Chapter 133

After the scouts returned, the men huddled near the center of the massive library.  Konstantin and Mateo’s news that there were thousands more spectators under the city was not met with much cheerfulness.  Mateo’s new runic elven blade was being passed around, but I ignored the interest.  I shifted my position to listen to Konstantin, Castile, Adrian, and Delmar talking.  They were all circled around the Scholar to plan an expedition further into the library.

Konstantin explained what they had found: “The library has two large towers on the northern corner of this structure.  We only explored one of the towers.  Each floor of the tower had its own library.  We only encountered a few specters of what I suspect were the elven librarians.  Easily handed, and they reformed after half an hour like the others.”  He nodded at the kettle of souls to indicate it would be required.

The Scholar eagerly interrupted, “What books were in the smaller libraries?”

Konstantin shrugged, “Unfortunately, not all were as well preserved as this room.   Some weather managed to get through the windows on the second and third floors.   The third and highest floor also damage the roof, and the books are just a pile of dirt for centuries in the elements.”  Scholar Favian frowned at the news.  “The first and second floors had books in better condition as well as a number of offices.  That is where Mateo found that,” he pointed at the elven blade.  “It was on a wall in one of the offices.”

Delmar looked around, “We should move camp to one of the offices in the tower.  It will be easier to heat and more defensible from the specters.”

All eyes turned to Castile, but she had not made a decision yet, “What about the underground complex?”

Konstantin continued, “After we climbed the tower, we thought we were headed into the sewers underneath the tower like the Scholar mentioned, but we encountered a long hallway with a number of storage rooms.  We only encountered a single specter until we reached a large room littered with hundreds of skeletons of elven children.  That is where we drew those specters from.  Mateo got anxious and swung his new blade even though they were ignoring us,” Konstantin shook his head.  “Otherwise, I think the child specters would have continued wandering the room.”

Delmar was interested in the other rooms, “Anything useful in the storage rooms?”

“We didn’t explore them too thoroughly, but it is unlikely.  I suspect they were full of food and other perishable supplies that have long since expired.”  All eyes turned to Castile to make the decision.

“Any sign of vermin?”  Castile finally asked.

Konstantin went introspective, “I see what you are asking.  Rat meat is better than starving, but I suspect the specters keep the city clear of all living things.”

He paused before delivering bad news, “We were able to see the city from the third floor of the tower. It is still snowing out there; all you can see is white, Castile.  Even the hearth tree of the elves is covered.  We are trapped.”

Adrian offered some optimism, “We have enough here to burn to keep warm and just need to melt the snow for fresh water.”

Delmar descented, “We will run out of food, Adrian.  Maybe we can stretch it and let it last a month, but I doubt we are going to find anything in the city.  Our only hope is we find the Scholar’s dungeon and hunt there.”

“Agreed,” Castile said tersely before an argument erupted.  “We will clear the two towers of specters and see if their libraries offer any more clues to its whereabouts.”

From his seat, Scholar Favian was quick to add, “Elven libraries in the Esenhem Kingdom have special restricted sections for magical study.  Maybe one of the tower libraries is a study of the dungeon itself.  It would make sense if the dungeon is indeed inside the city.”

There was slight optimism as the leadership group separated and began to move our camp to the north end of the library, closer to the towers.  The decision was for Konstantin, Adrian, Blaze, and I would go with Castile to secure one of the towers.  The Scholar would come with us. Brutus, Mateo, Delmar, Flavius, and Pascal would remain with the larger group, protecting them with their runic weapons.

There was not much fanfare as we entered the doors on the north end of the library.  I somehow ended up in front with a glowstone in one hand and my black blade in the other.  The wide corridor had footprints from Konstantin and Mateo in a thin layer of dust.  The walls were painted with images, but the dust coating them was too thick to make them out clearly.

“Follow our prints,” Konstantin said impatiently from the left.  “There will be a wide stairway to the left in about fifty feet.”

I walked slowly as our footfalls were muffled in the dust layer.  I paused at the steps Konstantin had informed me about.  The stone steps were a rich beige stone and had much less dust.  I started to climb the wide circular staircase.  The cold air had not reached freezing temperatures yet, and our ascent’s echoes made me tense as I was a dozen steps ahead of the group.

I reached the first landing, and two large double doors hung loosely from broken hinges.  They were also covered in dust, and whatever had ripped them out had long passed.  I entered the room beyond, and a specter was placing a book on a shelf obvious to my prescence.

Castile hissed, “It is a poltergeist.  Watch out, as it can affect the material plane.”

Adrian was on my right, “Eryk, you and me, now.”  We both advanced on the translucent elf in robes.  It turned its head in curiosity at us before Konstantin’s blade stabbed forward from my left and took it in the chest, causing a flash of sparks.  It screamed in silence as Adrian hacked it from my right, and I finished it off, bringing my blade down on its head.

Konstantin chuckled, “Third time I have killed this one.  Hopefully, this time it stays dead.”  Konstantin must have rushed forward to attack the specter. I quickly glanced at his runic blade, and it had luster to it I had not noticed before. Konstantin sheathed the blade, “That was the only one on this floor when we explored.”

Castile had the urn out, and the violet death essence smoke was already being sucked into it.  Castile was not happy, “Konstantin, you didn’t mention any poltergeists?”  He looked blankly at Castile, “They are advanced forms of specters that can manipulate objects.  They are usually only capable of throwing objects and not wielding them like weapons.  This one had to have been powerful to handle that book so gently.”

Konstantin nodded, accepting his failure, “I didn’t know that.  There is another one on the third floor.  It was trying to repair the damaged books when I struck it down.”

I took in the room as Scholar Favian was itching to get at the shelves.  There was only a single transparent stone window, helping our glowstones light the room.  The room was surprisingly clean and orderly.  The poltergeist must have maintained this room through the centuries. Six long double-sided shelves dominated the room.  Simple but elegant desks lined the walls, with five doorways dispersed between them.

Those of us with runic weapons walked the small library and searched the doors.  Adrian found a specter in one of the rooms and quickly dispatched for Castile, much to Konstantin’s chagrin.  We were allowed a break with the entire floor secure, and Favian started to go through the shelves in earnest.  I went into one of the offices that had a fireplace and window.  The view through the stone was foggy, and I cleaned the inside as best I could.

Beyond, it looked like snow was slowing as I could see a good distance and the shapes of buildings in the city.  The massive tree that dominated the city was covered in snow, its massive branches sagging under the weight.  Blue lightning flashed in the sky high above as I watched.  I heard Castile walk in behind me.  “Storm elementals,” she indicated the blue flashes.  “Looks like the summoner’s control over them is waning.”

“Are we getting out of this?”  I asked softly. This felt like Macha all over again.

She tapped the kettle of souls in her arms, “Yes.  With this, we stand a chance.”

“Why hasn’t someone used that before to clear the city of the undead?  There appears to be a lot in this city that can be plundered,” I asked.

Castile looked out the window with me, “The first kettle of souls was found in a dungeon about nine hundred years ago, according to Scholar Favian.  There was not much use for it until they learned the death essence it crystallized could be used to forge runic weapons and certain potions.  The Telhian Empire has neither powerful runic smiths nor powerful alchemists to make use of it.  This kettle was sitting in the vault of a Count, long forgotten, but Scholar Favian was aware of its existence.  We were lucky the Count was willing to part with it for a favor.”

“Favor?”  I asked.

“That is Between the Duchess Veronica and Count Lorenzo.  He did not know the true value of this artifact.  Neither did I.”  Castile walked the room and checked the fireplace and ornate blackwood desk.

She searched the drawers and pulled out a small silvery knife that looked like a letter opener.  She talked while she searched the rest of the desk, “We are going to clear the upper two floors.  You are to remain here and guard Scholar Favian while he sorts the books.”

Castile did not find anything else interesting, secured the small knife on her person, and left the room.  I sat at the desk and ran my hands along it.  It was a beautiful desk, but if the company moved up to these floors, it was going to be smashed and burned in the fireplace.  I sighed and went to the library area, “Scholar Favian was excitedly reading the spines among the shelves.  Castile, Adrian, Konstantin, and Blaze were departing to head further up the tower.

I went and stood next to the Scholar, “Any luck?”

“Luck?” Scholar Favian said absently.  He replaced a book, “Unfortunately, these appear to be all advanced reference manuals for professions. A lot of terminology used is even beyond my understanding.”

“Interesting, they sound valuable. What professions are here?” I asked, trying to make conversation while we waited.

“Valuable if you can read elvish. Maybe if they were translated and transcribed, but my grasp of the finer points of the language is lacking. Let me see,” he started to walk the shelves looking at the spines, “This section here is weaver’s, this section over here,” he paused to read a title, “appears to be for cooking—and brewing.” He spent some time on the next shelf reading titles before announcing, “It appears to be furniture making. It includes everything from cutting the tree, to seasoning the wood to various techniques.”

He had covered most of the sections and came to the last full row, “This appears to be the herbalism section and apothecary section.”

“Alchemy? I have learned a little bit from Decimus,” I said excitedly.

“Not alchemy,” he shook his head, “Just basic herbalism and non-aether infused brews.” I was still interested, and he indicated maybe three hundred large tomes on the shelf. Of course, they were all in Elvish. I started paging through the first book on the shelf. It had a lot of pictures and text.

Seeing me enthralled, Scholar Favian returned to his own task of trying to find clues for the Shimmering Labyrinth. I was paging through my fifth book when he said, “There might be an alchemy section in a different library, or wherever Mage School is located. It took me fifteen years to learn the nuances of the written Elven language.”

Scholar Favian started to go into his diatribe about how he became an expert on the Elven language, and I half listened as I focused on slowly turning the pages. If I couldn’t move these books to my dimensional space, I would try adding as many as possible to my dreamscape. It was over four hours before the group returned from the upper floors. I had paged through about one-third of the books before my eyes started hurting.

“How did it go,” I asked the group.

Adrian answered tiredly, “Seven specters and four poltergeists. There is nothing useful on the third floor. Part of the roof collapsed and weathered everything. All the books were mush. The second floor just had a crack in the window, but mold got to half the books.”

Favian eagerly stood, ready to explore upstairs despite his bloodshot eyes. Castile stopped him. “Later, Scholar. I want to get the company settled up here first. What did you find in these books?”

Scholar Favian eagerly told Castile, “It appears to be a catalog for the elven master craftsmen. I assume the other smaller libraries are the same, focusing on five or six professions. There is invaluable knowledge contained within. The Collegium Scholarium would be very excited to get this collection.”

Castile took in all the books but shook her head. “Getting them all out of here will be too much of a task. What about the Shimmering Labryinth?”

Scholar Favian had a smile split his face, “Three references so far. One is very promising.” He opened a book he had put aside and started reading, “The rock spider silk spinnerets are viable for seven hours after harvest. Getting them to the weavers on Dawn’s Light Street directly from the Labyrinth is best to spin them into silk thread.” His smile grew, “Dawn’s Light Street is in the city.”

“So the dungeon is within seven hours of the city,” Adrian said unhappily. “It does not mean it is within the walls or accessible by the underground network.”

Castile gave him a harsh look. It was not like Adrian to voice his pessimism; it was not the first time since being trapped in the city. Castile barked, “Adrian and Konstantin, with me, we will go and escort the rest of the company up here.”

As they were leaving, I heard Castile voicing her displeasure at his attitude and how it would affect the rest of the company. Blaze went and sat by a window and looked out at the white expanse, slowly darkening with night. He seemed morose and was normally one of the cheerier men in the company. I was beginning to think this undead city was affecting people. I remembered that last night I didn’t dream. Maveith had also been extremely quiet since entering the city, and didn’t want to play checkers. Yes, this city was definitely affecting us somehow.