Chapter 126 Choosing Sides

I was seated across from Castile, a worn, dark oak table between us.  Two gold rings, a silver necklace, and some folded papers were on the table.  She studied me until I started to get uncomfortable.  Castile broke the silence, “Can I see the amulet?”

I didn’t hesitate, and I put the amulet on the table.  Castile picked it up and turned it in her hands.  I was watching her eyes to see if she used it.  She eventually put it down, never having tested it.  “I never heard them called dreamscape amulets before.  There were two of these at the Mage College, usable only by the First Citizens and under the supervision of a High Mage.  They could help you learn new spells in weeks instead of months.”

She pushed it back toward me, like pushing away a temptation.  “Secure it.  Duchess Veronica is not letting her brother do any message sendings, but we are certain he will plan to obtain it or use its existence to gain favor from a powerful First Citizen.”

I took the amulet and stored it.  Castile did not ask to use it but hinted that she wanted to.  Castile indicated the items on the table, “These are the artifacts found on Sebastian.”  Behind Castile, the collector was also on the bed.  “The maps and instructions from the summoner in elvish,” she indicated the papers.

The rings did not have any runic markings on them, “They are magical? I don’t see any markings on the rings.”  The silver necklace clearly had a unique pattern in the links.

Castile frowned, “Dungeon rings are typically just gold bands. Only when they are in use or heated in flame with their runic workings show.” She picked up one of the rings, “I do not know their function.”

After studying the ring, she put it down, “After we leave for the Ruins of Caelora, the Duchess will compose a message sending to the capital.  If Sebastian has an heir, they will go to him or her.  If he does not have an heir, the registry of artifacts will be consulted.  If any of the items are listed there, they will be turned over to the Empire.”  Castile turned around to look at the essence collector.  “Almost all essence collectors are registered in the Empire, so I will hold onto that until they request it be returned.”  She let a small smirk escape, “Of course, once we march with it, we will have no means of communication as I do not know the message sending spell.”

I figured out her plan.  Castile and the Duchess had plotted so she would be able to keep the essence collector for this one assignment.  I asked, “And the rings and necklace?”

“I will try to figure out their function tonight.  If I can, and it is useful, we will take it with us.  Most likely, Duke Octavian will come looking for them,” she said with spite.

“I don’t understand,” I said bewildered.

Castile clenched her teeth, “Flavius informed me Master Mage Sebestian’s estate is in Duke Octavian’s province.  If he has no heir, and Flavius thinks he does not, then all his property will revert to Octavian.”

“Why just not report the recovery of the items and keep them?”  I offered a simple solution.

“If the items are not registered, that would work.  But I do not know what is and what isn’t.  The collector is definitely registered, but these…”  Castile looked at the rings and necklace.  “If we did not try to get them to there proper place a Truthseeker would discover the deception.”

Castile straightened, “We have avoided why I asked you long enough.  Konstantin and Flavius are both suspicious of you.  The wyvern had no wounds, and no poison works that fast.”

With her tone change, I got uncomfortable, “What happened to, if you don’t know, you can not tell the Truthseekers?”  I said slowly.

 Castile frowned, “I am not asking you anything.  I am telling you Konstantin and Flavius will be watching you more closely.”

“If Konstantin watched me any closer, his head would be stuck in my ass,” I joked.  That got a small smile from Castile.

Her smile faded, “Konstantin knows you can heal.  I expect your training sessions are going to be more…intense,” Castile said.  I groaned as that had been one of my bigger fears.  “Do you know Konstantin’s spell forms?”  Castile suddenly asked.  “He knows your secrets. It is fair you know his.”

“He has a form of telekinesis.  He can move small objects,” I answered, and Castile nodded.

When I did not offer any more, she supplied them, “He can tell if something is poisonous.”  My blood suddenly chilled, and Castile smirked at my discomfort, “Only poisons that come from plants, though.  It is a weak spell form from the nature affinity.  He has a third as well.  Another weak spell form that is actually extremely useful.  It allows him to get a full night’s rest in four hours.”

“That bastard.  That is how he is always up before me.  That is just cheating,” I spat in disgust at the unfairness.

“Cheating?” Castile asked, amused. “You can heal yourself, turn air into defensive shields and have a secret storage. I think you have the advantage over Konstantin.” Castile did not even mention that I was working on a spell form for time.

“So you just wanted to warn me?” I asked Castile.

Castile rubbed her brow, trying to come up with a way to explain it, “No. The amulet complicates things. Konstantin will soon hear from the others that you have it, and he will tell his Praetorian Guard master, and Boris will continue to pursue it. It is going to draw a lot of attention to myself and the company.”

I was confused. I couldn’t believe such a small device could cause so many problems. “Then what do you want me to do? Give it away? Flee the Empire?”

Castile eyes danced with indecision, “No, it is not yet time we do that.”

A cold feeling ran down my spine. Castile had just confirmed some of my suspicions. She had clearly used the word **we**. She had been grooming me to help her flee the Empire. At least, that is what I was interpreting from her words. It had been intentional on her part as I read her eyes. I waited for her to continue. “You could always sell the amulet or seek protection from a First Citizen.”

“The Duchess?” I asked, trying to read her intentions.

Castile was impassive as she answered, “If you wish to enter her service, then you could. I know a few men of the company that will be leaving my service to join her if we are called to serve elsewhere,” Castile revealed. She did not sound bitter, though. “I also suspect that the Duchess is working with Konstantin’s Praetorian Master.”

“Konstantin is working for the Duchess?” I said. I was extremely confused.

Castile delinerated in silence, deciding what to tell me, “No. It is not that simple. I think Antonia Segreto is using the Duchess to keep me safe.”

“Antonia Segreto? The merchant queen you thought is Konstantin’s handler?” I asked.

“Interesting way of putting it, Eryk. But yes. While Firth is here to ensure I don’t betray the Empire, Konstantin appears to be here to ensure I do not get myself killed. She has some purpose for me, and I do not know what it is,” Castile revealed.

“Is that why he pushed us so hard to get to the capital for the Tribunal?” I asked.

“Partly so, I believe. He does have some loyalty in him as well,” Castile said softly.

Too many things were playing through my mind. Castile was a peasant raised to power and caught in the politics of the Empire. She obviously was hoping to escape one way or another. Konstantin had been a mentor, a tough mentor, but still a mentor. But his true motives were hidden. Castile let me consider everything for a few minutes. I finally chose to side with Castile. “What do you need me to do?”

Castile’s lips twitched in a brief smile. “Stay close to Konstantin. Ask him for help in protecting your amulet.” Castile let her words sink in before adding, “If you can get him to divulge what Antonia Segreto has planned for me, it would help enormously.”

So this is what it had come down to. I was to spy on Konstantin. “Konstantin keeps hinting that I should join the Hounds,” I said after considering her words.

Castile wavered a moment before admitting, “He thought it would be beneficial for you. In case you had cause to flee the Empire. Knowing how your pursuers work.”

“So I should ask Konstantin about working for Antonia?” I stated.

“Before, she may have seen you as useful as a smuggler. But now you are actually a competent fighter with self-healing,” Castile paused, maybe realizing how attractive I was to recruit.

“I understand and will try to get recruited by Konstantin,” I committed to Castile’s side.

Castile nodded but didn’t smile. “If you need help in the future, you can trust Adrian, Felix, Mateo, and Blaze.” I tilted my head before figuring out what Castile was hinting at. If I decided to leave the Empire, as she was planning, then those four would be trustworthy.

“Mateo, really?” I asked about the legionnaire who did not know how to hold his tongue.

Castile nodded, “Foolish with his tongue but loyal and brave beyond measure.”

I stood, “I should get some rest for tomorrow’s march.”

“Are you going to loan one of your new blades to Brutus?” Castile asked as I made to leave.

“Before we reach the ruins, yes. I want to try them both before deciding which to keep.” Castile nodded, and I left.

I returned to the northwest tower to find Maveith animatedly talking with Flavius and Konstantin. Maveith was retelling of the competition and how I had won the day. Konstantin had Maveith pause, “So those are yours now?” He pointed at the two runic blades on my bed with my pack.

I nodded and studied Konstantin. Maybe it was just the talk with Castile, but I could see the suspicion in his eyes. Flavius was ignoring me completely as he packed his own bag. I noticed a bundle of silvery arrows on the bed, so he must have received the runic arrows already.

Maveith broke the silence, “Benito brought you this,” his large hand dumped a mess of silver into my hand. “Ten large silver and forty small,” Maveith informed me. Benito had set up a betting pool for the tourney. I moved the coins to my storage.

“Yes, Konstantin. I am going to loan one of the blades to Brutus. And you heard about the amulet as well?” I said, sitting on my bed, my face impassive.

“From Mateo, yes. Sounds useful. I hope you are using it well,” he said indifferently.

Maveith could feel the tension in the room and asked, “Does anyone want to play checkers?”

Konstantin disappointed Maveith, “We should all get some rest. It is going to be a long walk tomorrow.”

I moved the amulet to my hand and entered the dreamscape. I only spent a few moments encasing the bookshelf inside a rock wall before returning. I exited and returned the amulet.

As I settled into an uncomfortable sleep, the dreams came quickly. No matter where I went in my dreams, someone wanted the amulet. It started with Mateo asking on the march incessantly to borrow it. Then, it was Konstantin’s Praetorian Master trying to get it from me in exchange for her protection. Then it was First Citizen Boris demanding to fight me for it over and over. I beat him down every time.

Konstantin was up first and kicked the bed to wake me. “Time to wake, Eryk, we have an hour before breakfast. Let’s see if you deserve to carry those blades.” I was awake instantly, but it was still dark outside, and Konstantin held a glow stone.

“Am I still dreaming?” I asked myself softly, even though I knew this was not a dream.

Konstantin barked a laugh. The racket from Konstantin had forced Flavius and Maveith to wake. “I am flattered you dream about me, Eryk. Get your armor on, and we only have an hour to make sure you don’t cut yourself with your new swords.” Konstantin was being Konstantin. He was gone, stamping down the stone steps. I groaned but started moving.