



*Book 2 in the Legion Saga. A friendless mage-assassin is tasked by a desperate young king to save the nation by creating a secretive strike force in the face of overwhelming odds.*

# **LEGION: RISE OF THE BLACK HAND**

by J. R. Schell

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J. R. SCHELL

BOOK 2 OF THE LEGION SAGA



LEGION:  
RISE OF THE BLACK HAND

And through it all, the Black Hand, the unstoppable assassin, slowly backed away, watching from the shadows and knowing he had to do nothing.

*“Rich people, poor people. They’re all just people,” Persephone had said. And these are simply men. Far from perfect, not so very different from my Phantoms, and far too quickly gone.*

It made no difference. He was greatly outmatched in the open and he knew it. Even without the formula, Legion guessed that his enemy would be as elusive as a monkey. Simeon’s way was the way of raw power, coupled with the skills of the ultimate warrior. But Legion’s way was the way of finesse, the way of the Silent Unseen, the way of death that struck without warning,

In moments it was over, and the guards were dead. But the king was still alive behind him and that meant he had a nation to save. Before Legion was the beast and the only exit. Savagely, Simeon sorted through the bodies, making certain he had missed no one. Then he turned toward the haze-filled tunnel where the unsuspected, virtually invisible killer waited in the shadows.

Simeon had entered the Black Hand’s arena.

# **LEGION: RISE OF THE BLACK HAND**

**J. R. Schell**

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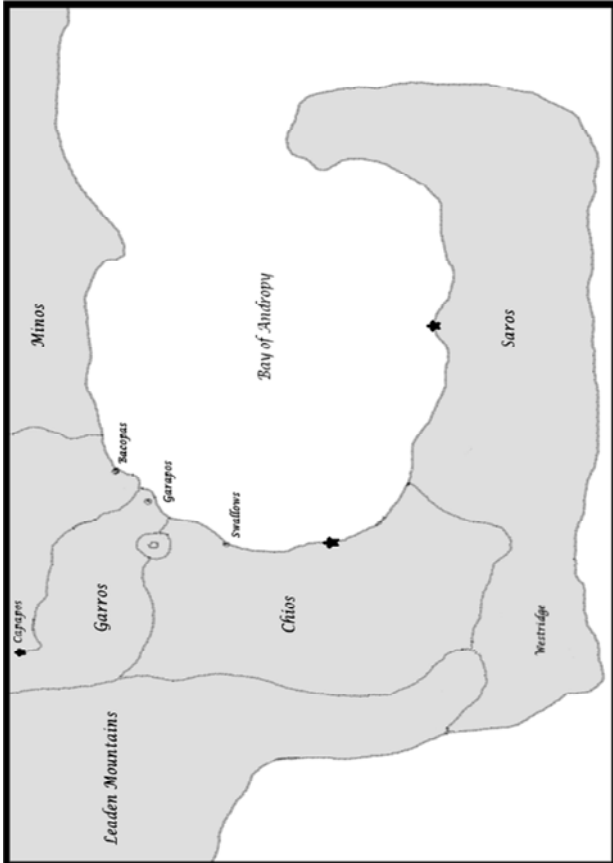
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# Map Of Andropy



## Tactics

*T*en years a soldier, three a hunter of men in the night. And now, this.

The man of many faces looked at himself in the mirror. The one looking back at him was now a coarse imitation of his own, though the knife scar on his chin and the others on his body were concealed. He had a hatchet-shaped head with a nose that had been broken many times and elfin features, softened to make them less remarkable. His eyes were gray, his ears human, his hair long, straight and black.

He wore a host of magical items, including an unadorned ring of Sorcerer Stone on each hand. In the city of Garapos, they called him the Black Hand, the formless portent of misfortune and malice. To the hardheaded dwarves, he had been simply ‘one mean cuss’. To the young king of Chios, he was his unstoppable Legion. In Gantua, far to the east...

No, he didn’t want to think about Gantua.

He had small, eight-sided scars on each wrist where chips of Sorcerer Stone had been inserted under his skin. He looked at them now and a pair of long black vambraces magically appeared on each arm. They stretched from his elbow over his forearms and had thin black spiders embossed into them. From a shielded pocket in one, he removed another ring, this one with a heavy platinum setting and a large red

emerald - the ring of the god, Avar-Piter. Almost instantly, the migraine began - from bearing more magic than even his psyche could manage. Quickly, he lay it on the counter, while he stowed one of the other rings away.

He slid Piter's Ring over his finger, strongly aware of the protective field crinkling through his clothing as it encased him in its impenetrable magic. He slammed his doubly-protected hand into the stone wall with all his might, and it hurt not at all. Then he kicked it, followed by slamming his shoulder forcefully into the stone. Some mild discomfort. He practiced picking up coins from the smooth countertop - not too bad.

He drew a slim knife from a hidden place, and his pock-faced manservant gasped, "No, milord!"

A Garaposian by birth, Taren was working zealously to justify his recent redemption. The deformities caused by Piter's curse had healed as much as they were going to.

"I have to know," the assassin said simply, as he stabbed and sliced across his upper arm to little effect. "I don't suppose you would know where to find a hammer?"

"Far be it from me, milord!"

"Another time then," he sighed, turning toward the mirror. Initially dubbed Legion by the king, his name had evolved into one more traditional with his recent elevation to court.

"Darius Laguerre, Count of Apollonia, senior adviser to the King," the assassin-mage said, making



the name his own. "Legion, Laguerre. Laguerre, Legion."

King Ikthos was young, but not a complete fool. The lands he had bestowed were on the northern border and would be among the first to fall if his new Count failed in his mission. Still, the king's plots were elementary compared to the machinations of his own race.

These Chiosians would never know his true nature. Those like Ikthos and Taren - who thought they knew him - in truth knew nothing. They thought of him as the Black Hand, the assassin that had undermined the Garrosian invasion and its gilded god. But even then - though the odds were wildly against him - he had restrained himself and used the simplest means necessary to achieve his ends.

Indeed, that was his method and his mantra, to always appear less than he was, in order to be underestimated by ally and enemy alike. That way, when things invariably went to hell, some element of surprise remained his to exploit.

The clothes his malformed servant lay upon the bed were rich and dark, with a short cape and black boots that could be pulled up to protect his thighs. The colors fit his mood. He looked at his magical vambraces again and they disappeared. They were especially good for disappearing.

As the new Count dressed, he considered his last conversation with King Ikthos, his eidetic memory recalling the conversation perfectly.

“I see it clearly now. Using methods similar to yours, Minos and Saros have been attacking us circumspectly for years. Spies and traitors in our court while they smiled to our faces. Our strengths betrayed, our weaknesses exploited. Mercilessly, chipping away at our trade and our borders. My father and his forces ambushed and destroyed. Our enemies seeking to divvy up Chios between them.”

“At last your eyes are opened,” the new Count said. “See how they play their enemies against each other. Minos sets Garros against us from the north, while Saros encroaches from the south. It is no coincidence. Chios’ is a desirable land, with fertile fields and great wealth. But her enemies are entrenched upon both borders and only a boy is left to lead her people. If you value your life, my counsel is to negotiate a vassalage.”

“No. I will not give Chios into the hands of those who murdered my father! At one time, my family ruled all of Andropy. Our legacy must survive. Chios will fight. Somehow we will endure.”

“Endure how? Fight how? Your navy is lost, and your armies broken.”

“With the Black Hand.”

Legion scoffed.

“Saros has six legions on your southern border. March on them and Minos will invade by sea. At the same time, Garros will soon be forced to annex your northern farmlands just to survive. What can one man do, on so many fronts?”

*LEGION: RISE OF THE BLACK HAND*

“Ah, my invisible Legion. You will multiply yourself. You will teach us your ways of secrecy and terror and untraceable sabotage. You will train us in espionage and the ways of deception and all that we will need to survive,” King Ikthos said undaunted.

“What you ask is madness. It will take time, time we are unlikely to have. And surely, such a weapon must eventually turn upon the hand that wields it,” Legion had said knowingly, tracing the ebon spiders embossed upon his black bracers.

The designs still gleamed with the blood of recent kills.

“You must make them loyal - by fear, by love, by rescuing their lives from the pit. Find a way. That is your mission. You must always find a way, until Chios is the most feared nation on the Bay of Andropy.”

“You will not be swayed?”

He had to admit that he liked the boy’s spirit, no matter how foolhardy. Then again, he had always been a sucker for an underdog.

“Chios will fight, with or without the Black Hand. However, you will never get your hands on Torreon’s Chronicle of the Wars until you fulfill your contract.”

The assassin considered. The Chronicle was what had brought him to Andropy in the first place. In it was recorded the last known sighting of the Belt of Arenea, an artifact so ancient that it had almost faded from memory. Too bad his mentor Draya had revealed his machinations, effectively shackling him to this boy king.

Not that he was one to let a little thing like that stop him. The man of many faces knew that as long as he stayed close, whether in victory or defeat, eventually he would get what he wanted. Of course there was no point in telling Ikthos that.

“If this is to happen quickly, I will need unrestricted authority. My methods may seem extreme.”

“You have earned the right to do what you must. I shouldn’t have to tell you to be discreet.”

“And I will need talented people. People that we can trust.”

“Yes, that will be one of our greatest challenges. Manpower is in short supply and gifted manpower triply so. You indicated that you need two types of warriors to wage two kinds of war. To start, you will need leaders and thus, I have chosen two. The first is Colonel Moran, an accomplished veteran of the wars. The others is a woman, Lady Persephone. You will quickly come to appreciate her talents.”

The new Count raised an eyebrow in question and Ikthos reddened.

“Yes, both she and her sister are invaluable to me. My father first saw them on the stage. He groomed them to gather information and we let them hone their craft in the palace. You will find that they are as clever as they are beautiful. It was Persephone who uncovered the prime minister’s collusion with Saros and the Temple. Meanwhile her sister Tympani has become a key component of our foreign policy. They are also quite good at changing their appearance.”

*Meaning they are accomplished spies who can report on my every move. He is foolish enough to trust me, but not foolish enough to trust me unreservedly.*

“They will be an asset,” Legion acknowledged. “What about a mage?”

“Between the wars and the Temple’s treachery, there aren’t any to spare. I will invite Durban, the court magician, to our meeting but we will need to work around his project schedule. We are currently leaning quite heavily upon his gifts.”

“You should probably warn him about me.”

“Trust me, my prickly Count, your reputation quite precedes you.”

“Good. Another thing. My manservant Taren is safekeeping a dwarven weapon unknown to Andropy. They call it a crossbow. It is superior to southern archery in many ways and will help to strengthen Chios against her enemies. There is also a bag containing the mechanisms to create another one. I suggest sending me your finest craftsmen to copy it - many times over - as well as crafting larger models to upgrade your tower defenses.”

“How generous.”

“Not really. I expect to be paid a royalty for every piece forged. In perpetuity.”

“Ever the mercenary. And your new lands, are they not rich enough for you?”

“They are a distraction.”

“How so?”

“Managing them is a burden. I do not like my steward but feel that I need his experience.”

“Then I shall have several qualified candidates sent over in the morning. Perhaps one of them will suit you better,” Ikthos suggested.

*More spies.*

“Perfect,” Legion nodded. “When can we start?”

## Draya

**L**egion looked out over the scene of the recent battle. It was here that he had faced the full might of the Garrosian army alone.

Or almost alone. A ravine opened at his feet, on the other side a dusty road crept through the volcanic desolation that separated the two countries. From one wall of the chasm to the other, numerous conical fungi grew upon the rotted remains of a wooden bridge. There wasn't much left of the structure and they were well in decline. With a sigh, he began working his way down the long steep slope, using the mushrooms to steady himself. Spores mingled with the dust, dislodged by his passage.

At the bottom, there was a jumble of flat rocks. Finding the one that served as his access point, he pried it aside. A serpent hissed and lunged from the shadows, but its prey was the true predator. Catching it in one magically-protected hand, Legion removed the head with a blade that sprang suddenly from his vambrace.

There was a small crevasse under the rocks. Slinging the snake over his shoulders, he slid into it feet first. There was just enough space for him to pull the rock closed behind him.

Next to him was a lightless well. Drawing his sword, he let himself fall into it. The current of the

Dark Portal took hold of his body and rushed him forward to Draya's Garden, miles below the world's surface. It stopped suddenly, and he landed ready. All was quiet. Much quieter than he would have liked. A motionless form lay at the water's edge and he made toward it. It was an elven female dressed in simple robes, with a wide-brimmed mushroom cap on her head and veiling her face.

"Draya? Can you hear me Draya?" Legion asked.

The Veiled Lady lay unresponsive within the depths of the grotto. Around them was a ruined fungal thicket and she was its dryad queen. Her feet were lying within a glowing blue pool, and she was again the picture of health. Her mushroom cap, the fungus growing from her woody skin and silken robes all confirmed that the magical pool had lost only a little of its potency. Still, the fungal being and all her minions had been motionless for weeks. He pulled a blanket from his bag and folded it under her head, as if she were really alive and could appreciate its comfort.

"I need you Draya, or I'm stuck in Andropy forever. I won't abandon the Portal and my only means back to you. You mean way more to me than any Chronicle."

She was his mentor, his safe place, his only real friend. And it was his folly that had brought her to this sorry state.

Guilt goaded him. Things were slowly recovering from the recent explosion with the exception of the False Morel. As he had done many times before, Legion waded into the center of the pool and studied the broken stump of the massive fallen mushroom. The



toadstool was clammy and increasingly gelatinous. Whatever skeletal framework existed inside seemed to be losing its cohesion. He picked at the base, seeking signs of new growth, signs of regeneration. He considered restorative spells for the hundredth time, but there was no way they could do more than the benevolent energies of the Aether pool.

*It's hopeless.*

If anything happened to the Dark Portal, returning to the Garden would be impossible. With an active volcano in the vicinity...

From the pack, he removed a dozen wine skins and filled them with the Pool's diminishing waters. Then he removed a knot of rope from an inner pocket and spread it into a wide ring on the loam covered stone. Under it, was now visible the extra-dimensional space attached to its inner edge. Inside was a rack of weapons, a makeshift bed and supplies to meet his most immediate needs. With a sigh, he began the arduous process of moving his treasure hoard and other belongings into the hole. When finished, he went back once more to his mentor.

"I'll be back Draya, as often as I can. I'll speak to the best wizards I can find. Maybe they can bring you back."

## Introductions

The room was lavishly appointed, as was to be expected from the royal palace. Checking for the telltale bulges of hidden weapons in the long mirror before him, Count Laguerre saw none though there were more than twenty at the ready. His thin pock-faced valet attended him..

“Allow me to help you, my lord. You need practice at being waited upon, while I need the practice of doing so,” Taren said.

“Gods, Taren. Am I ready for this?”

“My master, the real question is, are they ready for you?”

“We’ll see. I hate this.”

“As you have said more than a dozen times.”

He left Taren behind and headed purposely toward the king’s antechambers. As a servant led the recently appointed Count into the king’s study, a pert young blonde was speaking.

“We know nothing of his history and from everything I’ve heard, he’s a real son of a –

She cut herself short at his entrance. The young king looked slightly abashed, though the Lady did not. She wore a lacey shawl over her shoulders with a form fitting blue dress that would turn a lot of heads. Her hair was pinned up and sandy, her attractive features unrepentant with flashing eyes. Next to her sat a

woman who was clearly her sibling, but with long wavy hair, a formal white gown and the same slightly upturned nose and fearless expression. With the show of backbone, the ladies rose a notch in Laguerre's estimation.

On the other side of the king, a venerable dwarf wizard sat tranquilly, as if he were above all pettiness. Beneath a bald dome, a mass of salt and pepper beard cascaded from his deep brown eyes to his waist. A great staff lay across his burgundy robes. Beside him sat a tanned, graying officer with a haunted expression in his eyes. He nodded reservedly.

Gesturing toward a chair, King Ikthos welcomed the assassin and made the introductions. The royal robes hung loosely on his still youthful frame, even as his curly brown hair was bouncing energetically about his uncrowned head.

"Ah, Count Laguerre, we have been expecting you. You may remember Durban, my wizard and chief adviser. I also have the pleasure of introducing the Lady Persephone (the blonde nodded), Ambassador Tympani (the brunette rose and curtsied), as well as the distinguished Colonel Moran. Together, we will plot the course of Chios' future and the design of this invisible legion."

Seeming unimpressed, Moran offered his hand and the Count shook it warily. Laguerre thought the man looked more tormented than distinguished. In the way of dwarves, Durban simply bowed.

“Well met,” Laguerre said as he took his seat. “to finish your thought, milady – everything you’ve heard is quite true.”

Her eyes flashed again as they sized each other up, but she let it pass. The king cleared his throat.

“Let’s get right into it,” Ikthos began. “The difficulties that we are here to resolve stem from the same sources. First off, the Chiosian economy is throttled because Minos and Saros impose high tariffs on our trade beyond the bay. Secondly, Saros and Garros threaten to invade our borders, as does Minos to some extent. We can all agree that it is just a matter of time until Chios is overwhelmed by our more powerful neighbors.”

He motioned at the officer and Colonel Moran took his cue.

“Our troop levels are rebounding slowly, but we are far from strong. Every conceivable measure has been implemented to expedite the process, including lowering the age for conscription and pardoning criminals for military service. However, we simply need more time and resources.”

“How about mercenaries?” Laguerre interjected.

“Already employed by our enemies.”

“Hardly surprising. Well, if we are getting the most from our assets, then what about our liabilities?” Laguerre asked.

“Intriguing thought,” Ikthos encouraged. “But how?”

“Let’s take the issues one at a time,” Durban suggested.

“Right,” Ikthos said. “With the failure of the Garrosian invasion, Minos has retaliated by attacking their former ally. Minos controls the coast, but Garros is putting up a determined defense farther inland. Fortunately, the Black Hand only broke their will to fight and not their ability to do so.”

He looked at Legion encouragingly, but it was the veteran Moran who spoke.

“Yet eventually Garros must fall, from attrition alone. They simply don’t have the resources to sustain their efforts. They are cut off from their farmland and the provisions that come in by sea. In addition, Minos is driving inward from the coast, as well as pushing in overland with an overwhelming force. Once that army is resupplied from the sea ports, they will be able to lay siege to the capital city of Capopas until it crumbles.”

Ikthos nodded. “Still, our northern border should be secure for now, and that allows us to focus on our other problems.”

“We shall assume no such thing,” the new Count interrupted curtly. “The fool invites an attack by relaxing his guard.”

As one, the faces of the advisers registered shock at the insult to their king, but to Legion, it was simply a tenet of life.

“Excellent point,” the young king replied mildly. “What do you suggest, Count Laguerre?”

“Capitalize on it. The costlier the war for our enemies, the better it is for Chios.”

“You suggest reinforcing Garros?” Moran asked uncertainly. “Besides the rather obvious fact that they

can't be trusted, we simply don't have the troops for it."

"The idea does have merit," Lady Tympani considered. "Think about it. We wouldn't have to send an armed force, we could bolster Garros by supplying food, clothing and supplies in their war effort. And generate some revenue doing it, revenue we will soon need."

"As well as offer them a guarantee of peace on their southern border to free up more of their troops – and ours," Persephone added. "It would be a way for the weak to join forces against the strong."

"And then dispatch the Black Hand to keep things even so that the dispute continues and is as costly to both sides as possible," Laguerre said.

The room became silent. The others were clearly uncomfortable with that level of duplicity.

"Exactly my apprehension," Durban said quietly to no one in particular.

"What's that supposed to mean? Besides being *apprehensive*, exactly what are you doing to keep us alive, oh great and powerful wizard?" the new Count tested.

"Enough, Laguerre!" Ikthos interjected. "The capital has been under sorcerous attack for weeks now and only Durban's magic has delivered us. Now as far as Garros, our strategy for the foreseeable future will be simply to hamstring Minos, no more. Good. Laguerre seems to have a workable option for the northern border. Unless there is further concern, we can figure out the minutia later."

The king looked around, but the others were silent. “Then let’s move on to the more immediate threat posed by Saros and the trade issue. I suggest we can solve both by retaking the Westridge. That would give us access to the west shore and the open sea. At the same time, it avenges us upon our hated enemy.”

“With all due respect, your Majesty, I advise against it,” Moran cautioned. “It was costly for Saros to conquer it and it will be even costlier to regain.” He looked at Laguerre, explaining. “Saros is well established, and the terrain is difficult.”

“But we have the Black Hand!” Ikthos insisted, looking at his Legion.

“At this point,” his Legion replied, “we have only the concept of the Black Hand.”

The king stared uncompromisingly at his new Count. “Find a way. I told you that you must always find a way.”

Laguerre sighed and looked away. “Invading Westridge will not benefit Chios. It will extend your borders and do nothing to eliminate the threat.” Moran nodded. “You are thinking like a child again. Go for the jugular and remove the threat at the source. It is their leadership that we must overthrow. It would be more effective and far less costly if the Sarosian king were simply to die.”

“I will have no part in murder,” Durban said immovably, but repugnance was on all of their faces.

“We shall not condone assassination,” the king agreed firmly.

“Then why am I here? You told me to find a way. That is the most expedient way.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Enemies stand upon your borders. You need a solution next week, not next year. I do not need your permission or seek your assistance. Simply stay out of my way,” Laguerre said coldly. His eyes were on the wizard.

“You have taken oaths of fealty!” Ikthos objected.

The Count’s face was hard as steel, the dwarf’s unyielding as stone.

“Gentlemen, there are always alternatives,” Tympani interjected. “Count Laguerre’s concept is sound, to a point. We don’t have to kill their king. All we have to do is compromise his ability to rule.”

“Can we do that?” Moran wondered.

Laguerre shrugged, but there was no uncertainty in his eyes. Moran reconsidered the man and for a moment, the pained look left his eyes.

“Outstanding,” Ikthos said. “I thank you, Lady Tympani. Your wisdom has overcome the bullheadedness of others. Can you accept that, Durban?”

“I concede that our situation is dire, and our options few. Therefore, I will voice my concerns to you in private.”

Laguerre was shaking his head in disgust, but the king ignored him.

“Moran?”

“I approve of the Lady’s proposal, but we have matters of greater urgency. Count Laguerre is right on



one point. Sarosian forces gather at our border, knowing full well that we grow stronger by the day. We need to address that threat first, or the rest of this is of no consequence.”

“Our embassies are making a heroic effort on that front,” Tympani said. “Still, it is likely that Chios will end up paying a sizable tribute to keep Saros from our lands. If so, undoubtedly their goal will be to cripple our recovery.”

“A bribe?” Laguerre scoffed. “How long until they come back again for an even larger sum?”

“Best guess?” she considered. “Six months, but we can include the topic in our negotiations.”

“It is unlikely that we will have the funds to import mercenaries or to raise a sizable army, Colonel. The Black Hand is not only our best option, but perhaps our only option. It must be in full operation by then,” Ikthos affirmed.

All were silent, considering the staggering challenges that lay before them. After some time, Moran spoke up again.

“I do have another thought concerning the Westridge. I have been mulling something over for the last few days. If there is anyone who can fight a running battle for the province, it is Davalos, the only remaining son of Darden, Lord of Westridge.”

Ikthos was clearly doubtful. “The outlaw? He was as much trouble for us as he ever was for Saros.”

“As Count Laguerre noted, we have to turn our liabilities into assets. I might know a way to win him over. However, it involves swallowing some pride.”

Moran's eyes flicked toward Laguerre. "More than you already have."

Laguerre eyed him inscrutably, but Ikthos urged him to continue.

"What do you propose?"

"Davalos faults the Crown for his family's demise, but I have learned that two of his sisters were taken alive, Your Majesty. Rumors are that they were sold in the Sarosian slave markets. I was thinking that if we were to find his sisters, it might help make amends and sway him to our cause."

"Has he reason for his claims?"

"Arguably yes," Moran said delicately. "While the monarchy was not directly involved, Westridge's requests for reinforcements went unanswered. More fallout from the traitor Gustavo, I'm afraid."

"Gustavo has hurt us in many ways," Ikthos sighed. "Pity I could only hang him once. What is your plan, Colonel?"

"I suggest placing a reward for the women that is large enough to get every fortune hunter in Andropy looking for them."

"Calamity changes a man," Laguerre doubted. "How far has this Davalos fallen?"

"He's a drunk and a scoundrel, but also charismatic in his way."

"These are desperate times," Ikthos agreed. "Run with it Colonel, while we still have the funds."

Moran nodded, and the king looked at Laguerre and the Lady for more suggestions.

“So, what will this black league need to be?” Persephone asked in the silence.

“In order that this might come together quickly,” Ikthos replied, “Colonel Moran has already begun assembling the best candidates we can find - loyalists, hardened warriors, chosen men.”

“Archers would be useful. Some real marksmen,” Laguerre asserted.

Moran nodded.

“Conversely, Laguerre and Persephone will recruit those with less conventional talents to both train and round out the team. Of course, we shall readily grant any assistance required.”

“Glad to hear it.” Laguerre pulled a flyer from inside his vest and passed it to the king. It concerned a pending execution. “My first recruit,” he said, preempting disagreement.

“You want the Spider?” Ikthos laughed uneasily. “That’s mad Laguerre, even for you.”

“I need him. Since Moran has you eating crow, you might as well pardon him too.”

“Now see here,” Moran began, but Ikthos waved him off.

“You don’t understand. He’s too dangerous, even for you Laguerre. Murder is a passion to him, a game of cat and mouse to be savored. I can’t just pardon him. The victim’s families have a right to see justice done. Figure something else out.”

“I need him.”

“I regret that I must deny you in this. He dies as scheduled.”

“Alright. I guess I’ll have to find another way,” Laguerre agreed a little too easily.

“That almost sounds like a threat,” Moran said with rising offense.

“You will learn that the Black Hand makes no threats and gives no warning. Neither one serves our commission. All I meant was that I will shelve the matter for now.”

Ikthos spoke up. “As discussed, the Count’s role is not to charm us, but to train us in a new method of warfare.”

Laguerre knew his cue. “Concerning Saros, we need to start gathering intelligence. We need to find weaknesses to exploit and people to buy. Or blackmail.”

“We already have several spies in position. We simply need to communicate our needs,” Tympani stated.

“I believe I just did.”

“Enough, Laguerre!” Ikthos cut in. “Must you go out of your way to offend each and every one of us?”

Tympani looked downward, hiding her expression, as she smoothed both her skirt and her agitation away. When she looked up, there was no trace left of it. Not so the countenance of Lady Persephone. Ikthos began to look uncomfortable in his chair.

“How about Minos?” Laguerre asked.

“We lost our man there,” Tympani said with a bit of strain in her voice. Ikthos sighed his surrender.

“Then insert others post haste. Eventually, we will need them.”

“How charming to begin our relationship with these expressions of utter contempt for us,” the Lady Persephone interjected, looking Laguerre levelly in the eye as Ikthos looked up at the ceiling.

“We have wasted enough time on your gilded manners, milady. It’s time to find out if this team has what it takes to pull this off.”

“You pompous, uncouth, ill-mannered, ill-tempered, lowlife coattail rider! You think that because we forbear with you that you can speak to us anyway you please? Think you that placing spies in a foreign court is a simple task? What other trifling things will you require of us, milord?”

“What else can you provide?”

“Much more than just sticking a knife into someone’s back!” she spat at him.

The killer Legion smiled in spite of himself.

“This will never work, Ikthos,” Persephone acknowledged. “I’ll bludgeon him before the next moon.”

“Your spirit doesn’t frighten me, milady. I can handle whatever you throw my way,” Laguerre assured.

“As can I also. You have left me quite out of the equation. What would my duties entail - cooking, cleaning, and coquetry?”

“If necessary, yes. However, I understand that your talents also include acting, disguises and gathering information.”

Lady Persephone nodded, her gaze meeting the imploring eyes of the young king. With admirable self-

control, she regained her composure. Missing little, Laguerre reined himself in as well.

“Then I have the greatest need of you,” the Count admitted. “Your responsibilities will be three-fold. First, you will train the brightest of our team in stagecraft, intelligence gathering and, of course, courtly manners.”

“I do wonder, with whomever shall I start?”

“I already have a young lady in mind,” Laguerre said, pretending to miss the point. “Second, I am hoping that we can also recruit from among your peers and contacts, because lastly, I want you to duplicate yourself as many times as possible. Both male and female candidates would be invaluable.”

“Such people are the rarest of commodities,” Tympani replied.

For the moment, Persephone was quiet while her wheels turned. Then Tympani caught her eye. The sisters looked at each other appraisingly and had an entire debate made up of furrowed brows, pursed lips, shrugs and arched eyebrows.

“If we survive this introduction, you will need an out of the way place to train them,” Durban said in the silence. “Have you given it any thought?”

“I have. Are you familiar with the structure known as the Swallows?”

“Yes, overlooking the sea, about fifty miles north. It’s big enough and private enough, but it will need some repairs,” Durban said.

“With your recent elevation, you are something of a celebrity Laguerre. Everything you do is much gossiped about,” King Ikthos cautioned.

“Let them. I am having the Swallows completely renovated to become my primary residence. Three construction teams are presently onsite. I have also commissioned them to complete several atypical projects. One of them will be a training facility built to your tastes, Lady Persephone, plus whatever else we require. I should like the two of us to take a ride up there at your earliest convenience.”

“I can hardly wait,” she said with such aplomb that Laguerre had no idea what it meant.

“You may find the trip less disagreeable than you might now imagine. Perhaps we have misjudged one another?”

“I doubt it. My heart tells me that you are the embodiment of every wickedness that threatens Chios from without,” Persephone challenged him.

“Not so,” Laguerre replied, including them all with his eyes. “I am far worse. And right now, that is what exactly Chios most needs.”

Across from him, Persephone and Tympani had made up her minds. They had put this black Count to the test and had found him to be as resilient as spring steel. Intriguingly, there was more than a little pathos in his self-acknowledged darkness.

“We shall find a way,” Tympani concluded.

“For Ikthos, and for Chios,” Persephone agreed.

“And you, Moran?”

“Where you lead, I will always follow, my king.”

“Faithful Moran,” Ikthos said to the Colonel’s discomfort. “Durban, my old friend?”

“I am filled with great foreboding, my son. We fight fire with fire, hoping not to be consumed by the flames. We walk the edges of ignobility, dreaming that something noble will endure,” Durban said bleakly. “Yet, as I am already doing all I can to counter the evil of these days, my only hope is to bring a little light into our wanton descent into darkness.”





*Book 2 in the Legion Saga. A friendless mage-assassin is tasked by a desperate young king to save the nation by creating a secretive strike force in the face of overwhelming odds.*

# **LEGION: RISE OF THE BLACK HAND**

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