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61 Julian

In the last 400 years, Rome had expanded from a city of just three square miles to a super power of over 720,000 square miles, stretching from Africa to Asia Minor. Rome had become the most powerful state in the East Mediterranean for they had conquered everything west of Greece and began to expand even further than that.

All citizens of Rome were driven by the desire to make a mark in the history of their powerful Republic of Rome. To become the wealthiest, the most celebrated and the most famous of all. Glory was the one thing all Romans wanted and this wasn't an exception for one of the brightest sons of Rome, Julian Kaiser.

When Julian had been transported to Magus Academy, he was staying in the outskirts of Rome in a green field practicing his martial capability. A beam of light happened one evening while he had been asleep and after he returned, he recognized he was in the same patch of grass where he had passed out.

The first thing Julian wanted to know was to see his family again living in the walls of Rome. From his understanding, he had been gone for seven days without anyone's knowledge, so he was sure people from his family had been looking for him.

He ran back into Rome, a very magnificent city, inhabited by more than hundreds of thousands of citizens as well as slaves. He first passed by the roman aqueduct, a marvel of human ingenuity where fresh water was transported into the areas all over Rome. After that, he entered the gate of Rome guarded by several Roman soldiers wearing a full set of legionnaire armor.

Travelling through lots of tall buildings and a wide road to accommodate the countless caravans drawn by mostly slaves, he also passed by the crowded market where a lot of merchants were aggressively selling various goods from fruits to freshly acquired slaves.

Since Julian was a descendant of a well-known family who had a strong enough influence in Roman politics, they had a sizable house where there were lots of slaves attending to their various needs. The number of slaves a person had usually showed how wealthy the head of the family was.

Julian ran quite far without stopping; he didn't feel lethargic nor even feel the need to catch his breath. This was due to having him a stronger physique after his return from the Magus Academy. With this in mind, he ran faster at the thought of immediately bringing news to his mother, who should be at home, to and tell her he would like to carry out his ambition to become the most influential person in Rome.

Julian went out using the path he had taken and headed toward his aunt's house, located not far from here. His uncle and aunt had more influence than his father but as he also neared their place of residence, there were also two roman troops guarding the gate of the house. Just when he was about to walk away a familiar voice called out to him.

"Julian!"

He looked toward the direction of the voice and saw a hooded figure. When the person lifted the hood, Julian exclaimed, "Celia!"

The girl ran to Julian and gave him a hug.

"What's wrong? What happened here?" he asked his crying sister.

"Father and mother! They were... they were—"

"Our family has fallen into rumbles," said another female hooded figure that appeared from a corner. She lifted her hood as well and was revealed to be Julian's aunt.

"Tell me more, aunty," Julian asked, his voice serious.

"Let's go to a more secluded place," she replied.

The three of them walked and Julian was given a hood by his aunt. Once they were at a sufficient distance away from their former houses, his aunt broke the bad news that had happened during the ten days he had been missing.

Julian's father, who was a governor in the province of Asia Minor, had been accused of treason against Rome by their political rivals after presenting so-called evidence in the senate. The senate deemed it valid and proceeded to issue an order to execute the current head of the Kaiser family as well as the alleged co-conspirators, which included Julian's uncle as well as several other figures who had a close tie to the Kaiser family.

Most of those who were executed were the various influential figures, but they didn't include their offspring and wives, since according to the senate, the sins of the father were not the sins of their sons and daughters. They also made an excuse that in accordance with the contributions that the others had procured in years of service, the sons, daughters and wives of those who had sinned were only to be exiled. Hence, they were spared but all of their assets were confiscated and driven out of Rome.

Still, since Julian's aunt had her own connections, they still managed to stay in the city of Rome, but only hiding. She also told the story of how her husband had been dragged out of their houses, as well as other families whom House Kaiser had been friends with, in tears while they were brought before the town square and beheaded in public.

When Julian heard that, he wanted to break everything he wanted to see but did all his best to contain it. He had to be strong for Celia right now who was bawling her eyes out.

Since Julian grew up with the best education of the Romans, not only in martial way but also in science, he knew all of that 'gathered evidence' had been a sham. He knew his father's political rivals were only after the amassed fortune his father and uncle had brought from trading with those in the Asia Minor and they also feared the increasing political presence Julian's father and uncle were gathering. So these rivals decided it was the best time to strike before House Kaiser's influence got stronger. After all, in the politics of the Romans, the winner would get everything whereas those opponents who lose would lose everything.

Julian certainly didn't expect to be the head of the family after his return. Fortunately, even though all of their belongings had been confiscated, Julian recalled that his father had mentioned they had a secret savings with a merchant from the east, who was currently staying in the city. It was supposed to be used for a trip to a distant relative who could look after them forever but of course, that was no longer possible.

That was the first order of Julian's business as he tried to think how he would go about his and his sister's future. After finding the merchant, Julian received a lump sum of money and found a place for his aunt and sister to stay in. A small, crowded and shabby place, certainly much different from the clean and beautiful residence they had before all went downhill. In the end, Julian decided to stay in Rome.

He then handed over all the remaining savings to his aunt. "Aunty, please take care of Celia for me."

"What about you? What's your plan?" asked Julian's aunt.

"I am joining the Legion," he declared.

In Roman culture, there was no higher honor than fighting on the battlefield. Even the wealthiest merchant in the Republic of Rome wouldn't get far in politics if he had never had a record of success in warfare.

Julian's goal in joining the Legion apart from receiving a large amount of money and benefits once he retired was that only through a career in the military would he be able to redeem his family's name and keep himself and remaining relatives safe. With the benefits he had received from the Magus Academy, he believed he would succeed in achieving the highest status in the Roman military.

On that same day, Julian enrolled in one of the Roman Legions, with his family status having been revoked, Julian had to start from the lowest rank in a Legion. But it didn't worry him not one bit since every lesson he would receive starting from the bottom would serve him once he was at the top.

62 Thrax

The Greek and the Roman view the Thracians as mere bloodthirsty barbarians because of how undeveloped and uncivilized they lived. Most of the Thracians lived in settlements that were surrounded by wooden walls and wooden houses. The privileged citizens had stone walled houses but had haystacks as their roofs. Their leadership structure revolved in the physical prowess of a person, which decided who would be the chiefs in their dozens of tribes.

After a month had passed since Thrax's return from Magus Academy; his life had turned upside-down. Before he had been considered a normal youth, slightly better than some from the Maedi Tribe, but nothing outstanding. However, when he showed off his new found strength, none of his peers in the same age had been able to beat him. Even those who were a couple of years older than him and some adults had been beaten to a pulp. He was now the pride of the Maedi tribe.

In the first week of Thrax's return, he didn't waste time taking the initiation test to become one of the Thracian's Warriors. Usually, this ritual was only allowed to be done by those who were eighteen years of age because they involved dangerous activities, which could cost a person's life. Thrax insisted and after being allowed by one of the village elders, Thrax attempted and finished the ritual, receiving the highest appreciation from the elders in both wilderness survival and weapon combat tests.

In the following week, the Getae, a northern tribe who were sworn enemies of the Tharcians, attempted a raid in one of their neighboring village tribes. Fortunately, Thrax was staying there doing some spear training and he almost single-handedly protected the whole village before reinforcements arrived, causing his popularity to rise even further.

The seven days experience at Magus Academy not only made him physically stronger, but his skills with spear even exceeded some of those Thracians spearmen. In less than a month his name began to be sung by the tribal members, calling him Thrax, the son of Ares.

It wasn't only the many chiefs that had thrown their daughters at Thrax, since their culture valued martial prowess above all, a lot of women also threw themselves at Thrax. For Thracians males, it was normal to have dozens of women as concubines since a good tree meant good seeds, but Thrax decided not to accept any of the marriage invitations and ignored all of those beautiful, plump women for one particular woman. Sura, the most beautiful girl in his tribe whom he had liked since childhood, which the party was more than happy to accept.

Two months had passed since Thrax's return from the Magus Academy, and he lived like a chief. Preparations for his wedding were underway, he drank ale from morning until evening, feasted and trained in the honor of the god of war, Ares. His blissful life, however, had come to a halt when a cavalry wearing red armor coupled with thick metals on the chests entered the Maedi tribe.

Not a single one from the Thracians would fail to recognize where this cavalry came from. They were the Romans.

As of the moment, the Romans and Thracians were enjoying a ceasefire to recoup their losses and focus their attention elsewhere. They had never been on friendly terms because the Romans had tried to subjugate not only them but including neighboring factions several times. The Thracians hated the Romans with all of their being because whenever they were invaded by the Romans, these Romans never occupied their lands except that they took a lot of the young, male and female to become slaves in Roma, toiling for their pig masters. The arrival of the Romans was met with fierce riot from the citizens, and a lot of warriors from the Maedi tribe returned from hunting and readied their weapons in hand.

Fortunately, the Romans didn't draw their gladius and the current village chief knew better. The village chief invited the Romans in front of his personal residence to have a public forum. With this, none of his citizens would dare attack the Romans but still a large number had gathered surrounding the Romans.

"Get out, pigs! Roman scum! Slave drivers!" shouted some of the Maedi residents, attempting to expel the Romans.

"Hold your fucking tongues! Let the Roman have his say!" An elder Maedi exclaimed at the protesting residents before entering the tent.

Several neighboring chiefs, as well as renowned warriors, including Thrax attended the public forum and stood in the middle to have a discussion with the envoy from Roma.

"Stay your business in an honest tongue for we are honest people," said the Maedi chief.

The Roman calvary stood stoic, not a bit fazed despite the unending hurls of insults from the citizens around them. If it weren't for one of the tribal elders a battle would have definitely occurred. Thrax stood on the side as he listened to the Roman envoy, who was ready to convey his message.

The envoy stepped forward and removed his helmet, he announced, "My name is Claudius Glabber. I'll keep this brief since we Romans and Thracians have deep grievances. I came here to tell you that we have decided to put such matters aside in order to unite for a just cause—"

"You push your way into our lands, and now you are asking for our help?" an elder said, cutting off the Roman envoy.

"Indeed. We have reason to believe that Mithridates and his army would be attacking from the east encroaching from the black sea," replied the envoy.

Another elder snapped, "But they are far removed from our village! How does it involve us?"

The Roman envoy said calmly, "The Getae has caught wind of this and started to take advantage of the upcoming chaos. We have received reports that barbarian hordes are starting to amass north, which is barely half a week's march from your village."

The Maedi chief's brows frowned. "How many?"

"Thousands," the Roman envoy replied. After saying that, the people started shouting again, some were already picking up stones, throwing at the Romans, thick heavy metal armor. The Roman envoy was undaunted and shouted, "Align yourselves with Rome! Pledge your service to the auxiliary and join us in our campaign!"

The rioting became louder and some people were already shouting 'Kill these pigs!' and 'They are here to make us slaves!'

Thrax, who had been staying silent all this time, suddenly spoke, "To what end?"

The people stopped rioting, wanting to hear what their prospective leader thought. Thrax exclaimed louder, "TO WHAT END!"

The Maedi citizens became speechless, waiting for the Roman envoy to answer. "Victory, of course."

"And how is that to be measured? What does your victory mean? The Getae have raided our villages, raped our women and killed the young. Each time we push them back, we only see them return in greater numbers!"

The Maedi chief, standing next to Thrax, said while nodding, "He is young and speaks out of turn, yet the truth falls from his mouth."

"It doesn't matter, for death to the Getae is what we want!" said the Roman envoy. He shouted once more and the people started cheering, "Death to the Getae!"

Thrax stepped forward and continued, "If we are to align with Rome, what will happen to our young, women and elders left behind?"

"They will be under Rome's protection. I promise," said the Roman envoy without flinching.

Seeing how confident the Roman envoy answered, Thrax thought of Julian and unconsciously believed this person. With the increasing frequency of raids from Getae, he knew something had to be done so that his people could finally have some peace.

It wasn't only him that had the same thought, Thrax's feelings were shared with all the other Thracian warriors. Indeed they valued warring but what good would that be if they went out and the people they cared for would be attacked while they were away. If he had to be in the front line to take care of the problem, he would gladly do so as long as he was sure that their homes would be protected.

The rioting died down.

"Very well," said the Maedi chief. "We will align ourselves for the sake of our survival."

On that same night, hundreds of Thracian warriors from several villages and tribes gathered to form a Roman escort. Before leaving, Thrax gave a bracelet to Sura fashioned from the bones of animals he had hunted while Sura gave Thrax a shield she had the forge made. These two had already received the blessing to be married, however, the ritual had to be delayed due to the upcoming war. That didn't matter to Thrax though as he considered this girl already his wife. Thrax picked up his spear and Sura's shield, ready to go to war.

63 Klea

Alexandria was to be regarded as the capital of knowledge and learning because of the Great Library. Its mighty stone pillars housed over tens of thousands of scrolls and parchments that held all kinds of knowledge as well as poetry. These were maintained by countless influential scholars and librarians, re-writing, re-inking, and keeping the place well-maintained. The Great Library was also considered as the first research center harboring all the wisdom of the ancient world.

The creation of this great library had started three centuries ago after the death of Alexander the Great, the king of the ancient city Macedonia. This famous conqueror had an unclear heritage due to the people of Macedon being considered as outsiders by the Greeks. Nevertheless, the great conqueror died without naming a successor of his massive empire stretching from Egypt to India that resulted in civil wars all over the place, which resulted in dividing it into several smaller states. One of these states became the kingdom of Egypt and ruled by the Ptolemaic dynasty. Due to the influence of Greeks valuing knowledge above all, what was once only a small museum turned into the greatest library of the world.

Inside the Great Library, a beautiful black-haired girl sat in a private corner of the library wherein she had been studying nonstop for weeks. This girl, of course, wasn't a simple citizen because not everyone could be given the privilege in getting a private space in this historic building. She was the third daughter of the 12th Ptolemaic King, officially named Cleopatra the 7th but more commonly called Klea.

She was the third daughter out of six siblings born from the royal family. Klea had always believed that in order to succeed in whatever task she may find herself into, the person who had the most knowledge always had the advantage. This was instilled to her since childhood, thus she had received the best education from philosophy, astronomy, rhetoric, and mathematics amongst other things. However, ever since her return from the Magus Academy, Klea secluded herself learning a new subject in which she had the most interest in, magic.

Although all lower world acolytes had been restricted in using magic, that didn't mean they were unable to practice cultivating the elements. As she took up a private space in the Great Library, which

now became Klea's cultivation room for the past two months, she finally had a breakthrough of understanding in one of her three elemental affinities.

[Congratulations! You have mastered the middle stage foundation of water elements.]

[Spirit Energy - Water - middle stage]

[Klea]

[15 years old]

[Spirit Aptitude S]

[Spirit Affinity: Wind, Water, Lightning]

[Wind Spirit - middle stage]

[Water Spirit - middle stage]

[Lighting Spirit - Initial stage]

[Battle power 12 (9)]

[Acolyte Rank 4]

Klea had managed to improve her understanding of two elements she found the easiest the most. Due to that, her wind and water upgraded to the middle stage in just a short time.

After achieving such a breakthrough, Klea stretched her sore limbs from sitting a long time as she exhaled, feeling wonderful and recharged. She then stepped out of the private room, which was only covered with a thin curtain, heading to the balcony located just beside this room.

From the balcony, she rested her bronze-skinned arms and stared at the beautiful blue sky. Below, was a road filled with merchant caravans and vendor stalls selling figs, grains, carpets and various accessories, which the Egyptians loved to adore themselves with.

Looking straight into the horizon, the magnificent city of Alexandria was filled with many two story buildings and palm trees everywhere; if she observed even further, she could also see the vast stretching Mediterranean sea and the dock that had a large flock of birds circling around the ships on shore.

The scorching sun mixed with the cool sea breeze blew refreshingly on her face. Klea closed her eyes to marvel at the enlightenment of the water elemental she had just experienced when a bird landed on the balcony. She smiled because this bird became like a companion to her, visiting her every morning. Klea grabbed a piece of fig sitting on the balcony and fed the bird with it.

After it had its full, the bird hopped on Klea's palm that had a symbol, which she then used her elemental wind to form a small gust to push the bird upwards.

[Restriction, usage of elemental wind energy detected. Power has now been decreased to one-third of its strength]

The bird flew away with gleeful chirping and as soon as it was out of sight, the accompanying woman who always took care of Klea's needs came in and with her an old bald man wearing a long white-yellowish robe also entered.

Klea's brows twitched for a moment before it returned to her usual welcoming aura. She waited for the man to speak and salute.

"Your Highness, Princess Klea. I have been tasked by your sister to ask you to join the gathering," said the old bald man.

She replied while plucking a grape, "My Honorable Vizier, what is so important that my sister's personal regent came to me to be picked up?"

The Vizier lowered his head further and said, "All the neighboring states are here to meet the queen. The gathering would involve a discussion involving the future prosperity of our great nation, Egypt. Hence, your presence and great intellect is highly requested."

"Tell me, dear Vizier. Was it truly my sister's request or yourself?" she said, giving him a sharp glance.

The Vizier stayed silent, not even daring to look into Klea's eyes.

"Haha, don't be so serious. Of course I'll attend. I would love to meet these people," said Klea, standing up from her seat.

"Excellent. Please come with me to the palace, Princess."

That day, the Pharaoh's Palace welcomed many guests, all of whom were representatives from neighboring countries as well as tribes who frequently traded with Egypt. Some Greeks, some Afrikaans, some coming from the far east, including traders from the west of Egypt. Almost everyone who had a trade agreement with Egypt came into attendance.

They were talking to the person sitting on the throne, which was occupied by the acting ruler of Egypt. Berenice IV, Klea's oldest sister; the Queen-in-charge of Egypt.

The main reason for this gathering was to find a solution to the trade conditions that had been so terribly disturbed by the political conditions in Egypt, which for the last decades had been filled with corruption and violence.

Although the monarch technically owned all Egyptian lands as part of their estate, virtually all aspects of the Egyptian economy were nominally tightly controlled or supervised by the central government headquartered in Alexandria spearheaded by a Raja. The previous Raja as well as the current exacted high tariffs on imported and exported goods, established price controls for various goods, imposed high exchange rates for foreign currencies, established state monopolies and forced farming peasants to stay in their villages during the planting and harvesting periods.

The systems implemented appeared good on paper, but the reality was that there were many obstacles they were facing, thus Egypt's condition continued to deteriorate with its aristocrats losing influence, which could pose high risk of assassination to the princes and princesses due to growing power of the merchants.

Bernice had ascended the throne as soon as her father left for Rome due to being exiled after a revolt in Egypt. She tried hard to become a good leader but almost all her court advisors had little confidence in her because she didn't have the talent in the kingdom's administration, unlike her younger sister Klea, who was often invited to get involved in politics. Bernice didn't like Klea because everytime Klea was in a gathering, she was always being overshadowed by Klea's intellect and popularity. Fortunately, Klea was smart enough not to get too deeply involved.

Unbeknownst to them, Klea was indeed a smart woman, but her fluency in the various languages actually came with the help of the Magus symbol on her palm.

The meeting ended with a new strategy for maintaining economic stability and security in Egypt. One of the main topics actually was the upcoming dry season, which was expected to come soon, but Klea didn't delve too much about it because the seasons were things out of her control. After bowing to her older sister, Bernice, Klea returned to her private room in the Great Library of Alexandria and started training once more.

64 Fragmentation

Time ever passed as its nature; Emery decided to stay in the settlement called Mistshire for the meantime. He postponed his thoughts of finding out more about the marauders' chief, Padraig and who was the mastermind behind the attack.

For now, he spent time helping Granny maintaining the herb garden and learning how to make various potions. Granny observed the young Emery and grew increasingly fond of him since his ability in caring for the plants and natural talent in potion-making was a cut above Lanzo. Due to her growing trust in Emery, she gave more and more tasks to him and in return, Emery's understanding of the plant element and concocting potions resulted in him gaining knowledge more than he had ever expected. Fortunately, Lanzo didn't seem to mind it one bit and continued on his own business in gathering plants and helping Granny with various tasks.

In his first month of staying in the Mistshire settlement, Emery had started to know more about the plant element and eventually mastered the initial stages of plant spirit; with that came a sense of connection with the plants. He could feel the flow of spirit in each plant that had some unique energy in them. With that in mind, he had started experimenting with the moisture, sun, fertilizer, etc. In time, Emery's methods had improved the quality of these herbs. Not only Granny's medicinal plants but when he also started mentioning to Granny and Lanzo these methods, they shared it with some of the Mitshire residents' vegetable and fruit fields, which proved to be most effective.

Two more months passed, the air was getting chilly and some of the trees were starting to die from the coldness. Emery was starting to see his breath in each exhalation. He was wearing thick fur made from various animal skins, the same as the other residents to combat the increasing coldness. He wasn't worried about the upcoming winter though since the most recent improvements with the vegetable and fruit fields resulted in a large harvest.

This morning, Emery was actually more excited at the thought of how he had just penetrated the barrier of his cultivation that was now the middle stage for the plant element.

[Congratulations! You have mastered the middle stage foundation of plant elements.]

[Spirit Energy - plant - middle stage]

[Emery Ambrose]

[16 years old]

[Spirit Aptitude B]

[Spirit Affinity: Plant, Water, Earth, Darkness]

[Plant Spirit - middle stage]

[Water Spirit - Initial stage]

[Earth Spirit - Initial stage]

[Darkness Spirit - Inestimable]

[Battle power 16 (11)]

[Spirit power 32 (21)]

[Acolyte Rank 2]

Because he had been working with plants that involved tilling the soil and watering them every morning and evening, he also successfully mastered the basic spirit understanding for both the water and earth elements.

Although a total of three months had passed, Emery still decided not to pursue the marauders. He could still remember as if it was yesterday how he had almost died again fighting against the two adult marauders. Of course, those men would be just the lackeys, the lowest of the bunch, if so, then how much stronger would the chief be? It would be too difficult for him to fight with them at this time but as long as he was alive, revenge would never be too old.

Earlier before sunrise, Emery had attempted to use the spells he had bought in the Magus Guild inside the cave. Unfortunately, however, even after mastering the initial stages of the water and earth, he still hadn't been able to use the two spells he had. Another reason not to pick a fight with the marauder group for now, so finally Emery continued focusing on cultivating the elements, especially the plant element.

Emery proceeded to head to the herb garden, wanting to try out his rare spell that was of the plant affinity. After making sure he was alone and no one hiding by the trees, he plucked out one bunch of round black fruits that was called elderberry.

[Fragmentation]

Slowly, the medicinal fruit withered and secreted a dark liquid, which was floating in the air. Emery hurriedly grabbed a clay pot lying nearby and pointed his finger to the clay pot where the dark liquid dripped into before looking around the area again, making sure no one had seen him. At the same time, his palm glowed and issued various notifications in his mind.

[One essence found]

[Elder berry essence]

A good deal of knowledge about how the essence could be used entered his mind and Emery started to feel more close to these plants. Aside from feeling joyful that the spell was working, Emery smiled at the plants, which he could somewhat feel were giving a vibrant good aura. Since it was in his nature to experiment as well, he began plucking the other plants that weren't in the database and with each usage of the fragmentation, it felt like the plants were being used in accordance to their purpose.

He then picked up a mushroom that had a red cap with yellow spots. Emery remembered that this plant was actually poisonous, but Granny told him that in order to counteract the poison inside the people who had accidentally eaten stuff like these, they have to know the properties and what would work against them.

[Unidentified medicinal plant]

[Unknown properties]

[Fragmentation]

It withered the same as the elderberry but this time, two different colored essences came out of the mushroom.

[Two essences found]

Instantly, a list of the mushroom's functions and specific properties entered Emery's mind. He was over the moon when another notification came into his mind.

[Unidentified herb rank 1 data received. You are awarded 10 contribution points]

When he had first found this, what he only received was only one point but now that he used fragmentation to learn more about the mushroom, he received ten times the amount for the same plant! Granted that even knowing the properties of a plant, it didn't mean he had the understanding how to apply or use this knowledge properly. So, he still had to test it out on how to use these essences. With the help of the science of fragmentation, however, that would eliminate unnecessary trials and errors.

Emery hurriedly picked up the other plants he had previously discovered as unidentified first and foremost, and continuously used fragmentation on them.

[Unidentified herb rank 1 data received. You are awarded 10 contribution points]

[You are awarded 10 contribution points]

[...]

[Total contribution points: 140]

Dusk was arriving, but he finally finished using fragmentation on all the plants in the garden as well as in the forest. His next course of action was to check out the dried herbs stored inside the storage room Granny had lying around. He wasn't sure if the dried one would have some additional essence or something but based on how Granny kept some of them dried while others were fresh, there should be

some difference in the essences. Emery made sure that only one of each would be used for the fragmentation since these plants were not cultivated inside the medicinal garden. He particularly focused on the ones that had become powder or extremely dried up.

[Unidentified herb rank 1 data receive - incomplete - you are awarded with 3 contribution points]

Even though he only got unsubstantiated points, Emery was not disappointed, he was sure that there were hundreds or even thousands of plants in this world that could give him more points.

Emery tried fragmentation on dozens of other plants in the storage room, which gave him additional contribution points. As he looked for more herbs that he hadn't used fragmentation yet, he then remembered the ingredients in the special storage basket. The use of this ingredient was extremely limited but the temptation was too strong for Emery not to use fragmentation on it even though he and Lanzo had been reminded several times in handling this valuable ingredient.

He lifted open the basket's lid and carefully placed down the boxes on the floor. There were a few ingredients in the boxes but one in particular ingredient caught Emery's eyes the most. It was the bluish powder that Granny sometimes used to calm down a person's high body temperature. Emery pinched a bit of the power and when he used fragmentation, the information he received surprised him before the blue power turned into brownish dust.

[Unidentified herb rank 2 data received - incomplete - you are awarded with 30 contribution points]

Thirty contribution points and the first rank two herb Emery had ever seen, and it was ten times more valuable from the other dried herbs and at least three times more than the fresh herbs he had picked! As information about how this rank two herb flooded his field of view, Emery's mind went into a fast track on how he could make use and combine it with the other herbs lying around.

Feeling more excited than ever, he started experimenting with it but still made use of it sparingly.

65 Concoction

In his day-to-day life, Emery spent most of the hours he had in learning how to make his own concoctions with Granny's help. She had given him various recipes, which he followed with and was successful in brewing effective potions. This time though, he felt like with the help of the spell fragmentation and spell from the Path of Apothecary, he was confident he could make his own recipe.

The universal flora knowledge helped him understand the classification of plants, their properties and their effects whether good or bad. With this information, Emery mixed and matched the properties of each herb to either create a more powerful concoction of Granny's recipes or create a whole new potion that had an entirely different effect despite being made from the same ingredients.

He learned various methods of drying, brewing, grinding, amongst other things in order to bring out the properties Emery wanted to achieve in concocting the potions he needed. Some of these methods were listed in the parchments his mother had about alchemy, which the late-scholar from his now burned estate had helped him with, but some methods were entirely new ways from Granny's own personal experience. Although Emery could be considered a fledgling in this field, his dexterous hands and experimentative nature caused him to learn more with each day that passed.

After every successful potion he had concocted, Emery used the analyze spell from the Apothecary to find out the effect of the potion without needing to test for the experimental results. It was a whim when used the spell fragmentation afterwards, but it turned out to be a good idea since he found out that he could retrieve the essences of a potion, which he started using more frequently to use the same ingredients again in a different manner. Although the spell didn't extract all the ingredients' essences used and became less each time, it still helped him to not immediately run out of ingredients to experiment with. It went without saying that Emery only used this skill whenever Granny or Lanzo was not around, else how would he be able to explain such supernatural occurrences?

Every once in a while, Emery sometimes presented to Granny the potions he had made, and she was extremely impressed on how her new student had a natural talent in alchemy. She, herself, could understand the combination Emery used because she knew the ingredients by heart, but she was still surprised by the new ideas Emery brought to her.

He used the analyze spell first on the first item that had green paste-like content.

[Healing paste]

[This is a paste that can be applied to external wounds. Once used, the open wound would be disinfected and the body's natural healing capability would close the and dry the wound twice as fast.]

The difference between this healing paste compared to Granny's was that Emery's dried the wounds twice as fast, unlike the one from Granny. He then used the analyze spell on another container that also had green liquid inside.

[Stamina potion]

[A potion full of various nutrients that the body needs. It is used to re-energize lost energy of a person's body within a few moments. Be warned, it is bitter.]

Emery made several of these medicinal items since the ingredients were quite easy to find and able to cultivate easily. These two items were things that he and Granny believed to be at their most optimal stages. They heavily focused on these because the general usage would be most helpful in their day-to-day lives, especially in the winter where most of the food would come from hunting even if they had a plentiful amount of food in the storage.

The next two medicinal items had red and blue in its contents. They were actually still in the process of being experimented further, but they were at least useful in their own ways. The first was actually a paste, like the healing but it had quite a different property.

[Strength paste]

[Once applied to the parts of a human body, it could stimulate the muscles in the part it was applied to, increasing muscle strength twice of its normal capability. Be advised, the increase is temporary and cannot be used repeatedly because it would damage the muscles.]

[Cleansing potion]

[Drinks that can remove harmful bacteria and toxins in the body.]

Emery had no idea what the term bacteria was but based on what he had read so far about the properties of each ingredient, it seemed to be something minuscule that couldn't be seen with the naked eyes, which were harmful to the body.

Both of these medicinal items required a lot of blue powder which they had a limited amount of. Emery wanted to try out a couple more things he had in mind, but with Granny beginning to be more strict with the blue powder's usage, he had to keep to himself and respect her wishes.

In the afternoon, Emery took the time to show how these medicinal items were made to Granny and Lanzo. Seeing the new techniques Emery had done, Granny grew increasingly interested in Emery's method. She somehow had an inkling of them, so she still mentioned some side effects of this blue powder.

"Interesting, interesting... Where did you get the idea from?" asked Granny, taking a look at the freshly grounded ingredients.

"Just a lucky guess, Granny," answered Emery, blushing a bit.

"I believe that alchemy is a method of finding order within its chaos, but you?? it's like each of these techniques and functions you keep on mentioning are proven and tested methods. You really are talented and loved by nature," said Granny with a warm smile.

Emery laughed, if he could only share his abilities, maybe it would be more beneficial to everyone in the world. But for now, he was satisfied that he could share at least the knowledge on how to produce these medicinal items.

"May I ask where I can find more of this ingredient?" Emery said, pointing to whatever remained of the blue powder.

"It's better for you not to know where it came fr—" answered Granny but a sudden fit of coughing stopped her from speaking.

Lanzo came immediately and rubbed her back.

Emery went to get a warm drink and said, "Your coughing seems to get worse. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Granny issued a weak smile after drinking. She said, "Haha... you're a good boy, Emery. But there's nothing you can do to help me."

"It's always like this in the winter, Emery. Sadly, her condition doesn't seem to get any better," said Lanzo, still rubbing her back.

Emery observed Granny from head to toe. He couldn't help but notice how she seemed to be getting thinner every day. He placed another firewood in the stone furnace, hoping the rising temperature inside the hut would at least ease her coughing. She then went inside her corner of the hut, probably wanting to rest.

Once Granny had left, Lanzo approached Emery and said, "Good stuff you're making here, Emery!"

"Thanks, Lanzo," answered Emery, stirring the cauldron to make more of the stuff that seemed to at least ease Granny's fit of coughs.

"By the way, can you keep this between us? I actually know where the ingredients come from. Granny told me about it a long time ago," whispered Lanzo, closing the lid of the blue powder.

Emery's interest was piqued. "Sure, I'll keep quiet about it."

"Actually..."

Lanzo then told the reason why Granny was reluctant to tell about the origin of the ingredient. The blue powder was taken from a place she had called the Forbidden Forest. It was a dense forest located west of Mitshire, about a day's walk. This forest was filled with huge trees, stretching for an unknown distance, which resulted in some tales telling that those who had gotten lost became evil spirits wailing for eternity because the sun's light could never penetrate its soil. Hence, it was also called the Evernight Forest.

"You better not think about going there, you hear me? They say all those who enter never return and become food for the dangerous monster lurking inside."

"What kind of monster?" asked Emery, not flinching an eye. He wouldn't say he was immune to being scared, but after what he had seen in the Magus Academy's world, monsters were not a new thing for him.

"Are you crazy? What kind of question is that! All those who have seen it never survive the encounter!" exclaimed Lanzo with eyes widened in disbelief.

With a blank face, Emery answered, "Lanzo... If no one survives, then where did the story come from?"

Lanzo had no answer as he stared with bewildered eyes at Emery. He coughed and said, "Anyway, you should come with me to the town tomorrow. The folks there need help delivering this season's tribute to the king."

The city in question was of course the Lioness Kingdom's main city where the Lioness's Royal Palace stood.

66 On the Road

Selling their year's labor of crops and crafts in the city of the Lioness', was one of the settlement's yearly routine the moment winter arrived, so they could survive or at least ease the harsh cold environment.

By the head of the cart was Jacob, the village elder, who was also their main bridge between the Mitshire settlement and the city of the Lioness Kingdom. On this trip Jacob will be accompanied by Emery and Lanzo. There weren't many youngsters in the village, either they were too old or too young. Both young men although young they are currently the most healthy and energetic among the villages. Jacob didn't ask the adults because of course, they'd be busy hunting in the wild again even though they still had an ample amount of stored food. After all, having too much food in the winter was never a bad course of action.

Emery initially thought about refusing the elder's request because his latest experience in the Lioness' Kingdom capital, Lionarch, still left a pang of pain in his heart. That was his first reason, but it was more

of a worry that someone would recognize him in that city. Still, after a couple of months though since he had disappeared again, maybe, just maybe they had forgotten or no one else was looking for him.

He made sure to grab a heavy cloak as well as something to cover the lower part of his face. In the end, he decided to come for two reasons. The first was to seek information about the current state of the Lioness Kingdom as well as if anyone would know about Padraig, the marauders' chief, who attacked his estate.

Second was his deep interest in learning more plants. In finding more materials in one spot, there was no other place better than the city where most of the produce or even the most scarce items could be found. He also wished that he could sell his new potions in town for a decent profit. As for other reasons that still bothered him, Emery didn't want to think about it at all.

Emery came back with Lanzo carrying some items to place in the cart.

"Wow, this year's cart is the most it has ever been," exclaimed the elder Jacob, inspecting each cart.

The woman, who had just placed down her grown potatoes, commented while smiling at Emery. "Of course, it's all because of that handsome young boy right there. Oh my, look at him, he seems to be freezing. Make sure to bring him back as soon as possible, Jacob."

"Yo, old Jacob! We trust your trading skills are not outdated like your age huh. Come back with much profit!" said one of the farmers.

"Haha, these old bones ain't gonna affect my tongue," answered Jacob.

"Have a safe trips!"

Overall, there were about two carts full. The carts were pulled by the only two village horses. All three together, Jacob, Emery and Lanzo set off together to head to the capital of Lioness Kingdom, Lionarch.

Old man Jacob mentioned to the two that the trip would take almost a full day, so they would have to find a place to stay in the city once the sun sets.

On the road, Lanzo decided to pass the time in telling his story to Emery.

Lanzo was also a son of the lowest ranking nobility from a different kingdom. One day, an illness struck the peasants of their fief, which in turn spread into their own estate. Eventually, one by one people started dying, until Lanzo finally decided to call someone for help despite himself being sick. So, he headed out to the city nearby them but since he was too sick, he somehow found himself in the woods. On his last breath, there Granny was looking at him with teary eyes. She then took him, fed him and gave some sort of potion, which healed him. He then told Granny about his estate, however, when he returned, the whole place had become a ghost town. No one was alive, except for him. After that, he decided to follow Granny on the road, travelling from one place to another.

A year had passed, and Lanzo had thought about going back to his home. However, he didn't have anything back there anymore other than empty buildings and arid farms. With no one to return to he had no reason to go back.

Although Emery had known Lanzo for quite some time now, this was the first time he had heard Lanzo's story despite them staying in the same hut. He had indeed felt some connection with Lanzo and this probably was the reason. They suffered almost an identical fate.

Feeling a bit closer to Lanzo now, Emery also told his story but of course not mentioning the Chrutin and adjusting some parts. He told the tale of how the marauders raided his home and narrowly escaped with his life on horseback, making it match on how he had been found in the woods by one of the residents of the Mistshire settlement. As he shared his story, Emery remembered everything as if it was just last night. He was past the time of grief though, but he was surprised to see Lanzo's tears running down his cheeks.

"I—don't know what to say. I'm so sorry to hear that," said Lanzo, wiping his tears, which was about to turn into ice.

Emery half-smiled, thinking how Lanzo had a kind heart. Even though he's having a hard time as much as him, Lanzo can still care about someone else's problem.

??There's nothing much that I can do since it was the gods will that had struck my home. But as for you, Wait until I get stronger, I will definitely help you Brother" said Lanzo, sticking his fist out.

Emery gave a laugh, bumping fist with Lanzo, and said, "And when is that?"

"5 years! No, 10? 20 years at the very least!" declared Lanzo, standing up.

Emery burst into laughter hearing that his revenge would come in twenty years. Those marauders would have already been killed or bony old men by that time! Nevertheless, Lanzo's words cheered him up.

They talked more for a good half an hour about various topics. What was really on Emery's mind though was the Forbidden Forest, where it was actually located and any other stories Lanzo might have had heard.

In all honesty, Emery believed he had spent too much time in Mistshire. There still wasn't a day that went by when he hadn't been worried that a man who knew him would eventually show up in Granny's hut. If that happened, then most likely everyone would be killed just like his previous home.

After they had sold these items and spring arrived, he decided he would travel alone and train on the road. He wasn't worried much about the things he would be encountering such as beasts or possibly bandits as long as they were few, since his knowledge of plants and herbs, alchemy, and swordsmanship, should be enough to keep him alive. That should be easier as well, since Emery didn't know when he would be transported back to the Magus Academy.

For now, his general destination would be the Forbidden Forest to gather more of that blue powder as well other possible rare herbs there. Once he felt like he had prepared enough, he then would seek out the marauder's chief, Padraig, and the mastermind for revenge.

Just as the sun was about to set, Emery, Lanzo and Jacob arrived at the Lionarch.

67 Tribute

The capital city of the Lioness Kingdom, Lionarch. Aside from being the royal household being located here, this coastal city was also the trading center of the Britannia island due to being close to other

factions south. Due to its prime location, the city had a fairly dense population, with lots of different goods traded in and out of Brittania.

Located on top of a hill, Emery could see the majestic stone royal palace, which housed the royal family and safeguarded its city from any foreign invaders outside of Brittania as well as inland. The Lioness had also established this place as their main base of military operations, hence, the security of the merchants including the roads leading to this city was well guarded with soldiers.

As the three travelers from Mistshire settlement passed the large gate that could fit two carts on both sides, they were welcomed by the hundreds of houses and dozens of shops along the main road, heading toward the city center plaza where the marketplace was located.

Emery couldn't help but notice that the place seemed more crowded from the last time he had gone here. It was actually due to the arrival of the winter season because some settlements nearby still hadn't been fully developed, thus not having the appropriate clothing or tools to survive the upcoming harsh nights.

He adjusted his face coverings and cloak to make sure no one would be able to recognize him. Although he knew his face wasn't that much known to the public, the nasty noble boys he had used to play with might probably be here, especially that Abe Fantumar since his father was the right hand of the king.

Jacob led the way but instead of going straight to the marketplace, he turned the cart to the side and got in line along with other carts from other settlements where there was a two-storey warehouse guarded by many royal soldiers. The other people's carts couldn't compare on how full theirs were.

"Okay, we're next! Come on, boys. Help me get these carts up," said Jacob, pulling the cart in front of the steward who had a ledger sitting on a table.

Lanzo helped Jacob, while Emery still pulled his own cart by himself.

After parking it before the steward, the steward asked, "Location?"

"Mistshire, honorable steward," replied Jacob.

"Mistshire...where is Mistshire...ahh, here it is, so what do you have?" said the steward, writing some stuff with his quill and ink.

Jacob bowed and said, "Of course, honorable steward. This season's harvests are..."

The steward then started listing the items one by one as Jacob gave how much they weigh.

"Good, good. You have brought so much more than you used to. Excellent work," said the steward as if it was rehearsed.

"Yes, honorable steward. I hope you are pleased," said Jacob, bowing multiple times.

"Please, these fur clothings are the best out of the other settlements. Our produce as well is the freshest and the tastiest! You wouldn't find one as good in the market!" said Jacob before quickly winking at Emery. "Dear kind and honorable steward. We would appreciate it most for the wonderful price you would give us."

"Yeah, yeah..." said the steward. His men then came over and finished the weighing. They whispered something as he continued listing the weights. He pulled out a bag of coins underneath his desk and started counting. After he finished counting, he separated about a third of the coins and said, "Okay, 300 coins for the whole lot. 100 coins are to be given to the royal coffers as your settlement's tribute."

"100! That's more than half of what we paid tribute last year for less produce!" exclaimed Jacob.

The steward sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "This is required by the King's right-hand, Lord Fantumar. If you have any issues, bring it to him. We are only doing what we are ordered."

"I—thank you for your generosity, honorable steward." It was Jacob's turn to sigh. His shoulders slumped as he bowed weakly before grabbing the bag of coins and leaving a smaller bag from his waist. Jacob then tied the larger bag on him with a thick rope and returned to Emery and Lanzo.

"What happened, elder Jacob?" asked Emery, glancing at the steward who had a smirk while writing.

"That greedy bastard gave us only about 300 coins! Everything we had in the cart should have been at least 500 coins! But he gave some bullshit reason about taxes ordered by a lord named Fantumar. I'm hoping that Odin would burn him to ashes!" answered Jacob, feeling the coins on his waist.

"Then what was the other bag you gave?" Emery followed up with another question.

"Must you really ask? If we didn't give him that, who knows how much he will give us next season!"

The two youngsters pulled the carts while Jacob once again led the way. Emery looked at the sides and realized there were a lot of merchant stalls selling direct to the public down the street. He could hear some customers haggling fiercely with the merchants because of absurd prices, but the merchants said something along the lines of new taxes, etc. Despite the prices being high, the street they passed by was still crowded with buyers.

"Elder, have you not considered opening a stall in the city?" asked Emery.

"We can't afford such things. In order to open a stall here, we will have to pay an even higher tribute with more taxes. A small settlement like ours couldn't afford to even rent one much less buying a space here," explained Jacob.

"Then what about selling outside the walls?"

"The city forbids anyone selling without a permit and outside the city walls. They would seize all a person's belongings and be thrown into the dungeon if you get caught. We can't even directly sell to the merchants in the marketplace because that's also against the kingdom's law. So, we're left with only selling it at the kingdom's warehouse."

Jacob continued grumbling as they walked inside the city, looking for a place to stay, after parking their carts near a stable. He shared to Emery and Lanzo how he was becoming more and more disappointed at the Lioness Kingdom which he believed had become corrupt by raising such high taxes.

"Damn, I need something to quench my dried throat. Let's go to the inn, we will rest there for the night and return to Mistshire at first light. Here, take these since both of you are part of Mistshire and helped me deliver the merchandise." Jacob gave Emery and Lanzo five coins each. He then walked away, still grumbling to himself.

Emery stared at the five coins and was about to say something when Lanzo touched Emery's shoulders before shaking his head. Lanzo said, "Leave him be. It's always like this every season. Old Jacob just needs his drink and after that, he will be better again."

Emery gripped the coins in his hand tighter. He actually wasn't thinking about the coins he and Lanzo received, rather, what would be left after Jacob spends the coins. The coins belonged to all of the citizens in Mistshire.

Anyway, like Lanzo had mentioned, Emery let it go and started to walk with Lanzo on the streets of Lionarch. As they strolled around, looking for the shops he wanted to go to, Emery reflected about the coins he had just received.

He was the son of Geoffrey Ambrose, a person who had once belonged in the noble ranks, albeit being the lowest ranking. Back then Emery generally walked with dozens of coins in his pocket, but it seemed like he truly was fortunate, because before he didn't have to do anything and the peasants would give them their seasonal tribute to their family's steward. He hadn't considered how much labor a person had done for a whole season just to receive something he had thought as measly coins before. This got him into thinking more about it when Lanzo suddenly invaded his thoughts.

"Hey, what are you thinking about? Don't be gloomy, anything in particular you want to visit?" said Lanzo.

68 Marke

The first item was a weapon. Emery needed a good weapon, more specifically a sword, so he could practice as well as defend himself in case of emergency situations.

He had asked about the sword he had taken from the marauders, but it looked like it got dropped somewhere along the road while he was losing consciousness and falling from the horse. Emery had asked around in the settlement, however, there was no one there that used a sword. They deemed it too impractical because small knives could do the same job, and forging axes was way easier. Bow and arrows were also popular in Mistshire for hunting some game.

It had been a while since Emery had held a sword. He planned to train with Lanzo, since Lanzo also used to be a nobleman and confirmed knew some sword techniques. So, he was hoping he could get a good deal with the coins he had for two swords and shields.

The clanking noise of the hammer and anvil got louder as the two of them approached the blacksmith. A rugged, tanned hairy man, worked on the outside furnace located outside covered by a wooden roof while its main store was inside the door beside. The heat from the forge gave some sense of comfort to the frigid weather covering the whole of Britannia.

On the side were displayed various farm tools, as well as swords, axes, shields, spears, maces, etc. as well as some huge chunks of iron and firewood lying near the furnace, but when they asked if they could take a look, but the smithy replied these weren't for sale before directing them to the door. So, Emery and Lanzo stepped into the smithy's door to talk to the shop owner. The inside had a much greater collection of weapons. There were armors also on the display too, but they were far and few in between the racks.

"Welcome to Erick's weapons and armors, feel free to take a look and buy whatever fits your needs," said the shop owner.

Both of the youngsters nodded and proceeded to take a closer look at the weapons rack, which had a lot of swords on display. Emery could tell by just observing that all these weapons here were made from iron, the most common metal, which any equipment and tools were made from. He was disappointed a bit but understood that higher quality swords such as the ones wielded by the noble lords couldn't be bought in a smithy like this, instead obtained from outside the island.

Emery grabbed one and tested its balance and feel as he gave it a few swings. It felt too heavy for him, which meant his sword arm would get tired at a faster rate. He grabbed another sword that was thinner and longer but this time, it was too light and couldn't feel any weight behind it. That meant he would lose in a clash against another person wielding a heavier sword.

"This is a good sword! How much for this?" asked Emery, placing it in front of the shop owner.

"Excellent choice, that sword is our bestseller for most nobles. It costs thirty coins."

"Pardon me, did I hear you say five coins?" asked Emery, trying to haggle already.

The shop owner laughed, "Thirty coins, young lad. No less"

"But five coins is all I have, anything you can do for me with a similar quality, good shopkeeper?" Emery said a bit disappointed.

"There's none here, young lad. We have some lower quality swords, but they are all at least ten coins. As for anything less than that, we have some under the five coins. They're the ones stored there in the corner," said the shop owner, pointing to the weathered rack that had several swords, some of which appeared visibly bent or had some chippings.

Emery certainly hadn't expected that even the lowest quality would already cost five coins. He then kept switching glances between the coins in his hand and the weathered rack, trying to debate with himself if it was even worth it.

"Hey," Lanzo called out to Emery. "If you really need it, I can give you my five so you can at least buy a decent sword. You know chipped and bent swords are as good as nothing."

"It's fine Lanzo, I just remembered I have another way to get the coins," Emery showed the contents of his bag to Lanzo before pulling it out one green paste and laying it on the table. He then looked at the shop owner and said, "Can we lower the price with this,?"

The shop owner laughed again. "This thing you put out ain't in my expertise. Better you go to the apothecary at the other just three blocks from here."

Emery and Lanzo gave a nod before heading out of the smithy and looked for the apothecary. To make sure, they wouldn't be looking in the wrong place, both of them asked the locals, and it wasn't long before they finally found the shop.

'Lionarch Apothecary,' said the hanging huge sign, written in a cursive, slanted text. It was the largest shop Emery and Lanzo had seen so far in the city. And judging by the few guards standing outside in leather armor, it probably was also the most popular shop in the city.

The two young lads went inside and were immediately welcomed by the strong scent of medicinal herbs being brewed by the fat old man, who was stirring a big round cauldron just behind the counter. The shop had a large interior filled with different herbs and plants on the side, potions and pastes sitting on a shelf, and some insects lying around in different sections of the shop. Although it was a large shop, the place only had these two young lads as customers.

The fat old man seemed intent on focusing on his work, so when Emery called out to him, he replied, "What do you kids want?"

Lanzo frowned, but Emery didn't mind it one bit. Somehow, Emery this fat old man resembled Aeon, back in the Magus Academy, well at least in this manner. Emery didn't waste time and placed three stamina potions as well as two healing pastes on the counter. He said, "We are wondering how much would these be if we sold them to you."

The old man balanced his wooden ladle on top of the cauldron and proceeded to pop open the lid of the stamina potion and smell it. He also did the same with the other container holding the healing paste and tasted both a little.

"Hmm, looks like we have a tonic for energizing the body and a paste for healing external wounds," replied the old man whose neck was barely visible. Just by smelling and tasting it, he actually found out their functions immediately, and this made Emery happy since he understood he was talking to an expert.

"So, how much can we sell this?" Emery asked.

The man snorted before shrugging. He said, "For the whole lot, five coins."

"What! These should be worth more than that!" Lanzo exclaimed.

"Look kids, if you aren't interested just go away!" snapped the old man.

Emery patted Lanzo on the shoulder before saying, "Pardon, but can you tell me why is it low?"

The old man eyed Emery and stared directly in the eyes.

"Okay, kid. Since you asked nicely"—he then pointed to the shelf behind him—"see those things, they contain the same stuff. They are helpful, sure, but they're the easiest to make. I have made too many, so yours ain't nothing special."

Lanzo then asked, "How much do you sell those for?"

"Twenty coins each, boy," the man answered without hesitation.

Lanzo seemed to make another snide comment again, but Emery reached Lanzo's shoulders again before he had said anything.

"I understand. You said first. So, what's the second reason?" Emery pointed out.

"Second thing is I don't know who made these. The ingredients for these potions might be the same, but not all are made equal. Some may use a different concocting technique, slightly different

measurements, subpar ingredients, among other things, which could create a whole lot of varying degrees of result. So, tell me, who made these?"

"I did," said Emery, not flinching.

"Hmpf, a young boy who thinks he knows alchemy. I'm already doing you a favor and for one coin each on an otherwise probably worthless item. It's a good deal already even if your parents made it, I don't believe these items would be as powerful as mine because this art needs dozens of years to master."

"Give me one moment." Emery then took out all the stamina potion and healing paste he had brought with him, leaving only one of each. In total, five stamina potions and five healing pastes were laid down on the counter.

The old man stared at Emery before saying, "Like I said, ten coins, for each one of them."

69 My name is

Just as when he was about to say yes, it was Lanzo's turn to cut him off. "Hey, are you sure about this? Why don't we check out other places? We both know this healing paste and stamina potion should be worth at least three times."

"I got this, Lanzo," said Emery when the alchemy expert snorted.

The owner said, "Kids, my shop is the best there is in this city and in our kingdom! Even the royal physician often comes here for supplies."

"I believe you," answered Emery and that was no lie. The moment they stepped in here, the countless shelves were stocked with various potions, paste, herbs, powders, some of which were things he had never seen before in Granny's storeroom. He then said, "Let's make a deal."

The alchemist then took out ten coins from underneath his counter and placed them on the table. Emery, however, didn't touch nor look at them. Instead, he stared at the alchemist and said, "Actually, I wonder if I can trade these ten coins with you for just an hour to check out your various herbs and maybe get some handful of them that you have in stock."

The old man certainly didn't expect this answer from Emery, causing him to frown. He answered, "Are you thinking of stealing from me, boy? I have guards here who can throw you into the dungeon with just one order from me."

Emery stood unshaken before shaking his head. "Please be assured that I am an honest person and would not dare to steal from you nor from anyone. It's just that I have been in awe the moment I stepped in here, your wonderful collection of multitude of plants, potions, salves, is just so rich that I couldn't help my curiosity. Please think of it as giving a lesson for a disciple in the art of alchemy. I will very much be grateful for your generosity."

Lanzo, standing next to Emery, had his mouth agape as if words in his throat were lost in a thousand languages. He was probably thinking his friend, Emery, might be the stupidest person he had ever met. While, on the other hand, the old fat man coughed, slightly appearing a little red.

The alchemist once more cleared his throat before picking up the coins, putting it back underneath the counter, and saying, "Is that so? Hmm, okay... I'll let you check out my stock but only for a short while. I'll be closing up the shop soon and I still need to finish this concoction I'm brewing."

Lanzo pulled Emery to the side and whispered, "What the hell are you doing! At least you'll be getting ten coins instead of none, what benefit will you have by just taking a look at these herbs and potions!"

"Alistair! Come in here and watch this kid for a while," shouted the alchemist before heading into a different room with Emery.

One of the guards outside entered the shop and said, "Understood."

As Emery entered the back room where there were more exotic looking ingredients than the one in the main hall were stored, he tried his best to keep a straight face because inside him, his heart was actually jumping in joy at the prospect of getting more contribution points.

"Go ahead, take a look, but again, don't you dare steal anything especially right under my nose," said the alchemist.

Emery nodded and proceeded to only touch the plant and activate his analyze spell on the plants he hadn't seen before. He made sure he used it only with either his back facing the expert or at least his palm couldn't be seen because it still glowed whenever he used it.

He touched one of the plants that had pale green leaves and bright orange flowers. It looked more like a pretty flower in hindsight, but when Emery used his analyze spell on it, the following was listed:

[Analyze]

[Universal Flora Level 1 - activated - analyzing flora...]

[Analyzation complete]

[Unidentified medicinal herb]

[Register to database for one contribution point?]

[Yes]

Only a few moments had passed but Emery had already found dozens of plants that weren't located in the Magus Academy's database. He asked if he could get some of them, especially the ones that he could feel some sort of energy flow with his plant affinity, and fortunately, the old man only allowed him to do so but only a few of them.

Emery plucked a stalk from each of the plants the analyze skill had registered for more than one contribution because he would be using fragmentation later for additional points. He looked around further and seemed to have finished looking at all the plants but not one of them was a rank two plant. For such a huge building and well-stocked shelves, he couldn't help but wonder but ask, "Respected expert, is this all the plants you have?"

"Of course not. And before you ask further, no you are not allowed to pluck the more valuable ones nor see them," answered the alchemist sternly.

This apothecary was located in the Lioness Kingdom's main city, which had dealings with other nations outside the continent of Britannia. Therefore, Emery was sure that there were more herbs than the current stock he had seen so far.

Still, Emery knew he shouldn't push it because he still didn't have the full trust of this alchemist. Satisfaction came with patience, and in due time, he would be allowed to check those out or maybe find some in the woods. For now though, he was satisfied with what he had earned and grew more determined to explore that forbidden forest where to find which plant the blue powder originated from.

Speaking of the blue powder, just as Emery was about to leave this stockroom, an idea came into his mind.

He went back to the old man and the old man said, "What is it now, kid?"

Emery reached his hand into his patchwork bag and fished out a blue colored potion. The cleanse potion, it was a potion that could cure several diseases and his analyzation skill deemed to have been safe for consumption. The moment Emery took it, for the first time, the alchemist appeared to be a bit surprised.

"Give me that, kid," said the alchemist, grabbing the potion. He popped open the potion and gave it a smell. "It's a medicine that could treat poison, isn't it? But"—giving it another sniff—"this is much stronger! Where did you get this, kid?"

"I also concocted that. I deem it the name cleanse potion. It should be able to cure many types of diseases as well as fever in just a few days," answered Emery, recalling the description from the analyze spell.

The alchemist stared at Emery in disbelief, since he had proudly claimed himself being the best in the kingdom and based on how seemed to stumble on his words, it looked like the description from the analyze spell was accurate. The alchemist asked, "How much do you want for this?"

Emery thought for a moment and said, "How I give you it for free?"

Even though he would take a loss for giving this cleanse potion for free and only had enough blue powder for about two more bottles of cleanse potion and two salves of strength paste, Emery thought this was a good investment. After all, Emery was sure he would return to this place some time again in the future, so he needed to create a bond and trust with this old man, hence the gift.

The old man covered the lid of the potion and gave it back to Emery. "No. I refuse to accept anything for free. Tell me, what do you really want in exchange?"

Emery smiled because his bait succeeded. "I understand. Then why don't we make another deal? As you have said, the price of a potion is decided upon the reputation of its maker. Honestly, I believe my healing paste and stamina potion is better than the one you have on the selves, and I am sure you will find that to be true after you have tested it yourself and the people whom you will sell it to. With that in mind, I am hoping that you remember me once it sells with wonderful results. So, once I am back here, I am hoping to sell more for you in the future with higher prices of course."

The alchemist laughed hard. "You are hilarious, kid! Alright, alright. Let's make that deal. I am accepting this potion. Now, tell me, what's your name?"

Not wanting people to know his name, Emery decided to make up a name similar to his, "You can call me.. Merlin"

70 Hide in the Darkness

In truth, Emery wanted to use his spells for more contribution points but there were orders to things he had to do. And right now, that was to find more information about the marauders' chief, Padraig, who had attacked the Ambrose family.

As they walked on the ground, which was making a crisper sound, Emery said, "I think it's better you return to Jacob, Lanzo. I have something I need to do. Alone."

Lanzo twisted his neck to get a clearer view of Emery. Emery hadn't noticed it but his eyes had gone from warmth to cold. "No way. You know, I am aware of what you're trying to do. I already see you as my brother, so you need someone to watch your back!"

Emery was taken aback at Lanzo's claims before his eyes returned to the warmth it had earlier. Underneath his face-covering, he smiled and said, "Okay, I hope you won't regret calling me brother."

They entered one of the taverns located near the marketplace. Since winter had arrived, the taverns were filled to the brim. Those who came from the settlements outside the city decided to stay in places like this where it could protect them from the unforgiving weather outside. There were actually also people outside, hugging the wall, just to get a bit of warmth. Hence, the laborers, the caretakers, the guardsmen and the tavern keeper were busy as bees.

"So, any ideas where to start?" asked Lanzo, leaning a bit to Emery while moving his eyes around trying to decide what to do.

In a tavern, there were generally two ways to obtain information. The tavern keeper whom the drunkards loved to share their stories with after being intoxicated, or the caretakers who always had an open ear for any juicy gossip occurring in the city.

"Come on. Follow me." Emery led Lanzo to the front counter and took a seat. He called for the tavern keeper.

"Okay, tell me what is your preferred choice of drink, boys? Let me guess, fresh milk? Hahaha," said the bartender while wiping a tankard with a ragged cloth.

In the rowdy tavern, Emery recalled this was the first time he had visited such a place without his father's company and during all those times he had always wanted to try drinking ale. He was about to order when spoke first.

"Yes, two pots of milk for us," said Lanzo, grinning.

The tavern keeper laughed to his heart's content while Emery stood there feeling like complaining. "Hahaha! You are funny, young lads."

Emery sighed as the tavern keeper put down the drinks Lanzo had ordered. Still, he let it go since ale wasn't his purpose in coming here anyway. He then asked the tavern keeper if he knew any person named Padraig but the answer was a resounding no.

Walking on the road, Lanzo asked, "Are you sure you have the right name?"

Emery nodded. "That's the name."

Lanzo walked with his shoulders slumped and started yawning. Their adventure to the third and fourth tavern had the same results, and after walking out of the fifth tavern and finishing another tankard of ale(well, at least Lanzo) however, Emery felt like they were getting closer.

Emery had noticed several people with cloaks since the fourth tavern, and he could tell they were following them. He then went to a corner, guiding the dizzy Lanzo, when the two cloaked figures showed up in the alleyway.

The two cloaked figures blocked Lanzo, and Lanzo was immediately taken aback. "What do you want!"

"Don't you dare to scream or I'll slit your throat," warned one of the men. Two more appeared by the corner and now all four had their swords drawn.

"Hey, weren't there two of you? Where's the other one?" asked the man who had his sword close to Lanzo's neck. Lanzo looked to his left and right and appeared to be just as surprised as them. Emery had indeed disappeared.

"Go, search the corner, he might still be around!" ordered the man.

Two men broke away but after searching for the corners, they still couldn't find Emery.

"Where is he!" demanded the man, pressing the sword closer.

"I swear that I don't know!" said Lanzo, raising both his hands.

Emery was in fact just near them. With enhanced physical abilities, he was able to quickly get into another corner and climb on the roof of a nearby house to hide in the darkness of the night.

"Forgive me, brother. I am actually glad because I truly needed your help. I hope you're not regretting this already," said Emery in his heart.

The man sheathed his sword and spat on the ground. "Tch! You dimwits can't find a single boy? Let's head back to the safe house before anyone sees us."

The four men then gave up searching for Emery in the dark night. There weren't that many torches in the streets but the dim light from the stars and fire from the furnaces in the houses, exiting through the windows and holes, still provided some vision to the people walking on the ground. Hence, Emery was also able to follow the four people who were dragging Lanzo until they had arrived at an old seemingly abandoned house.

Emery carefully took into consideration what he was stepping on and made sure he was in a position where he could listen in a good distance while making sure no light source was coming his way.

Inside the rickety house, there were two more people who were rolling dice and had a pouch of coins sitting on the table. One of them had a muscular build while the other lacked the beefiness and was short instead. Regardless of the small man's appearance, the four men who had just walked in with a young lad became meek like sheep.

"And who is this?" said the thin man, his voice cold.

"Boss, this young lad has been walking around taverns looking for the chief," replied the man, throwing Lanzo before the thin man.

The thin man, who appeared to be their leader, got off his chair and squatted in front of Lanzo and stabbed precisely on the small open space in between Lanzo's fingers. He grinded the small dagger back through the wooden flooring and pointed his knife to the panicking Lanzo.

"Why're you looking for the chief? What is your purpose?" asked the thin man in a murderous tone.

Emery was now positive these men were Padraig's marauders. As much as he wanted to storm in and demand where their hideout was, Emery held himself back and searched around with just his eyes for anything he could use. There were, after all, six of them and only one of him, probably two if he counted Lanzo, but whether he could beat all six people at once or not, he wasn't about to find out with nothing in his hand.

Lanzo crawled back and placed his back against a wall. He exclaimed, "Please, please! I am just a village boy who happened to stumble upon the great name of the chief. I—I am looking for him...to join his cause!"

Emery, who also had his back pressed against the wall of the rundown house, smiled to himself since Lanzo didn't drop his name. Although he now felt a bit more guilty than before, he made excuses in his mind to convince himself this was necessary in order to achieve his goal and would apologize later to Lanzo.

"We don't accept skinny boys like you," said one of the marauders. "Just kill the kid!"

"Hold this," said the short man, giving the knife to the marauder next to him. He took a step toward the marauder who had just spoken and added, "Are you ordering?"

"N-n-no, boss! I-I was just giving a suggestion, hahaha..."

"In that case"—he then punched the marauder in the gut—"if you speak out of turn again, it's not my fist but this dagger will go into your innards. Do you understand?" said the boss; the marauder shakingly nodded.

He turned back to Lanzo with the knife in his hands. "Young lad, I don't appreciate it when people are lying to me. Especially on the night of our big operation."

The boss smiled, and in a flash, he stabbed Lanzo's thigh. He twisted and turned it, making Lanzo scream at the top of his lung. "Tell me the truth, who sent you?"

He pulled the bloody knife back and pointed it to one of his underlings. "You, go outside and inform the teams that if they notice anything suspicious, all should immediately retreat here. Got it?"

"Yes, boss!" shouted the marauder, running out of the house.

Lanzo curled into the corner and refused to speak. Hearing how Lanzo had screamed in pain, Emery knew this was time to act.

Emery had dragged Lanzo into this, and it was his responsibility to bring him back. Not to mention, this seemed to be the only sole opportunity before the marauder came back with more people, so he had to do this now and fast!