away as possible.”

We walked for a while and a question formed in my mind. “Why would Castile not flee the Empire?”

Konstantin grunted and pointed at the men making their way around us through the woods. “The Hounds always find you.”

“How did you become a Hound?” I asked, watching the men flitter among the trees.

“Interested, are we?” he chuckled. “Well, two things are needed. You need to complete legionary training, and you have to have a useful spell form.”

“So I qualify?” I questioned. We were approaching a clearing, and Konstantin focused on scanning the tree line.

“I suppose you do,” he said, distracted. “It is not as plush as you think it is. The Hounds track down beasts, mages, men, and sometimes children. They are the attack dogs of the Emperor. This...” he motioned to our escort, “is out of character for them, and I am curious how Duchess Veronica sent the best of them to secure Castile.”

We entered the clearing, and it looked like a campsite. There were two small shelters, and inside, foul-smelling bodies covered in fur and blood. I walked with Konstantin for a closer look.

“These are gnolls. Do you have them in Tsinga?”

“We do, but I have never seen one before,” I replied, inspecting the dead creatures. Arrows had been pulled out, throats were slit, bellies were cut open, and entrails pulled out. The creatures were vaguely humanoid but definitely more beast-like, hyena-men.

Konstantin looked into the other shelter and grunted before walking on. I looked inside as well. Puppies. No... Baby gnolls, all ruthlessly slaughtered. I moved to catch up with Konstantin. He gestured toward the carcasses, “That is what the Legion Hounds do best. I am sure if they were not tasked with bringing in Castile, they would have tracked down the rest of the pack. Gnolls are a scourge.”

“Is that what you did? Hunted monsters?” I asked him. Brutus had moved beside us to listen.

“No, I was the monster. I hunted mostly soldiers, deserting their posts. Some legionnaires, failing to do their duty. And a handful regular men as well, Highwaymen and other criminals. If a Hound is coming for you, the trial is already over,” he said hollowly.

Brutus asked, “Why did you leave?”

Konstantin smirked, “I didn’t. I was recruited into the service of someone else. There are not many ways to leave the Hounds.” He pointed at Cornelius far ahead, “To leave, you need to be reassigned by your commander or complete your tenured service. Someone negotiated with Cornelius on my behalf.”

The sound of bow twangs could be heard to our right, far and deep into the woods, and everyone paused to listen. Konstantin unshouldered his bow and went into to follow the noise. We had to wait for ten minutes until Konstantin returned. Our group was moving again, but Konstantin was at the front talking with Castile. Word was passed back that the Hounds had encountered a giant spider and dispatched it.

Mateo joined Brutus and me. We broke out some wrapped rations. Mateo had gotten his soaked when he tripped in the reservoir, so I shared one of the meals from Flavius’ pack with him. As we finished the meal, we reached another clearing. This time, it was a wide, packed-dirt road bisecting the forest.

Cornelius was talking with Castile, and soon, we were walking down the road. The pace had increased, and Adrian was grunting at every other step while keeping up. The forest finally faded into open fields of wheat. It was late evening, and a dozen riders came charging toward us on the road, their horses raising clouds of dust behind them.

We had remained at the rear of our group and could not hear the exchange with the riders wearing the army’s regular uniform. It did not matter, as the riders rode back in the direction they came from after a quick exchange. Delmar turned to us and issued an order, “Legionnaires! Form ranks, four abreast at the front!”

We scrambled to obey, and in a few heartbeats, we had a four-by-five block of men. Castile, Delmar, and Adrian walked to the front as we began the march. I was in the last row, and soon all twenty of us had synched our steps as we continued down the road. We passed by a few fields, and a neatly arranged tent city appeared over a small hill. Mounted sentries were on the surrounding hills.

The tent city was still being formed, as they must have recently stopped here for the quickly approaching night. The tent city had flattened a farmer’s wheat field, but I doubted the farmer had complained. We held our chins high and walked through the soldiers, causing people to pause and stare. A few larger tents were flying a mage flag above them and were surrounded by other men in legion armor. Our Legion Hound escort evaporated into the tent city, leaving us to march alone, their duty to deliver us fulfilled.

The rows of tents seemed to go on forever as we marched deeper into the encampment. We finally reached the center of the camp, where a large white tent was erected. Delmar ordered us to halt and stood at attention. I had not expected to wait long.

I was wrong. The sun had set, and we remained at attention in the humid late evening. I wanted to ask a question or even just get a drink, but I was too afraid to be the first person to do so. That was how we remained throughout the night, statues outside the command tent as the Duke's army continued their business.

The rich blue moon lit the camp, and we soon fought to keep our eyes open. I felt pity for the injured men, especially Adrian, who shifted ever so slowly at the front of our block on his broken ankle.

We were all still standing when the hint of dawn crested the sky. Several of us had swayed during the night, somehow finding the ability to sleep while standing for short periods, but none of us fell. The command tent flap suddenly flew back, and a man in a general's dress exited the tent. He walked past us, not saying a word. Shortly after, another man exited the tent. He was tall, with sharp features, and with his jet-black hair in the dim light, he seemed even more solid. He wore legionnaire armor, only it was steel and not the standard red leather. Looking at all of us, heavy on our feet, he smiled ruefully, and started, "Castile, so good to see you again. You look well. Why don't you come in so we can talk." I immediately did not like the man; he just had that air about him.

Castile stumbled on her first step before gaining her balance. She told Delmar, "Get everyone to the legion healers." Then, she went inside to confront Duke Octavian.

Chapter 60: Recovery

My legs were unsteady for a few steps, and my boots were still damp from wading through the reservoir. All I wanted to do was sleep, but the army and the small encampments of legion companies were waking and packing. I feared I would not have the opportunity to rest. Somehow our marching block was more haggard than when we entered the camp, but we still followed after Delmar and a severely limping Adrian. Delmar seemed to be scanning the flags of the legion companies, looking for something particular.

I asked Brutus, “Are all these flags for different mage companies? Do we have a flag?”

Brutus looked up and studied a few flags. “Most are mage companies. You can tell by the solid background. If there is a horizontal stripe in the background, it is a duke’s legionnaire company without a mage. Dukes cannot command mages, and they must pay the Emperor a tax for legionnaires under their command. Legion units without a duke or mage in charge have no flags. Castile must also have a flag, but I do not remember ever seeing it.”

Felix, from the back row of the marching block, answered tiredly, “Castile has a black flag with an orange bull on it. I do not know if she chose it or inherited it. I have not seen the flag since we marched during the New Year parade in Telha. It’s been a few years.”

Delmar found what he was seeking and quickened his pace towards a gray flag, depicting a red serpent. Outside the tent’s entrance, he announced us to two legionnaires in pristine leather armor. “Mage Larita, Mage Castile’s company seeks your healing skills. Please grant us your favor!” His tone was very respectful, and an older woman with mostly gray hair in blue robes exited the tent, a steaming cup in her hand.

She looked over our group and sighed. “Very well. Strip to your undergarments before entering my tent.” She turned to one of her legion guards. “Do we have orders to move out yet?”

He responded sharply, “No orders yet. The army will advance after the midday meal. I expect us to follow.”

The old mage turned to Delmar. “We have time then, Delmar. You may enter and send in your men in threes. No armor or filthy clothes.” She wrinkled her nose, turned, and went inside the tent. With Mage Larita accepting our request, Delmar looked more relaxed.

He turned to us and spoke loudly, “We are fortunate! The best healer in the legion is going to see to our ailments. Everyone, strip. And keep as much of your body stink out of her tent as possible!”

We all stripped. As I took off my boots, some of my soaked calloused skin went with it. My heels were bleeding freely, and I did not feel the sting until the air hit the exposed flesh. My feet were not the only ones in dire need of attention. Everyone had gotten their feet wet in the reservoir, and the hard-earned callouses were puckered with water and peeling away.

The first few men were down to just their loincloth, so I copied them. Adrian had protested to going with the first group, but Delmar yelled at him. Looking around at the rest of the company, we were filthy, and about half had unhealed upper body wounds.

Brutus fell on the grass and lay back. Delmar snapped, “You fall asleep, Brutus, and we will not wake you when your turn comes.”

I sat cross-legged next to him to wait. Brutus had his eyes closed as he spoke, “This is the largest benefit of being in the legion, Eryk—the healing. The regular army might see a magic healer in their infirmary who was looking to practice their craft, but that would be it. As a legionnaire, you can walk into any large city and find magical healing without paying a single coin.”

I nodded, and it made sense why people would volunteer to fight in the legion over the army. I looked down the row of tents. “If all these flags belong to mages, how come we were defending Macha with just three? There must be twenty mage companies in this camp,” I asked in disbelief.

Brutus responded while yawning, “More. Probably close to thirty in the entire camp. Don’t ask me why. They would not care for my advice.” He chuckled at the absurdity of a duke considering his words.

Adrian came out walking stiffly, testing his healed ankle. Lysander came out next. Delmar turned. “Lysander, you are with me. Let’s find a legion supply wagon and get new underclothes and socks for everyone.” Lysander did not look thrilled but nodded and went after him. Brutus was snoring in the grass. I let him sleep until we were the last two remaining and kicked him awake.

The tent had three tables in the center, a comfy bed along one side, and a modest dining table. An array of fruits, breads, and sliced meats was on the table. The legionnaire inside seemed to be preparing another teapot for Mage Larita. I bowed. “Mage Larita, thank you for healing me and my company. It is an honor to be healed by the best healer in the legion.”

The older woman chuckled softly. “Best healer! I am as close to the best healer as I am to being a virgin. Delmar was just buttering me up to do my best. No fear, boy, I may not be the best, but I am better than most. Up on the table and lay down so I can assess you.”

Brutus stood while I lay on the table. Larita moved to my head and placed her hands on my ears. I felt a pressure in my head that suddenly cleared. I felt lightheaded but not nearly as tired. “Some minor trauma there. You should wear your helmet more, boy,” she said jokingly.

“I lost it, falling down forty feet of stone steps,” I replied irritably.

“I am sure there were plenty of men no longer in need of theirs close by,” she replied cleverly. She moved to my left arm, and I felt a warmth spread throughout. When she let go, my arm felt cold, and I got goosebumps. She repeated this with my other arm and then moved on to my legs. She mentioned, “Your knee has been healed several times somewhat sloppily, probably by an alchemists’ healing potion or a bad healer.”

I nodded but did not have time to speak as she moved to my torso. She focused on where the crossbow bolt had penetrated, and I felt a sting. I reached reflexively for it, and she slapped my hand away. “Just some small fragments I am extracting. You probably used a healing potion. They close the wound too quickly to get all the debris out.” She felt across my chest, working her way down. Sometimes I felt some warmth spreading from her hands, sometimes not.

I remained still as she reached my groin, cupped it, and squeezed a little harder than I thought necessary. “Healthy, unlike some of your fellows,” she noted merrily. “You are the last one?” she asked Brutus. The sleepy Brutus nodded and took my place on the table. Mage Larita quickly started to repeat the process.

My voice cracked a little as I asked cautiously, “When the healing mages healed us during training, they never touched us...all over.”

Larita paused on Brutus and looked at me. “They were not healing mages, boy. They were using spell forms. Very inefficient. I use a diagnostic spell form with a very focused range. Then I heal just what needs to be healed. It conserves aether and is much better healing than a potion or spell form. I fixed a dozen issues you did not even know about.”

“Thank you, Mage, for your insight and thorough healing.” I bowed slightly and stepped back. I would gladly take the handsy nature of Larita if it healed injuries even I was not aware of.

She continued her work, and I think Brutus had fallen asleep again. Larita addressed me, “Delmar used to be one of my legionnaires. He did a good job for me,” she smiled slyly. She looked me up and down, “I could use a large boy like yourself. If Castile survives this mess, I might ask for you as a favor.” I noticed she did not grab Brutus’ groin as she had mine before finishing with his torso.

The old mage smiled with perfect teeth as I woke Brutus and pulled him out. I felt a little like prey under Mage Larita’s gaze. “Thank you,” I yelled as I went to our gear and began dressing. My feet were completely healed with new pink skin, and I could not find a single ache in my entire body.

Brutus mumbled, “I think she knocked me out when she started. I was not planning to fall asleep.”

“Huh, don’t worry, you didn’t miss anything,” I said, dressing quickly.

Felix was waiting for us. While we were dressing, he said, “We are headed to a farmer’s house. They have a pond, and we will bathe and wash our clothes there.” We started walking, following Felix. The army was packing up their tents, and some units were eating from meal carts. The farmer’s house was outside the camp’s perimeter, and none of the sentries stopped us.

Firth and Konstantin were already clean and headed back toward the camp. Konstantin paused to talk with Brutus and me. “We are going to see what is churning in the rumor mill among the

legion companies. Brutus, do you know any legionnaires in other companies? You trained at the Legion facility outside the capital?"

Brutus nodded. "Yes, I trained with the legion volunteers at the Perfectus Legonis Camp." So, they called the camp where the volunteers trained the Perfect Legion? What do that make those of us who were constricted?"

"Good, you can head back to the camp after you have cleaned yourself," Konstantin said as he went on.

When we got to the pond by the farmhouse, a dozen ducks were swimming in it, and most of the men had already bathed and were putting on clean underclothes. It was a little surreal as just a few hours ago, we could all barely stand, and now our injuries, however severe, were mended. Lirkin rushed up to us with bundles of food. "The healing will have drained your body's reserves. Eat all you can for the next two days." He rushed away to continue preparing food from a cart he had apparently appropriated.

Mateo motioned at the cart. "He stole it from the regular army. Best not to ask too many questions."

The pond was a good acre in size, and I think the farmer used it to water his livestock and horses. My bath was quick, and I was glad to put on clean underclothes. I rinsed the dirt and sweat from my canvas clothes and hung them to dry in a tree. I then took care of my equipment, sharpening my blades and oiling them and my armor. Flavius' pack was well equipped, and I even found a gold and eight silver wrapped at the bottom. I hoped he returned from his adventure with Master Mage Sebastian to reclaim it.

The air was actually dry and not humid for once. The sun was clear, and the company was lounging bare-chested on the grass, happy to be out of armor and danger. The farmer came out once to talk with Adrian, it looked like he handed him a few coins. Lirkin handed out food as fast as he could prepare it on the meal wagon. It was jarring how quickly our fortunes had changed.

I soon fell asleep in the grass. Konstantin kicked me awake well into the afternoon. My pale chest felt slightly burned from the sun. "Get up and dressed. Adrian and Delmar are talking to the company."

My clothes had mostly dried, and I put on some new socks. The boots were still damp but drier than before. As everyone circled around Delmar and Adrian, we were anxious to hear the fate of Castile and ourselves.

Adrian looked gaunt, but was otherwise completely healed. He had been in too rough of shape to do much leading, but now he seemed revitalized. He spoke clearly to our small group, "Castile is going to be transported to Caranhagan. From there, she will be portaled back to the capital, Telha. Duchess Veronica has called for a Ducal Tribunal into her actions."

Everyone was quiet. Delmar joined us and said, “We are going with her. Duke Octavian, with his fifty legionnaires, is going to escort and guard the prisoner. We need to make sure Castile does not meet with an accident under the duke’s care.”

Lucien, our horse master, asked, “What happens when we reach the capital?” Adrian answered, “We will wait in the East Legion Hall. The Emperor will name the other two dukes to sit with Duchess Veronica in the Tribunal. Any of us may be called as a witness before a Truthseeker.”

“You know Duke Octavian is going to get himself on the Tribunal. Who will be the third?” asked Kolm, our company blacksmith.

Adrian made a pained face. “I guess we will see if the Emperor favors his son or a peasant mage.”

Delmar added, “Get some rest. Octavian’s company is mounted, and I do not expect them to wait on us. It is eighty miles to Caranhagan. It would not surprise me if they outpaced us and did not wait at the portal for our arrival.”

“Are we going to have to do an eighty-mile jog?!” Wylie exclaimed, exasperated.

Delmar snapped, “If I told you to do an eight-hundred-mile run, you would do it with a smile on your face!”

Adrian calmed things down. “Lirkin is working with the farmer to get us water and food for the long march. That road,” he pointed behind us, “is the road they will travel. As soon as we see their horses, we will fall in.”

“Why don’t we leave now?” Blaze asked. Konstantin barked, “Because Duke Octavian would probably have us executed for desertion. He cannot do anything about us following our mage commander.”

We all strapped our armor on so we could mobilize quickly. This time, I settled under the shade of a small tree and healed the sunburn with my spell form. I rested my head on my pack and drifted off. It was late evening when Brutus woke me. “There’s news. Duke Octavian is breaking camp. We are to assemble near the road.”

We were soon formed into ranks and waiting. It was nearly dark when a mounted unit came from the mostly dismantled army camp. The fifty mounted legionnaires all had metal legion armor instead of the leather we wore. At the front of the group was the black-haired man who met Castile. I assumed that was Octavian. He looked fairly young to be the Emperor’s son. The Emperor was hundreds of years old. I guessed with magic, someone’s true age was hard to discern. Castile was riding in the middle of the group as if she were at danger to escape. The duke sneered at us as he pranced by, and Castile couldn’t hide a small smirk at seeing us. We fell in behind the cavalry. This was going to be a long march.

Chapter 61: Loyalty

We fell in behind the horses. I thought they would try to lose us by increasing their pace, but the horses only moved leisurely, we could march without a hurry. I was happy Kolm had repaired the sole of my boot. I was in the back row of our marching block with Brutus to my left and Firth to my right. Firth, the old veteran, muttered, “This is going to be a miserable night march. Good thing we have those glowstones. You will need to charge mine.”

He passed it to me, and soon, I had a cycle of glowstones coming my way. They were the ones they had ‘requisitioned’ from me. I kept the remaining four stones in my *dimensional space*, fearing they would also be ‘requisitioned’. As I finished charging the glowstones, more riders came racing up behind us. Firth barked, “Shields to the rear! Spears and archers at the ready!”

Four men, who had acquired body shields in the army camp, moved to form the wall, and two men with round shields took the ends of the shield line. Four spearmen were behind the six shieldmen, and four archers were behind them. Adrian and Delmar stood to the rear, and I was with them. Konstantin and a few others darted off the road into the brush to flank the possible attackers. All this was well-practiced and happened in mere heartbeats. Delmar yelled, “Hold! Break and reform ranks! It’s just the Hounds.”

Nine riders led by Cornelius came up to us and slowed to a walk with their mounts. Cornelius smiled in the waning light. “Konstantin, I am surprised you did not steal horses for your company.”

Konstantin laughed. “I am sure Octavian was waiting for me to try so he could shackle all of us!”

Cornelius laughed with him. “Probably. He sent us off to track down two regulars in the woods who thought better of rushing the walls of Macha. No need to worry, Konstantin. We will make sure your mage gets to the capital in one piece. Since you are walking in that direction, I am sure you will get to the capital—eventually.”

Konstantin asked seriously, “What is the pulse of her chances before a Tribunal?”

Cornelius frowned while his men rode forward at a hand signal from him. “Octavian will worm himself onto the Tribunal with Duchess Veronica. The Emperor will appoint the third based on the highest bidder for the judgment seat. Unfortunately, I do not think he is invested in Mage Castile’s fate, but others are.”

Firth asked Cornelius, “Isn’t Octavian the Emperor’s son? Doesn’t that mean he will get his way?”

“The Emperor doesn’t favor any of his children. Quite the opposite. He is always on guard against them. I doubt it will work in Castile’s favor, though.” He spurred his horse forward to catch up to his men, leaving us behind.

We held our formation and kept the riders in sight. They were kicking up a significant amount of road dust, which soon coated everyone. As the sun set, the glowstones appeared on the men on the outside of the block as we marched. Larita had done an amazing job healing everyone. My only issue was that my feet had no calluses, just new pink skin. I could feel the blisters forming already, just a few miles into the march. As the night set in, the blue moon was hidden by heavy clouds, resulting in a deep darkness. Our men on the edge of our formation had fixed the glowstones to their shields. The shifting shadows the glowstones generated from the trees and shrubs created a spooky and eerie feeling, especially since I knew my new world had dozens of horrors that could rush out of the darkness.

The contingent of mounted legionnaires ahead brought their own light. Heavy directional beams of light bounced around far in front of us as they served as the vanguard. It made me think I could do the same with my glowstone, creating a simple flashlight with a polished metal funnel.

As the night wore on, the horses kept opening the distance on us. The bouncing lights got further and further away. Delmar and Adrian upped the pace. They knew our best speed in the dark on the dirt road to not wear us out. At least with the increased distance, we did not have to deal with the dust any longer.

Hours into the march, Brutus spoke, "Well, this is not all bad. At least we are not being ordered to assault the walls of Macha to retake the city."

Firth said, "There is that, but from what I heard, they do not plan to assault the city. They have some powerful earth mages with them and plan to tear down the outer walls, probably take half the lower city as well."

Wylie turned. "What about the citizens who remained?"

"They should have fled. I talked with an acquaintance in Master Mage Dacian's company. Dacian is tasked with bringing down the western wall and then restoring it after the city is taken," Firth said calmly.

"So they are just going to destroy the city and then rebuild it?" I asked incredulously.

"It will take a few months, but yes," Firth said. "It was the plan all along. They needed the Bartiradians inside the city."

"Then why is Castile going to a Tribunal?" Wylie asked from the row in front of us.

"Her orders were to hold the city until Duke Tiberius arrived," Firth replied.

I was dumbstruck. In other words, Castile, Gregor, and Durandus were going to fail no matter what. The only way they could have survived the Bartiradians and succeeded in the plan would have been to hold the inner-city walls until the Duke felt like showing up.

Everyone was too tired to talk after Adrian ordered a slight increase in pace, just short of a jog. It seemed ridiculous that we could keep up with horses. At least Cornelius said he would make sure Castile would reach the capital. We passed through three towns throughout the night, and by then we could no longer see the lights of Octavian's horses. We reached a small bridge, and Delmar announced, "Thirty minutes for water and food!"

Konstantin barked, "No one removes their boots! I know your feet hurt like your first march in training, but it will only be worse if you take them off. We have about fifty-five miles to Caranhagan. Fill your canteens by the stream and saturate your bellies!"

Damn, hours of marching, and we were only a third of the way there. Men rushed to drink, eat, shit, and piss.

Lucien, our company horse master, tried to cheer everyone up. "Most likely, they will have to rest their horses twice before they reach the city. Maybe we will pass them while they are watering them."

I was with Brutus, Felix, and Mateo, shoveling down food. I noted, "I can't believe how dry and cool the air is. It was humid daily in Macha, and we are not far from the city."

"One of the larger ley lines runs under this road. It plays with the weather above it," Brutus answered.

Felix asked, "Don't they have ley lines in Tsinga?"

I replied slowly, "We do, but I didn't grow up near one, and my education was lacking."

"Rest is over!" came a shout from Adrian, saving me from having to explain further. I needed to be careful when referencing Tsinga. With my recent luck, we would have another legionnaire from the distant duchy join our company.

I channeled aether in small amounts through my spell form to keep my feet maintained, and was one of the few men moving without wincing or grunting. It did not take long for everyone's training to kick in and ignore the aching feet. We were going to march 80 miles in heavy boots with over sixty pounds of armor and gear. Some men who had geared up in camp with shields, spears, and arrows probably regretted their decision. We quickened our pace into a fast march, and silence reigned among the scuffing of boots on the dirt road.

When the sun rose, there was no salvation. Down in a valley, a river cut into a town. Octavian's legionnaires' silver armor sparkled on the new day's light. We had caught up to them, and kept on the road to continue our march, passing by the town below. The mood brightened some as Castile was down there somewhere, and it looked like we were going to reach Caranhagan and make the portal.

By mid-morning, we passed a sign that indicated we were forty-one miles from Caranhagan. I was surprised that Octavian's men had not ridden up behind us yet. Just before the sun reached

its midday zenith, we were called to halt again. Not even Konstantin looked good after fifty miles of forced marching.

I worked my stiff and sore shoulders out with a touch of healing. It almost felt like I was cheating. Men collapsed to the ground, trying to find energy to consume food, but many preferred a quick nap. I drank and ate from my pack. The more I consumed, the lighter it would be. With the company spread on the side of the road, Octavian's column rode up behind us. As they passed, they spurred their horses to a light gallop. Their faces were smug as there was no way we could cover the last thirty miles before them. Castile remained stoic, riding in the center of their formation.

After they passed, Delmar swore nearby, "Harpies' tits. If the Duke orders the Displacement Mage to send him as soon as they get there, we might have to wait two or three days before the next portal opening to the capital."

Adrian snapped, frustrated, "What do you suggest we do, Delmar? We have no stamina potions, and I am pushing the pace as much as is safe. If we are denied healing in Caranhagan or Telha, we will be laid up for a week of healing!" I had never seen our leader's nerves so frayed before, and Adrian had just pushed through serious injuries a day ago to escape Macha.

"Send a few men ahead. There are a few of us who can push harder. If the dukes rush to hold the Tribunal, Castile will have no witnesses to defend her. She deserves a few of us to try, at least," Firth muttered aggressively. I had not known he cared enough to defend Castile, especially since he worked for one of the Praetorian Guard.

"Who is willing to jog thirty miles to the city? My best guess is you need to make it in about five hours to catch the portal opening?" Adrian asked, almost as a plea to the company.

Konstantin dropped his pack and pulled his canteen. "Fill my canteen, and I will go. Benito, Linus, Pavel, and Eryk are the only others who look like they can make it." Benito nodded numbly and dropped his pack. Pavel did as well, albeit reluctantly. Linus looked like he was not happy being volunteered but slowly dropped his pack.

Well, shit. Getting volunteered again. "Give me more full canteens. I can squeeze five in my dimensional box," I offered. Everyone quickly shuffled in their packs, and I shoved the canteens and some food into the box in my space, filling it.

The five of us left our packs to lighten our load. The only weapon we each took was our short swords and belt knives. We jogged after Konstantin in a line. The five of us were mismatched body types. Konstantin was squat and barrel-chested, Benito was short and thin, Pavel was almost as tall as me and wiry, and Linus was the only person in our company who did not look like he was layered in muscle. Then there was me; both tall and thick with muscles.

As we started our jog, Konstantin pacing us. It was a light run, and maybe we were making sub ten-minute miles. Konstantin had selected our group well. Only Pavel was struggling visibly

when we reached a road sign at a town noting eleven miles to Caranhagan. Pavel had a limp, it grew more pronounced with each and every mile.

Konstantin took notice. “Come on, Pavel. You have all that gold waiting for you in the Adventurer’s Guild! You just have to earn it with a little pain!”

Konstantin was referring to the seventy odd gold we were promised for discovering the lost dungeon. It was motivating Pavel plenty, as he did not waver until the city walls of Caranhagan came into sight. Konstantin swore, “Thought we would have caught sight of them before the walls.”

Outside the tall stone walls of the city, there were no sprawls of farms or buildings, unlike Macha. The last mile or so of road was paved with stone. It was late evening, but there was still plenty of light. The city guards at the gate stopped us, and Konstantin rasped, “How long ago since the Duke rode through?”

The gate captain spent a moment looking us over. We were covered in dirty sweat and general filth, and Pavel had trouble standing on his right leg. “The Duke passed just under an hour ago.”

“Thank you,” Konstantin said, trying to move past.

The guard blocked him. “Legionnaire, you must enter your men in the Registry,” the guard said seriously, pointing to the guard house.

“Did the Duke register his company?” Konstantin snapped.

The guard looked uncomfortable, looking for support among his fellows. “No, he flew his flag, and we counted his men as they rode through.”

“Good, add five more to that count,” Konstantin spat at the guard, pushing past.

The guard sputtered protests, but I could not make them out, and neither did I have time to admire the city as Konstantin moved quickly through the streets, dragging us along. The citizens gave us a wide berth, likely due to our filthy appearance and obvious urgency.

We arrived at a large courtyard with a familiar stone arch where the duke’s horses and men were waiting. Castile stood in the center of the group, no longer mounted, and talking with Cornelius. Cornelius spotted us and pointed to a small stone building. Konstantin barked, “Frigging paperwork. Wait here. If the Displacement Mage arrives and opens the portal, go through, do not wait for me. Do not let anyone stop you. I will go register our travel with the clerk.” A disgruntled Konstantin stomped away, finding energy in his anger.

Pavel found a barrel to sit on and peeled off the boot from his right leg. As he removed his blood-soaked sock, it was apparent the flesh on his heel had split, exposing the heel bone. Linus and Benito were not as bad. Their socks were bloody, but only from blisters. I left my boots on as I had kept my feet in good shape with touches of my healing spell form.

Cornelius approached us as we inspected ourselves while waiting for Konstantin, who was getting vocal inside the clerk's building. "Impressive feat, getting here on foot. I could use men like you in the Hounds. Do any of you have a spell form?" I knew a spell form was required to join the Hounds, but none of us answered him. After a pause, he asked, "Is this all that made it?" Cornelius indicated our group curious.

Pavel answered noncommittally while delicately inspecting his heel, "They should be here soon."

Konstantin joined us, his face red from yelling. "We are fine to enter the portal to the capital," he barked.

Cornelius eyed him. "You were always a tough bastard, Konstantin. Good thing, too. Octavian sent a message to have a Truthseeker lined up to expedite the Tribunal. If you had not made it, they would have proceeded without your testimony."

My limbs suddenly went cold. We were going to be questioned by Truthseekers? A procession of legionnaires in metal armor approached. They were escorting the Displacement Mage. Fifteen minutes later, the portal opened, and the duke's procession began entering. "Don't bother putting your boots on; just move through," Konstantin snapped, and we all shuffled to the portal. I had a thought about falling to the back and missing the portal by accident, but Konstantin was behind me, pushing me forward. I entered the portal and emerged in the capital of the Telhian Empire.

Chapter 62: Telha, Capital of the Telhian Empire

I walked out of the portal prepared, not stumbling, and quickly took in my surroundings. The duke's horses were being led away, through an opening in the wall to our right. We were in a box-shaped stone pit about forty feet across. On each side of the thirty-foot stone wall stood six archers and a person in mage robes. The archers' steel legion armor reflected brightly in the sunlight. The Displacement Mage stood behind us by the portal arc we had exited, guarded by a dozen legionnaires.

Konstantin snapped me out of my gawking, "You four get to the East Legion Hall. Find a healer. I am going to the Magistrates Hall. Do not leave the Legion Hall no matter what. I will find you there later." Konstantin hurried off, not explaining any further.

"Does anyone know how to get to the East Legion Hall?" I asked. My companions had boots in their arms, standing on bloody bare feet or blood-soaked socks.

Linus spoke, wincing as he put on his socks, "The city was designed to be easy to navigate. I have been there before."

Pavel groaned. "I know where it is, too. About a mile walk from here." He did not want to put his socks and boots back on but started doing so anyway.

Benito noted, "It's the smallest of the three Legion Halls in the capital. The Imperial Legion Hall houses the Emperor's personal guard. It's actually close by." He indicated the passage the horses were led into. "The Western Legion Hall is outside the western walls and connected to the Perfectus Legionis Training Grounds. That is where they train the men who are dumb enough to volunteer for the Legion."

"Brutus mentioned that. He trained there," I added as we walked, the only one not struggling with each step. We did over eighty miles in less than eighteen hours. It probably wouldn't have been so bad for them if Mage Larita had not healed away the calluses on their feet. The newly healed skin could not take the abuse of the march. On the march managed to figure out how to heal my feet and not lose the calluses as they built up again.

"That's where the loyalist legionnaires train," Linus muttered. "They get paid as soon as they start and spend twice as long training as us conscripts."

"Not twice as long, just a full year, but definitely better training." Pavel grunted painfully between steps. "I think Adrian was a volunteer, but I don't know how he got assigned to our company."

We reached the top of the ramp, and the city spread before us. The roads were made from large, immaculate granite pavers. The buildings all looked uniform and neatly arranged along the road. Everything was made from a white stone with black marble highlights. Arches and columns were used heavily in the construction. It was beautiful. The most impressive feat was the height of the

stone buildings. Some had ten floors when I counted the windows. The windows were also massive, easily ten feet tall and half that in width.

The men and women walking the road wore thin, colorful fabrics in various styles. We reached an intersection, and I paused. The road we entered was the capital's main thoroughfare. I could tell because, to our left, stood a massive structure, easily five hundred feet high, a shining white and silver beacon in the late afternoon sun. "Never seen the Emperor's Palace, Eryk? It boggles the mind. Something so big for just one man to live in," Linus said.

Pavel looked and noted, "There are probably a thousand men of the Legion inside and another thousand in the building to the right. That's the Imperial Legion Hall, and the Emperor has, what, a hundred consorts and hundreds of servants? I am sure the palace is full." His tone was indifferent.

"How many consorts?" I asked, imagining a massive harem. "Does he have hundreds of children as well?"

"It is seven consorts," Linus scoffed at Pavel's misinformation. "And he can only name seven of his children First Citizens by law. The rest he marries off or sends them abroad on diplomacy missions."

Pavel griped quietly, "I doubt he limits himself to his seven wives. He is known for taking what he wants."

We turned away from the palace and started walking in the opposite direction. The wide road was busy as evening was approaching. Pairs of legionnaires patrolled in metal armor. It felt like we were the scrubs with just our hardened auroch leather armor. But I guessed leather armor was lighter, cheaper to make, and easier to maintain. I would hate to spend every evening polishing my metal chest piece. My helmet took enough effort to keep the rust at bay.

When we finally encountered food carts, I bought everyone skewered meat. The vendor called it pork, but it tasted like spicy chicken to me. The pause in our walk was short, as we were on the move. Everyone was eager to get the healing. We tossed the skewers into a trash barrel on a corner. The city was extremely clean, with much higher sanitation than in other large cities I visited. The crowds of civilians got thicker as we went farther and farther from the palace.

Some intersections had large fountains with mural mosaics tiled in the bottoms of the pools. We did not stop to get a proper look, but the mosaics seemed to depict legionnaires battling various beasts.

My head snapped around, and my jaw fell open. A collared leopard man was led by a cable.

"That is one of the catfolk." Linus seemed confused at my amazement. "I thought they were common in the jungles near Tsinga?"

I scrambled to think of a response. "It's not the catfolk, but the fact that it is collared like a pet."

He nodded sadly. “The beast races aren’t allowed freedom in the Empire. They are a rare sight and usually too feral to tame.” I watched as the catfolk disappeared on its leash into the crowd.

“What are the beast races?” I asked, looking for others in the crowd of humans.

Linus was willing to answer, “There’s a zoo in the upper city. I went once. Let me see...minotaurs are the bull men. Satyrs are the goat men. Centaurs are the horse men. Serpens are the snake men. Avians are the bird men—there was one more,” he paused, trying to think of it.

“The lizardfolk,” Pavel supplied. “But all the beast races are about as welcome in the Telhian Empire as elves and dwarves.”

“Where do the orcs fit in?” I asked.

Linus answered, “They group them with the goblinoid races, but if you happened to meet an orc, don’t call them that. They are as intelligent as you or me. Well, maybe not Benito.” Linus waited for Benito to remark on the jab, but he walked on oblivious to the insult. Linus continued, smirking at Benito, “The goblinoids are the orcs, bugbears, goblins, hobgoblins, kobolds, gnolls, ogres, and trolls.”

Pavel grunted as he stepped, “I am no scholar, but that is a very general classification. I have never met an orc before, but if you call him a goblin, I would not be surprised if he swore a blood oath to kill on the spot and then hunted down your descendants right after.”

We took a left turn, and the city buildings off the main road were not as opulent. They were still stone constructions, but now a mixture of various stones instead of being homogeneous. The buildings were also only three stories tall by now. We were within sight of the outer wall—or at least I thought it was the outer wall—as it was twice the height of the buildings close by. Linus said, “Here we are.”

Linus led us down a side street that lacked the heavy flow of people. At the end of the road was a small park with trees, and beyond it, a large black stone building. The large entrance was flanked by a legion guard on either side, wearing familiar leather armor. The building looked like an imposing structure with a single large statue on top. Pavel sighed in relief at having arrived.

Linus said, “We’re in the old city. This was built and used by the First Legion. It’s not as impressive as the Imperial Legion Hall or even the Western Legion Hall, but it’s the nicest Legion Hall you’re likely to see in your service as a conscript.”

The black archway entrance led to a courtyard with an open sky above. Legionnaires in the courtyard were in and out of armor, milling about on stone benches. Most stared at us as we entered; after all, we were still a mess. Linus stepped forward and asked, “Is there a Healing Mage on duty?”

One of the men in armor stood and approached. "You four look like you just came out of an ogres' arse," he said. He also introduced himself. "I am Severus." He pointed to an archway to our left. "Head to the baths over there. I will go and fetch the healer. We use the one from the clinic down the street. The only company Healing Mage we had is off to assault Macha."

We gratefully made our way to the baths. The stone inside was the same onyx black as the facade, but the space was well lit with glowstones. Four boys came and took our clothes and armor as we stripped. Then we entered the showers with brushes and fresh soap. As we washed, Pavel noted, "Damn, Eryk, your feet don't look bad at all."

"Yeah, Larita didn't heal them. I still had my calluses, and my socks dried in the sun," I responded calmly. He just huffed and did not comment again. I was in the heated bath first. This bath was actually much nicer than the upper city baths in Macha. The seating under the water formed to your ass, and the water was hotter.

I waited almost half an hour for the others, who themselves had to wait on the healer to arrive before they could join me in the soaking pool. As Linus settled in, he asked, "Do you want the healer, Eryk?" I shook my head, and he waved off the man in the other room. "He only had a spell form, but he was good. Pavel is digging through his pack to tip him some coin."

Benito just jumped into the pool like a kid, causing a splash and waves of water. The center of the pool was much deeper, and he appeared to know that in advance. When he came up, he laughed, "Damn, this almost makes me forget the last three days."

Shortly after a happy Pavel joined us also, his feet pink with new skin, but more importantly, the bone was no longer exposed. We soaked in relative silence, as Benito started to snore. It was another hour before a naked and clean Konstantin joined us in the pool. He sighed as he entered and kicked Benito awake.

With all our attention on him, he stated, "The Tribunal starts tomorrow. We were lucky we made it before the Displacement Mage opened the portal. It is going to be at least a week before it will open again."

Linus asked, "So what do you need us to do?"

Konstantin nodded. "I was at the Magistrate's Hall where the Tribunal will be held. Tonight, we will all head back to give statements to the Truthseekers. They will use the transcript in defense of Castile for the trial in the morning. We will wait outside and may be called to clarify our statements."

"Did Castile get a good Advocate?" Pavel asked. "The woman I was assigned for mine was fresh out of the College. Maybe if I had a better Advocate, I wouldn't be here for poaching."

Benito looked confused. "I thought you said you felled a baron's cow by mistake?"

Pavel rolled his eyes. “Getting caught was the mistake, Benito. Besides, half my village was starving after the dry summer.”

Konstantin returned to the reason we were here. “I do not know who is counseling her. The Tribunal is Duchess Veronica, Duke Octavian, and Duke Vito. I do not know Vito other than he was visiting the Emperor from his province. The only good news is that the Emperor did not appoint the duke Octavian wanted as the third judiciary.”

Konstantin stood, having only been in the pool for ten minutes. “We will go and get fresh clothes and sandals from the Legion Hall quartermaster while our clothes are being cleaned. The sooner we talk to the Truthseekers, the better.” I was left in no position to object. I noted a little sourly that the cost of the new linens and sandals was being added to my debt. Even Benito was smart enough to see we were being charged twice what they were worth.

We soon walked in the fading sun, following Konstantin to the Magistrate’s Hall. Konstantin had us leave our weapons behind. I was extremely nervous, as I had no idea what this encounter with the Truthseekers would entail, but I had no other choice.

Chapter 63: Truthseeker

Konstantin led us back toward the upper city where the portal stone was located. Pavel said, “They may have been expensive, but they are comfortable.” He was fingering his new linen shirt. “It’s also new. Most of the clothes we requisition at other Legion Halls may be free, but they are also used. Sometimes, they have holes you need to sew shut.”

Konstantin got us focused. “When you are questioned, you need to answer questions truthfully and use as few words as possible. They will ask you for an opening statement. Say that Castile could not prevent the fall of Macha. Remember the facts. Master Mage Durandus got himself killed, so he was not available to anchor the defense. The Displacement Mage was assassinated days before the Bartiradians arrived. The army surrendered after the lower city fell, which was why we fled.”

“I don’t know about the last one, Konstantin. We left the city before they surrendered. We only heard they were going to surrender,” I said after considering what I remembered. I did not want a Truthseeker to call me on a lie.

Konstantin grunted. “Fine. Just tell them the Bartiradians were cutting through the barricades quickly and would reach the inner-city walls less than a day after breaching the outer walls.”

Linus asked thoughtfully, “Will they just question us about the siege?”

Konstantin walked a little slower. “They are the Imperial Truthseekers, not the lowly ones you find in a town or city. They can ask about anything. Most likely, they will only ask questions about Castile, as that is who you are giving a statement for. It is also late, so they will probably want to finish quickly. Her Tribunal starts soon, so we need to do this now so copies can be distributed to each duke on the Tribunal.”

I was extremely nervous now. My fingers twitched as I tried to get them under control. “Can we refuse to answer questions?” I asked.

“If you do, they will just dig deeper,” Konstantin responded with a glare. I felt trapped but made an effort to keep my mind sharp. I knew body language was important from watching cop shows. I needed to look calm and respond calmly, so I focused on getting into that state of mind for the rest of the walk.

We reached a building flanked by two giant beautiful marble statues, a woman holding scales and a man holding a sword. “Who are they?” I asked, marveling at the artistry of the statues. The detail was amazing, and one could believe they would come alive at any moment.

“They represent Justica and Ultio, the gods of justice and vengeance,” Konstantin said, pushing the doors open, not looking at the statues. Maybe he had seen them before.

A man in white robes came rushing forward. “All business will be handed on the morrow.”

“We are here to give statements for the Ducal Tribunal starting in the morning concerning Mage Castile. I already talked with Magistrate Aurelia. She approved statements to be given to a Truthseeker,” Konstantin said with annoyance.

The man stuttered, “Magistrate Aurelia...I-I c-can do that. There are two Truthseekers still in the north wing. I will set up the rooms. Please wait here.”

We were standing in the lobby. Above us, on the ceiling, was a massive mural. The painting was of legionnaires fighting back what appeared to be a giant black demon. “What is that depicting?” I asked, pointing up.

Konstantin and the others looked up. Konstantin took in the whole scale of the mural. “It is the arrival of the First Legion during the Abyssal War. They managed to turn the tide and banish the demons. It is probably more myth than truth. To my knowledge, no greater demon has ever been seen outside a dungeon. The mural is more likely showing the First Legion battling the demon in a dungeon.”

The man in white robes returned. “The rooms are ready. The Truthseekers are being pulled from their studies. Which two of you will go first?”

Konstantin gave me a slight push in the back. Shit, I would have preferred to go last. I was soon walking down the hall with Konstantin, following the man who was walking with long, hurried strides. We proceeded through the maze-like building. Many of the walls and ceilings had massive murals of creatures and battles. They seemed out of place in a building that served as the court of law in the Empire.

We reached a series of doors made from bright blue wood. Two men in white and gold robes approached us. One was a graying man with haggard eyes, and the other was a young man, no older than fifteen, with black hair and a bowl cut. Our guide introduced the two. “Truthseeker Nico,” he indicated to the older man. “And the newest Imperial Truthseeker, Yanis,” he pointed at the younger man.

Konstantin looked at both and pointed to the older man. “Truthseeker Nico can take my statement. Eryk, you can have the boy.” Yanis pursed his lips in distaste at being called a boy and I did not appreciate Konstantin angering someone who would be questioning me.

The young Truthseeker opened a blue door and motioned me inside. The room was not what I expected. Two comfortable-looking plush chairs faced each other in the center. The walls were painted an off-orange, and the floor was light yellow stone. “You can take either chair,” Yanis said while retrieving a notebook from a small shelf. “Forgive me, but what is this statement concerning? I was summoned from my studies just minutes ago.”

This was a relief. Maybe I could keep everything focused on Castile. “Our company mage commander is being accused of abandoning her mission to defend the city of Macha.” I tried to make idle conversation. “The blue wood is interesting. Is it stained, or is that its natural color?”

He looked at the blue door. “That is tace wood from Tsinga. It absorbs sounds so people outside the door cannot listen in.” Damn it. I hope he didn’t learn I was from Tsinga, otherwise my question would be suspicious. I decided not to try for further small talk.

He seated himself across from me and wrote for a few minutes before looking up. He focused on me. “The crime is quite serious.” He turned the page and concentrated. “Please limit your next answers to yes or no. Are you planning to do harm to the Empire or Emperor?”

My jaw would not work for a second. “I thought I was giving a statement for Mage Castile?”

“Yes. Well, I just finished my training, and we are always supposed to ask three questions whenever we do a reading. Not all Truthseekers do it, but as I said, I just began my training and was told it is standard practice. My teachers would be upset if I did not follow protocol,” he said. “Now, are you planning to harm the Empire or Emperor?”

“No.” He scribbled something quickly. I did not feel anything, so I was not sure how his ability to read the truth worked.

He asked his next question while my mind wandered, “Have you done harm to the Empire or Emperor in the past?”

“No,” I answered, and he wrote again in his book.

“And the final opening question. Do you have magics on your person to deceive a Truthseeker?” He was turning a small black ball in his hands, waiting for me to answer.

“No,” I said more slowly than I probably should have, focused on the ball. He scribbled, then looked up after letting the ball disappear into his pocket.

“Excellent; please give your statement slowly so I can record it. I will ask questions if relevant.” He looked up, waiting patiently.

I tried to remain as relaxed as possible. “Our company was to defend Macha until the Bartiradians arrived and surrounded the city. The duke was supposed to come and kill the Bartiradians outside the walls. Instead, one of the three mages sent to defend the city died, making the defense impossible. Then, the Displacement Mage was assassinated along with all his legionnaire guards.”

I waited while he wrote. “Without the portal, we had no method to resupply. The outer walls fell in the first assault, even though Castile put up a valiant effort to defend the Trader’s Gate. The inner walls were about to fall, and we were told the army was going to surrender. We escaped on the aqueduct, losing a third of our company, while another third were seriously injured during our evacuation.” I thought “evacuation” sounded better than “running for our lives”.

He finished writing and waited for me. When I did not add more, he read what he wrote about five times before asking a question. “What was the name of the first mage killed, and how did he die? Did the Bartiradians kill him?”

I used his title. “Master Mage Durandus. A shambling mound monster in the swamp killed him. The Bartiradians were not responsible.” He studied me as I spoke and then wrote in his book.

“I thought he was sent to defend a city. Why was he in a swamp?” He looked up expectantly, waiting for my answer to clear up his confusion.

“We were helping with patrols outside the city. A storm giant was digging in the swamp.” I paused, ordering my thoughts carefully. “But we didn’t know it was a storm giant at the time. Durandus went to explore to see if it was a threat, and I was sent with his company to help. When we found out it was a storm giant, Durandus attacked it.” I stopped there.

He wrote furiously. “And the shambling mound was under the control of the storm giant?” He seemed much more engaged now.

“Um, no. We killed the storm giant, but most of Durandus’ company was killed in the effort. On the way back to the city, the shambling mound killed him,” I replied.

He tapped his writing implement, thinking. “Did you or any of his company play a role in Master Mage Durandus’ death?” he asked, studying me little too intently for my liking.

I answered carefully, “No, Mage Durandus was collecting the essence from a frozen shambling mound. It broke free and threw him into the swamp. When we found him, he was dead.”

He paused before writing. “Durandus had a collector? I’m not sure if you can get an essence from a shambling mound. He should have known that.” He spent a long time considering his next question. “Why did Durandus attack the storm giant? They are formidable foes. Was it threatening the city?”

“He didn’t tell me, but I’m fairly certain he wanted the giant’s essence. He consumed it as soon as he collected it. He was also interested in what the giant was digging for, but I think he ordered the attack for the essence,” I replied truthfully.

Yanis wrote slowly, thinking on another question. I guessed by his apparent fatigue that each answer had to be verified by his aether. Maybe I could outlast the young Truthseeker. Yanis asked, “What was the storm giant digging for?”

“I don’t know. Durandus said there was a city of the giants buried under the swamp,” I replied.

“There was a what?” Yanis asked, moving to the edge of his seat.

I realized this bit of information had only been told to me. Castile had not been interested in this detail. “A city where the giants used to live, buried with time. Durandus seemed obsessed with

trying to find out what the storm giant was digging for. He couldn't delve deep enough with his senses, so we were returning to Macha when he was killed." The Truthseeker scribbled furiously.

"And do you know where this dig site is?" he looked up and asked earnestly.

"Sure. It is not difficult to spot. There is a massive crater where he was digging in the swamp south of Macha." The Truthseeker finished his writing, then reviewed everything he had written, and it was a good thirty minutes before he focused on me. The giant city seemed important to him, so I expected more questions about it.

He seemed distracted when he asked, "Um, yes. You said the Displacement Mage was assassinated with his guards. How did this happen?" He was verifying my statement and the purpose of this session.

I spent the next hour telling how we found the first Bartiradian infiltrators and knew others were in the city. Konstantin had warned the Displacement Mage, but they attacked him through the sewer wall in his basement, taking him by surprise. He asked about Mage Castile's pursuit of the air mage that had killed the Displacement Mage and how he escaped the city and destroyed the aqueduct. Unfortunately, my knowledge was limited in this part of the story.

Then he started to ask questions about our flight from the city. My heart was pounding, just waiting for him to get a sniff of my abilities. I was lucky as the Truthseeker was distracted as he asked questions, and I gave short answers. I assumed he was still thinking about the giant city under the swamp. I didn't know why, though. By now it looked like he was getting fatigued as well from the aether expenditure.

"I think we are done," he suddenly said. It had been almost three hours. "Your statement and all relevant information will be transcribed for the Ducal Tribunal in the morning. Where can you be reached if the dukes seek to question you further?"

"I will be waiting outside the chamber. At least that's what I was told I would be doing," I answered.

He nodded, tapping his stylus on the pad. I had never had to reveal that I had a *dimensional space* or anything else about myself. He thought I was just a regular legionnaire. I walked into the hallway and found Konstantin, Pavel, and Benito. "Who's next?" I asked.

"Next? We finished two hours ago. All of us!" Konstantin motioned for us to walk away. "What did the young Truthseeker ask? I gave him to you because he looked green. All you had to do was offer a statement he could verify."

"He asked a lot of questions about Durandus' death and the Displacement Mage's assassination. A lot of questions. Then he focused on our escape from the city," I said, throwing up my hands.

Konstantin studied me. "Did you insinuate Castile was responsible for either of the deaths?" Konstantin was calm but looked concerned.

“No!” I balked at the accusatory comment. “He was more interested in Durandus’ fight with the storm giant and Castile’s pursuit of the air mage who destroyed the aqueduct.”

“Was he trying to tie the air mage to Castile? That they might be working together?” Konstantin pressed insistently.

“I don’t think so. I wasn’t there, so I couldn’t give him any information. I think he was just trying to confirm Castile didn’t let him go on purpose,” I said hastily.

Konstantin seemed to think. “Okay, we are heading back for just a few hours of sleep, and then we will come and camp outside the Tribunal chamber. We need to make sure the Advocate has received our statements. They can make sure the dukes read them.” Konstantin took off, and we followed.

Chapter 64: Raelia the Griffin Rider-flashback

Raelia walked through the camp, looking for the meal tent for the riders. She had seen it from the air before she landed, and it should be near this abandoned farmhouse. There, she spotted it. The tent flaps were green, not black this time. She walked inside to the smell of food being cooked.

The cook plated her some food with a smile, and she took the plate to a table, sitting opposite Zyila, her commander. The tall, lean elf woman smiled. “Raelia, the food is good tonight. A sweet pepper sauce over brown rice and shredded venison.”

“You took down the deer, didn’t you?” Raelia smiled back. “You are always telling us never to risk combat from our mounts, yet you do it every flight!”

Zyila smirked. “Well, I answer to your brother. You answer to me.”

“I am sure you answer to him a lot in his tent—privately,” Raelia retorted, quickly receiving a kick to her shin from her commander.

“Not when we are on a campaign,” she scolded Raelia. It was not a well-kept secret. “The other generals on the campaign would frown on me distracting him.”

Raelia tasted the food. “Ugh, too sweet. They must have added honey again.” Her commander tried to hide a smile. “It was you. You asked for the honey,” Raelia stated flatly.

“When you are the one who brings in three hundred pounds of fresh meat, the cooks tend to honor your requests,” Zyila said, shoveling the food into her mouth with a smile.

After they both finished the meal, Raelia asked, “What are my orders?”

Zyila rolled her eyes. “The postings are twenty feet away on the tent wall. Fine! You lazy girl. You are circling the city from two miles above with Nessa, Elanor, Daena, and Yavanna. We are attacking tonight as planned. I will fly out and ensure the duke’s army has been delayed.”

“By yourself?” Raelia asked, knowing that doctrine did not allow riders to operate alone.

“Rina is coming with me. And no, I am not taking you! You would probably try to fly too low and count the duke’s army or something else foolish,” Zyila said seriously. “We have thirty minutes before we exchange flights.”

They left the tent together and went to where the griffins were stabled. The attendants had fed them raw horse meat while they had been getting their own dinner. Moonclaw saw his rider approaching and nipped two other griffons, Monsoon and Sunflare, out of his way to get to Raelia. The griffin nuzzled her chest, lifting her off the ground with its powerful neck.

“Moonclaw, be nicer to the others,” Raelia scolded. He continued nudging her until she rubbed the feathers around his ear holes. He started clicking his tongue in appreciation. Finished with the affectionate beast, she started to prepare for the flight.

Raelia checked the harness twice, inspecting it for wear and fit. When griffins were used in rapid rotation like this siege, they would lose weight rapidly, requiring constant adjustment to the

straps. This was for both the rider's safety and the griffin's comfort. Nessa, Elanor, Daena, and Yavanna were already in their saddles.

Raelia swung her small frame up into the saddle and scanned the skies, waiting. A few minutes later, a griffin began to land. Raelia and her patrol took to the air one at a time, blowing dead leaves into small cyclones from the force of taking off. The wind blasted through her face and hair before she channeled her air spell form to shield herself from the rush of wind. She circled the camp once to inspect the army. Thousands of men were below her, like little ants scurrying about. She was glad to be a Rider.

She soared high into the sky before starting her dull circle patrol. She pulled out her spyglass and watched the defenders of Macha prepare for the inevitable. She had nothing against the people of the city. Their Emperor and his hatred of non-humans was the rot of the Telhians.

They had killed many Bartiradians on Bartiradian soil over the last two years. This assault was their own fault. The Telhian plan was also painfully obvious. They would put up a token resistance and let the Bartiradians take the city. Then, they would trap them inside.

Her brother and the other generals were smarter than that, though. They had killed the Displacement Mage in Macha and planned to man and reinforce the battlements themselves through the portal after taking control of the city tonight. Then, they would let the Telhians waste their men and legionnaires trying to retake the city. Her brother, General Clayln Glavien, would ensure the Telhians were much weaker after this battle. Returning Macha to Bartiradian hands was sure to be a bloody endeavor.

Three flight rotations later, Moonclaw was exhausted, flapping his wings to glide over the night battle below. It was dark, and the fog had allowed the army to reach the walls and gates. It would not be long now before they broke the defenders on the wall. Then, a huge gust of wind ripped from the city. Raelia had to let the wind carry her and Moonclaw away. She saw the battlefield revealed below as the conjured fog had cleared. The Bartiradian attackers were suddenly exposed. Arrows pelted them from the walls, and men were falling by the dozens.

Raelia felt helpless. She was not supposed to do anything but observe and report. Maybe she could help, though. The defenders were focused on her brother's army. She could prepare a fireball, swoop down, and release it before they tracked her.

She began guiding Moonclaw with her legs, using the stirrups and squeezing her thighs. He was sensitive to her body movements and understood what she wanted. The important thing was to shield the fireball as she formed it. Otherwise, it would shine like a beacon in the sky to the defenders.

She mentally wove her aether into the spell forms. She layered the aether in a well-practiced action. She would have to dive to get into range to release the ball of fire. She needed to remain unseen. The glowing ball of destructive heat twisted between her cupped hands as she squeezed her knees and dug her heels in. At her subtle cue, Moonclaw began to dive.

The outer range of her magic fire was one hundred and twenty feet. She needed to get within a hundred feet and release on the dive. Moonclaw knew this as well and would rise after the fireball was released. She was focused on the tower on the left, a mage was definitely there. She revealed the light of her prepared spell and was about to throw it when the spell forms dissolved in her hand. She grabbed the reins and pulled hard. The mage in the tower had seen her and disrupted her spell form. She needed to...

Moonclaw shrieked in pain as an arrow protruded from his wing, wispy black tendrils wrapping around it. He could not flap to turn away from the city. There was no time as she tried to guide him to land on a rooftop in the city. Moonclaw came up short and crashed hard into the building. As they fell between two buildings, the griffin did his best to spare his chosen rider.

The ground came fast, and she never had time to activate her featherfall device. It would have minimized her body mass and made the crash less impactful. Instead, Moonclaw bounced on the ground, and the impact tossed Raelia out of her saddle and into a building, breaking ribs and wrenching her knee. She must have hit her head because she was dazed as well.

When she regained her senses and got back to her feet, Moonclaw was protecting the alley from a squad of legionnaires. Moonclaw was injured and overmatched. She tried to form a fireball, but her head hurt too much and she was unable to properly focus. Moonclaw shrieked in pain. She could not help him. She cried as she limped away into the alley, searching for a place to hide. Moonclaw, her friend that she had raised from an egg, would buy her time. She wiped the tears and focused on escape.

She took a simple healing potion from her belt. As its effect went to work, her mind started to clear as she hobbled away. The potion was not enough to heal her ribs or knee, but it did give her enough clarity of mind to cast her spell. A shifting light came up behind her. The legionnaires were already upon her. She cursed them in her mind. Anger welled in her as they killed her mount and friend. Moonclaw was not the first friend she had lost to Telhian legionnaires either.

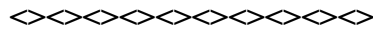
She timed the approaching light, spun with her daggers drawn, parried the sword strike, went into a roll, and came up in a crouch, grimacing from partially healed injuries. The legionnaire looked surprised she had evaded his attack. He was just staring at her like an idiot. "I will kill you, legionnaire," she rasped in his own tongue. Blood trickled from her lips as she spoke. At least her ribs felt slightly better from the potion, but she probably had a damaged lung, as breathing was difficult.

As she waited for the legionnaire to attack, loud booms came from the outer wall. She smirked, knowing her brother was probably sending all three assault elements at the wall in an attempt to save his stupid sister who had crashed into the city. She just needed to hide until he got his forces inside the city. She thought Zylia would scream at her for this, and her brother would probably have her exiled from the Riders. First, she needed escape.

The loud booms had the young human legionnaire nervous. His long black hair was matted with sweat under his red metal legionnaire helm. He held his short sword with skill but seemed reluctant to attack. She needed to stall him while her mind wove the spell forms for a fireball.

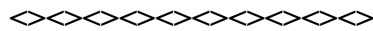
“Your city will return to us, and the duke’s army will not save you!” She said with as wicked a smile as she could conjure through the pain.

He relaxed in his defensive stance, underestimating her. He started to talk, “Can you just...” She finished her spell form and ignited her fireball...



Raelia pressed the fireball forward in the dark and was confused to see Alhar, her brother’s friend and bodyguard, three feet in front of her. The fireball exploded between the two of them, burning her face and throwing Alhar into a stone wall behind him. Her retinas were burned, and she could barely see. She couldn’t move, and her consciousness was fading. What had happened? Was this a bad dream? Why was Alhar in front of her and not the legionnaire? Was this some kind of mind magic? No, the pain was too real.

A blurry image of the legionnaire from the alley stood over her momentarily. He then shuffled out of her sight, leaving her in pain and thankfully fading into unconsciousness.



Raelia woke slowly. “Relax, Raelia. You are in the city,” her brother’s voice soothed her.

“Alhar?” she inquired with a dry throat.

“The healing mages are seeing to him. He is in much worse shape than you,” Clayln said.

“How am I here?” Raelia asked, gratefully taking a cold water skin from her brother.

“We thought you could tell us. We replayed the battle you had with the legionnaire after you crashed and thought void magic had erased you,” her brother said softly.

“No. I don’t remember. He said something and then...” Raelia could picture his face—shock at the fireball and panic. Raelia thought she was about to blast the young legionnaire with her spell, but...instead, Alhar was in front of her. And she hit him instead.

“No time passed for you then?” asked the old dwarf healer at her bedside. Raelia nodded slowly. The dwarf nodded sagely, “*Dimensional space*. He stored you like a pair of old socks, girl.”

Clayln shouted, “Impossible! His space would have to be huge, and he could not have overcome her aether resistance to forcibly store her!”

The old dwarf healer spoke with years of wisdom, “He could have if his affinity was high enough. Probably in the eighties.”

Raelia shook her head. “No, he was just a regular legionnaire. Not a mage.”

Clayln sat down, considering the events as he remembered them. “The speed of the cast...it was a spell form, not a true spell. If it had been void magic...to completely disappear a body, his affinity would have needed to be in the sixties or seventies...”

Raelia was still in disbelief. “I am telling you, he was just a regular legionnaire. He wore just leather armor, not even the metal armor of the Imperial Legion.”

The general shook his head. “Whoever he was, he escaped. According to my bodyguards, he was not among the dead bodies at the reservoir,” Clayln murmured. “Whoever he is, he is dangerous.” He considered. “We will spread his description among our spies in the Empire. He is probably one of their Praetorian agents. He is not our concern at the moment. The duke’s army will be at the walls soon.”

Clayln stood and patted his sister on the shoulder. “I need to see to the defenses of the city with the other generals. The portal mage is also opening a passage home. You are going. A few days’ rest, and you can go to the Rookery. I am sorry, but Moonclaw did not make it.”

Raelia winced as her chest constricted in pain and guilt. She had forgotten about Moonclaw. He had died defending her. It was her own stupidity that had gotten him killed. She cringed. “I do not know if I will remain a Griffin Rider, brother. Maybe I will think about it for a few weeks. Maybe I could join the Rangers.”

Clayln grimaced. She knew he did not want her in any unit, especially the Rangers, who worked as spies and scouts. He let out a sigh. “Zylia will have you cleaning stalls at the Rookery for the next year for your unauthorized attack.” She nodded in understanding. She would have to pay for her mistake—a mistake that had cost Moonclaw his life.

But she would help fight the Telhians. It was in her blood. She would do her penance and return.

Chapter 65: Tribunal

I woke in the middle of the night, unable to sleep. I wandered the building. Most rooms were softly lit by a single glowstone embedded in the stone. I found a small, empty, private bathroom with running water and a mirror. It must be for a mage commander, but it was currently barren of personal possessions. Looking in the mirror, I saw my beard had grown in. I decided to access my barber's kit and clean up.

The straight-edge razor was new to me, but I could quickly heal the skin even if I nicked myself. Experimenting, I found the key was getting the angle right and using light, short strokes. I applied the face balm and was looking better already. I put the kit away and continued my wandering of the Eastern Legion Hall.

The complex was huge. There were classrooms, offices, private bedrooms, dining rooms, and a very large kitchen. "Can we get you something?" a pudgy woman who was preparing the morning meals asked.

Since I was here, that sounded like a fantastic idea. "Ham steak and scrambled eggs?" I asked hopefully.

The cook motioned for another kitchen staff to fill my request as she appeared to be in charge and focused on the dough she was kneading. I asked, "Is this building always so quiet at night?"

"No! This is the quietest it has been since the last duke's coronation. Back then, the Emperor sent two thousand legionnaires to his province's Citadel to show his support." The cook continued to roll the dough with her well-muscled forearms and hands. I sat across from her on a stool and waited for my food. The cook cracked five eggs and added a splash of milk, pepper, and salt before whisking them. A hand-sized ham steak was placed in a separate pan with bacon fat. It was not long before a plate of heaping scrambled eggs covering a thick ham steak was put in front of me.

As I ate, the head cook asked, "You're from Castile's company?"

"I am, but I've only been with them for a month," I replied after swallowing a mouthful. This was just my fifth week, which seemed impossible after all the shit I had been through. "How many mage companies are in the city?" I asked before shoveling another forkful of eggs in.

"Normally, we have twenty or so mages and five hundred legionnaires in Eastern Legion Hall. Tomorrow morning, we're only cooking for three mages and a hundred or so legionnaires," the cook said while cutting the bread into small chunks to bake the rolls. "The Imperial Legion Hall has over two thousand legionnaires, and the gods know how many mages, the Mage War College is also not far from the Imperial Legion Hall."

"And the Western Legion Hall?" I asked, finishing my plate. The cook who made it took it away and left a steaming cup of tea in its place.

The head cook slapped each piece of dough hard on a tray to get the shape she wanted and then slid it into the oven. She then answered my question. "The Western Hall has maybe two thousand legionnaires as well, but a portion of those are in training and not true legionnaires yet." I did not have time to talk further as Konstantin walked into the kitchen.

"Figures you found your way to a meal," he said with a light tone. "Eryk, we are leaving soon. Gear up. Smart move getting breakfast. We may not have time to eat throughout the day," Konstantin advised.

The middle-aged cook addressed the scout. "Konstantin, you old goat. There is a basket of hot meat buns warming in the oven." I had never seen Konstantin get flustered before as the cook addressed him. But he was shaken as he looked at the cook and processed her words.

"Gilda?" Konstantin showed familiarity with the cook. "What are you doing here?"

"You know why I am here. Take the buns," the cook said with a slight smile and a wave of her hand.

Konstantin's eyes hardened slightly at his acquaintance as he ordered, "Eryk, get the buns into your space." He spun and left, shaking his head.

I added a basket of twelve meat buns to my space and returned to our room. I dressed in my clean armor while the others waited for me. We left in the dark, and I had a chance to ask Konstantin, "Old lover?"

"Gilda? Gods' mercy, never," Konstantin rasped. "No, we both work for the same woman," he said low enough so the others would not hear. "If Gilda is here, someone is not long for this world." Realizing he said that a little too loud, he gruffly walked ahead of me. So, the cook was an agent of the Praetorian Guard that Konstantin worked for. She was probably an assassin, based on his words. The pudgy woman did not look like a fighter. Knowing the agents could be anywhere was good, as I never would have suspected the cook.

We returned to the Magistrate building before the sun had broken the sky. The door between the statues was guarded by two legionnaires in metal armor. Konstantin noted, "They have the insignia of Duke Octavian. He must already be inside." Duke Octavian's symbol was a black crow on a white field, apparently.

We entered the building, and there were quite a few men and women in the white robes of the magistrate walking the halls. The place was much busier than in the middle of the night. Konstantin stopped and asked questions while we waited. When he returned, he told us what he had learned. "The Ducal Tribunal will be in the Venus Room. I have directions. They are still waiting on Duke Vito, so it has not started yet."

We followed Konstantin to a corridor with a large blue double-door. A mural painting took up the entire opposite wall. The painting was lifelike, depicting a woman exiting the ocean's surf. She was naked with long, flowing dark blonde hair and mesmerizing sky-blue eyes that seemed

to follow you. I was not the only one staring. “Why is this painting in the magistrate’s building?” Benito asked.

Konstantin studied the image longer than he needed to. “This building was not always the building for the Imperial Magistrates and training the Truthseekers. It served some other purpose in the past.”

A man in white robes overheard our conversation and informed us, “That is right, legionnaire. This used to be the villa for Duke Latrell when he stayed in the capital. He challenged the Emperor and was beheaded, and all his property was seized. This building became the Magistrate’s office. All of the amazing artwork has been preserved.” He focused on Konstantin. “Are you here for the Ducal Tribunal of Mage Castile?”

Konstantin nodded. “We gave statements last night to Truthseekers. We are here in case our statements are questioned or further explanation is required.”

The man in white robes nodded in understanding. “Only the accused, her Advocate, the Imperial Truthseeker, and the Tribunal are allowed in the room. If witnesses are requested, they will be summoned.”

Konstantin ground his teeth, obviously frustrated at being helpless. A man in purple and gold robes walked down the center of the corridor. He was overweight and had an air of self-importance. The white-robed magistrate met him. “Duke Vito. This way, please.” He opened the blue double door, and immediately, arguing voices spilled out of the room. The door absorbed sound as the corridor had been silent before they opened.

I only got a brief glimpse into the room. Castile was standing next to a man in yellow robes. Her back was to us, and she was facing a table with three seats. Two seats were filled with Duke Octavian and a young woman who I assumed was Duchess Veronica. The argument that was interrupted was between Octavian and the yellow-robed man. I assumed he was Castile’s Advocate. Nico, the old Truthseeker from last night, walked from a door inside the courtroom to join the proceedings. Duke Vito went to join the other two dukes. The white-robed man shut the blue doors behind Duke Vito, and we were cut off from the scene and all sound.

The white-robed man then stood in front of the door like a guard. Konstantin pulled us to the side. Benito asked, “What is the plan?”

Konstantin said, “We wait.” He leaned against the painting of Venus. The white-robed man frowned, and Konstantin stood away from the painting.

Close to an hour had passed before Pavel asked, “What is going on inside?”

Konstantin started to answer, but the white-robed man surprisingly answered for him, happy to help. “The charges will be read. Each charge will be dealt with one at a time. Each of the Tribunal members will have a turn to ask questions of the accused. The Truthseeker will verify

the answers of the defendant. Then, the Advocate has a chance to ask the final questions. Finally, each Tribunal member votes on the charge.”

“What about our statements?” Benito asked.

The white-robed man nodded. “They were copied and given to the dukes last night. Duke Octavian was questioning their addition to the formal records when the doors briefly opened.” The man had a slight smile, “Do not worry, legionnaires. Justice is always based on the evidence presented.”

“What about the evidence not presented.” I muttered.

The white-robed man focused on me. “You would make a good magistrate, legionnaire. Yes, missing evidence or questions not asked can lead to verdicts that are undeserved. Have no worries. Your Mage has one of the best Advocates in the Hall. Duchess Veronica personally requested him.”

Another hour passed, and the blue doors had not opened. “It seems to be taking a long time,” Benito stated to his rumbling stomach.

“Hand out the buns,” Konstantin muttered to me.

I produced the basket of buns, and we each took one. I offered one to the white-robed man, and he reluctantly accepted. Benito took possession of the basket, and slowly, the buns were consumed. Hours passed, and even the magistrate guarding the door seemed to get fidgety.

A man in blue robes, followed by two legionnaires in metal armor, came down the corridor to our room. Slightly out of breath, he addressed everyone, “This is the Tribunal for Mage Castile?”

The white-robed man guarding the door answered, “It is. They are still in deliberation, Chancellor.”

He looked at us. “And you are her legionnaires?”

Konstantin moved to stand before the blue-robed man. “We are. What does the Collegium Scholarium want with the Tribunal?” Konstantin was both confused and hopeful.

“Truthseeker Yanis came to us this morning with a copy of a testimony. We wish to interview any legionnaires who were part of the storm giant slaying,” he said, and all my fellow legionnaires turned their eyes to me.

The man, who was a Chancellor, instantly said, “Ah, you must be Eryk, the legionnaire who gave the original statement. Who else was with you when the mighty storm giant was defeated?” I looked to Konstantin, who nodded.

I was slightly nervous and answered truthfully, “Legionnaires Brutus and Flavius are the only two others who have survived. Master Mage Sebastian took Flavius. Brutus is in Caranhagan. He missed the portal to the capital.”

Konstantin stepped forward, intervening. “What does the College of Scholars want with the legionnaires?”

“Just to question them. Nothing nefarious. We will take this one,” he pointed at me, “and you can send the others when they arrive.” The man handed Konstantin a wrapped scroll.

Konstantin unrolled it and looked up, surprised. “The Emperor’s seal?”

The blue-robed man bowed. “I am Marcel, Counsel to the Emperor and Chancellor of the Collegium Scholarium. Truthseeker Yanis is my nephew. My time is precious, and I have already been to Eastern Legion Hall and back today.” He wiped his forehead of sweat.

“Go with him, Eryk. When they finish with you, check here for us first and then the Legion Hall. I will want to talk with you as well,” Konstantin said with a note of curiosity and annoyance.

It did not feel like this was voluntary. The two legionnaires in steel armor flanked me, and we all followed an excited Marcel out of the Magistrate’s Hall. The Chancellor was a little too excited, in my opinion.