Chapter 95 Practice

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

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

Adrian shrugged, “That is not relevant to our practice, Eryk.  Are you ready to go again?”

I pressed him for something I did not know about him, “What are the names of your parents?”

Adrian looked over at the others who had been standing and watching us.  No one moved for a moment, and then Adrian said, “I do not recall.  Should I know?”

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

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

I walked back into the first room where the ankheg were, and it was as I had left it.  Konstantin did not look regretful for having just killed me.  And there was no body.  Konstantin barked, “You should have expected that, Eryk.  If your opponent knows your tricks, they will use them against you.  Again?!”  I liked this dream creation as much as I liked the real one.

I fought Konstantin again and lost, this time pausing the environment before his sword pierced my heart as I was on my back on the ground.  He seemed to be getting better and learning from me.  I realized that I was not fatiguing, feeling injuries, or had a limit on how much aether I could use.  I focused on adding these elements into the dreamscape practice.  Although, I did not want to feel pain, it made sense to include it while I practiced.  Limiting the number of shields was smart as well to get used to my limitations.

I started to rotate who I was fighting.  Konstantin always seemed to beat me no matter what I tried.  He seemed to be a step ahead.  Blaze was easy to beat with my shield.  Lucien was an even match for me, but multiple shields usually put the match in my favor.  He did crush my forearm with a lucky blow.  After a moment of shock, it was the most intense pain I had felt in the dreamscape so far. The pain shifted, though, like it was trying to find the appropriate amount from my memories. So, the amulet was adjusting to my knowledge to get things right.

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

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

Lucien arrived just as the sky was turning gray in the sun’s first light.  “All done?”

“I couldn’t sleep and needed to do something,” I explained.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Adrian said calmly, “He will not have a choice. Horses ready?” He addressed Lucien, who nodded. Lucien ate his biscuits and gravy, but none of the chunks inside.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Adrian answered, “There are two fortifications space equally along the road. Merchants use them, and so will we. Now, Eryk, let’s practice.”

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

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

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

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

Lucien motioned to me, “Let us clean what we can and get the horses fed and water, Eryk.”

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

We rode hard the next day, with Adrian not wanting to trust the condition of the fortification. We reached it at midday, and it actually had a door. It lacked a roof, but Adrian stopped as we rode on, planning to make Lorvo before nightfall.

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

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

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

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

Blaze asked hopefully, “They have a Displacement Mage?”

“It won’t help us,” Adrian informed him. “Forgabua does. Nor does any city on the return trip. The only reason a city this far south has a portal is so the First Citizens can get their wine in a timely manner.”

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

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

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

The baths were white marble, and Adrian commented that a quarry was near the city. This city produced both wine and quality marble, so it was not surprising the Count who ruled it appeared to be wealthy. I did not have time to luxuriate in the baths as Adrian had us dressed in borrowed robes and off into the city while our clothes and armor were cared for by the attendants.

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

Large buildings seemed to be dedicated to pressing grapes and fermenting the product. Many people had purple-stained hands from their work. Adrian had been to the city before but still asked for directions. The alchemist shop we were looking for was a gray stone building. When we entered, we both paused, a little shocked. The alchemist had bright red skin. He was working on a chemistry set spanning two full-length tables that would make any mad scientist envious.

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

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