

Firebrand 501

Chapter 501: Almond Bread

Almond Bread

The following morning, Martel spent some hours practising his enchantment. No matter where he ended up, even simple things like light and heat might be luxuries; the stronger he could make such enchantments, the better.

During the third bell, he felt early pangs of hunger, but dinner was still a while away. As he still had a good amount of coin left from what Mistress Rana had paid him, he decided to reward himself with a few pastries from one of the vendors that crowded the square outside the school. As he would only be outside briefly, he did not bother with his cloak, intent on making it a quick errand.

Crossing the square, he regretted not shielding himself against the wind; if nothing else, it encouraged him to quickly make a decision about what to get. Deciding on some almond bread, he approached the relevant stall and held up two fingers to the old crone selling them. She nodded and pushed two pieces towards him while he dug out some coins.

As pastry and payment exchanged hands, Martel cast an idle glance around the square before he turned back towards the Lyceum. His attention was caught by a flash of blue. Trying not to be obvious, he walked a few steps and cast a surreptitious look in the same direction before he hurried inside the Lyceum.

Munching on the bread, he went over what he thought he had seen. Lots of people wore blue, usually along with garments of other colours. This had looked like a uniform, worn by a particular institution.

Martel had no idea why inquisitors would be watching him, but then again, they had done so before, and never for any good reason. And maybe they were keeping an eye on the school in general, rather than him.

Still, Martel would like to know for sure whether he should be alert and expect something from the mage hunters. But he did not wish to confront them and tip his hand that he had noticed their surveillance. He looked down at the second piece of almond bread in his hand and wondered if it would suffice to bribe Eleanor.

Leaving the Lyceum a second time, now wearing a proper cloak, Martel crossed the square roughly in the same direction as before. However, he stared straight ahead rather than give any indication that he noticed his surroundings. If he was being followed, he would not know. But Eleanor would, following at a discreet distance.

Martel did not intend for a lengthy trip; it should be simple and quick for Eleanor to ascertain whether someone stalked him. But he did have one trick he wanted to play before returning to the Lyceum. If an inquisitor walked behind him while bold enough to be in uniform, they would presumably also be covered in gold, which to Martel's magic would feel like a walking cold spot.

This did not help him while walking on the main street with lots of other people, whose presence would confuse his magical sense and make it hard to distinguish between them. But if he turned

down an alley with few others around, Martel could let his magic feel for the presence of more gold than any commoner would ever possess.

Reaching a location suitable to his purpose, Martel turned a corner to head down a small, empty street. Even as he did this, he caught a flash of the blue uniform out of the corner of his eye, even though he did not look down that direction; the inquisitor needed to learn to keep their distance when surveilling someone.

Unless, of course, they planned to close that distance and attack Martel. But if so, he was not particularly worried, especially with Eleanor further behind. Once away from the crowd and distractions of the main street, Martel let his magic flow in every direction from him. To his surprise, it told him of a large source of heat some ten or twenty paces behind him; it was a little hard to get a feel of the length. Regardless, Martel's assumption about the gold had been wrong.

Feeling more and more curious, Martel saw no reason to tempt fate. He reached the end of the alley and turned another corner, headed straight back for the Lyceum. Perhaps Eleanor had noticed something useful to shed light on his stalker.

The strangest part was, Martel thought he had figured out why he was being watched. He had visited the location of an attack by the maleficar yesterday, and he had asked questions of the locals. It makes sense that the inquisitors would find out about this and decide to watch him, given their suspicious nature. But what sort of mage hunter would wear the blue uniform, yet none of their weapons and defences against magic?

As the school came into sight, Martel began putting the pieces together.

Once he had returned, Martel paced back and forth in the entrance hall, too excited to stand still. The clerks at the desks gave him odd looks, but nobody felt like saying anything to a battlemage. Stolen from Royal Road, this story should be reported if encountered on Amazon.

Finally, Eleanor returned. She moved with hasty steps, appearing as animated as him; perhaps she had realised the same. "You were right!" She looked around. "We should find somewhere quieter to talk."

Seeing the wisdom in that, he nodded and went down one of the corridors. It was dinnertime, meaning the librarian would be absent from his post; quickly, the pair ascended the stairs to enter the deserted library.

"You were right," Eleanor reiterated. "He was following you, and he is not an inquisitor."

"I knew it! I know what he is!"

"I think I figured it out as well!"

They both looked at each other.

"He's the maleficar!" Martel exclaimed.

"He is under a curse!" Eleanor declared.

They shared another look, this time born of confusion. "Alright, you first," Martel said.

"I got a good look at him. At first, I was confused. He followed you really closely, which seemed like an odd risk. Also, he kept bumping into people, and when they reacted or spoke to him, he made only grunting noises, almost like an animal. So I dared getting really close to him myself, and I realised his eyesight is terrible."

"I'm sure that's frustrating for him, but I wouldn't call that a curse."

"Of course not," she replied impatiently. "But I remember from Master Fenrick's lessons. A common element of curses is that they severely hinder the victim's senses, preventing them from seeking help for their affliction. He has bad eyesight, and he sounds like he is mute."

"There could be countless explanations for that, all of which are more plausible than him being cursed. There's not even a mage in Aster who has the power to curse anyone – how would this even have happened to him?"

"Well, the witches of Tyria could have done it," Eleanor argued, though she sounded less certain. "Maybe if you had seen him yourself. His expression was almost vacant, with drool down his chin. He certainly did not seem like a cunning maleficar. What makes you think he is?"

"Well, we agree that he is not an inquisitor? I used my magical sense, and he wore no gold at all. For some reason, he has disguised himself as one of them. For what purpose?" Martel looked at her with a triumphant smile. "If the inquisitors are chasing you, what better disguise? They'll never suspect one of their own. Nor will anybody question his presence near a location where the maleficar struck. If he is audacious enough, he can even use this disguise to infiltrate them and keep track of their investigation."

"I would not tribute such acting skills to the man I saw," Eleanor retorted. "Though admittedly, that might just speak to how good of an actor he is. But why not wear any gold? Surely that makes his disguise less efficient. "

"It would also prevent him from using his spells if he suddenly needs to."

"I thought you believed he did not actually possess magic. You mentioned how he could not even prevent Sparrow from escaping his grasp."

Martel frowned, a little impressed by her memory. "Alright, so I might have been wrong about that. I had less information than I do now."

She crossed her arms, face furrowed in thought. "I admit, your explanation makes more sense. Or," she added in a contemplative voice, "perhaps we are both right."

"How so?"

"Remember the creature we met in the catacombs? The monster made of smoke that sent us fleeing."

"Hard to forget."

"We know curses can change a person's appearance completely. Tyrian witches turning someone into a werewolf. What if the maleficar is the creature? That would explain why chasing one, we found another. Why he does not use magic," she considered. "He is magic."

Martel took a deep breath. "That would really make confronting him a lot more dangerous." His hand went inside the pocket to the rune token he carried around; he had figured it could be used to unbind a jinni in magical chains – could it unbind a curse?

"I would say we have excellent arguments to present to the faculty. They must be the right people to handle this."

Martel shot her a look. "I'm almost surprised you didn't suggest going to the inquisitors with this."

She scoffed. "Accusing someone wearing an inquisitor's uniform of being a maleficar? They will strangle us both just for the heresy of having the thought."

"But we don't have any good proof. This makes sense to us, but from their point of view, we are accusing a man of wearing blue clothes and being swivel-eyed. Why should they listen?"

"If we explain everything in detail, they might believe us." Eleanor did not sound confident in her own claim.

Martel walked over to the window that overlooked the square in front of the school. He saw a blue figure in the distance, but who knew when the villain might leave? Once he did so, they had no hope of finding him again. "We need to act fast. And I think there's a way we can prove that we are right without necessarily confronting him."

"How?"

"Whether maleficar or cursed, he has magic – or he is magic. And we know how to prove that. I have an idea of what to do. Though should something go wrong... Perhaps it's better to be three than two."

Maximilian looked from one to the other. "You want to assault an inquisitor? Look, if you could guarantee that nobody would find out, maybe..." His voice trailed off.

"He's only disguised as an inquisitor," Martel explained, trying not to get frustrated. "And we won't fight him. Just lead him down a certain path to step on a particular rune to confirm our suspicions. Once we have proof, we lead him back here, where the teachers will be waiting to deal with him."

"So, what you need me for?" The mageknight crossed his arms. Martel and Eleanor had approached him in his room where he had intended to nap, and he seemed disinclined to change his plans.

"You know, in case something goes wrong... and we have to fight him."

"Maximilian, consider the glory if we uncover the maleficar who has plagued Morcaster for more than two years now," Eleanor added.

"You told me that last time. Pardon me if I'm not convinced."

"But are you willing to risk it? Last time, we were on his trail. Now, he is right outside these walls, just waiting for us to unmask him. Consider what it would do for your career," Martel told him.

"No other praetorian can boast of something like that," came Eleanor's honeyed voice.

Maximilian sighed and looked over his shoulder at his bed. "Can it wait an hour? Preferably two."

Martel shook his head. "It has to be now. We don't know when he might give up watching the castle and wander off." He looked at Eleanor. "I'll get what we need. Meet you both down at the entrance hall."

She gave him an encouraging smile, though tinged with concern. "We will be ready."

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Chapter 502: A Rune in Hand

A Rune in Hand

For the third time today, Martel left the Lyceum. Stepping across the threshold and leaving its protective wards, he felt a lot more apprehensive than on the previous two occasions. He let his left hand gently tap the pockets on his belt, just to remind himself of the contents; three fire jars on one side, the healing elixir from Mistress Rana on the other. He had placed his gold-edged dagger into his belt as well, and he was brimming with spellpower if it came to a fight.

Not that he expected one; the maleficar had made no indication that he intended to attack Martel. Though that begged the question; why was he following the young wizard around? There could only be a nefarious reason to do so.

In his right hand, Martel carried the folded cloth that had served as his target while practising the range of his magic. It still bore the letter 'M' on one side, while a rune adorned the other.

The plan was simple – sort of. Assuming the maleficar would follow Martel once again, it was easy to lead him down a path and make him step on the rune. The presence of magic would make it activate, and they would have the proof. Eleanor would run back to the Lyceum, raising the alarm; once Martel made his way back there as well, the faculty could greet the maleficar and deal with him, once and for all. And should something unexpected happen, Maximilian would stay near Martel and provide assistance.

Resisting the urge to look over his shoulder for the reassurance of seeing Eleanor and Maximilian inside the entrance hall, Martel crossed the square staring straight ahead. Out of the corner of his eye, he believed that he saw movements clad in blue; suppressing the same urge as before, Martel continued down the street.

Unlike previously, when Martel had simply taken a short jaunt around the market district and back, he set a course westwards to enter the merchant quarter. The district had a number of warehouses with small, deserted alleyways between them; it seemed wisest to avoid the more populated residential areas of Morcaster, just in case something did happen.

Martel's fingers clutched the cloth in his hands. He dared not look behind to see if his malignant shadow still pursued him, and the uncertainty made him jittery. If he was right, all his ordeals and pursuits of the maleficar would soon be vindicated. The dark stain upon Morcaster that turned people against magic would be cleansed away. The victims would be avenged, and the living would be relieved of fear. For once, Martel would gladly attend an execution to watch the inquisitors strangle the condemned with a golden chain.

His thoughts were interrupted by a procession of carts coming towards him, and Martel stepped to the side to avoid them. He had walked a good distance into the merchant quarter, and mostly warehouses and workshops lay ahead. Time for the next phase.

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Turning right, Martel walked down the narrow corridor between two large storehouses. He unfolded the cloth he was carrying and pressed his hand against the rune. "Klar," he whispered, and a faint glow came in response.

Moving deeper into the labyrinthine paths behind the warehouses, Martel let his cloak unfold to hide his actions from anyone behind him. Using magic, he floated the cloth to the ground and pulled dirt to help obscure it. His heart pounding, hoping that his deception would work – and that the maleficar was as near-sighted as Eleanor claimed – Martel steadied himself and continued walking at the same pace as before.

He heard an odd sound behind him, like a sack of apples being dropped to the ground, but he could not risk looking behind. It was up to Maximilian and Eleanor to sense whether the rune gave any indication of magic once the maleficar stepped onto it.

"Martel!"

Fearing their plan ruined, his mind already in a worried state, Martel turned around as he heard Eleanor call out to him. Both she and Maximilian came running down the alley, but not towards him; instead, Martel's pursuer lay on the ground. Swiftly, he ran forward as well to join the other two.

The three of them looked down to see a man somewhere in his thirties, if one was charitable given the state of his appearance, and dressed in the blue uniform of an inquisitor. His eyes were open, but lifeless. Bits of foam began to form around his mouth.

"Holy Nether, Nordmark, what kind of rune is that?" Maximilian looked up at his friend.

"Just a simple rune of revelation. It reveals magic, that's all!"

The mageknight looked down at the body in front of them. "Well, you killed this one. I guess that makes everything simpler. We should probably leave."

"He's not dead," Martel claimed. "Is he?"

Eleanor pushed him with her boot; in response, more drool appeared around his mouth. "How curious. Tyrian runes can be a little unpredictable when interacted upon by other schools of magic, but to cause such a strong reaction... Some manner of powerful magic is upon him."

"Like a curse." Martel fished out the rune stone in his pocket. He tried to consider the arguments for and against, but this was magic of such complex and unpredictable nature, he had no idea what would happen. Nor did he know if the man lying by his feet was a deranged murderer and malevolent sorcerer, or some hapless fool caught up in magic none of them could comprehend.

At the end of the day, though, he was stalking Martel. More likely than not, he was an enemy, and there was no reason to show caution. His decision made, Martel let the token with its rune of unbinding fall. It landed on the man's chest, where it suddenly glowed brightly before cracking in two, while he began violently convulsing.

"Martel, why would you do that?" Eleanor yelled.

"Damn, Nordmark, if you do not kill him with one rune, you simply pull out another! That is cold-hearted, even for me!"

"I'm not trying to kill him," Martel muttered. "I just want to see what happens."

"You may not be the only one," Maximilian replied. "To any passers-by, this looks like three mages torturing an inquisitor to death. We should leave."

Martel looked up and down the alleyway, catching a glimpse of a woman. "You're right. Let's make ourselves scarce."

"We cannot leave him!" Eleanor interjected. "We are responsible for his current state!"

"Exactly why we should leave," Martel argued. "If he is the maleficar, he deserves this fate."

Swiftly, Maximilian drew his sword. "Too late. If he is the maleficar, he brought his pet."

Down the alleyway, a creature born of smoke with flaming red eyes came flying towards them.

Chapter 503: Rising Smoke

Rising Smoke

Eleanor was wrong; the man convulsing before their feet was not a shapeshifter, cursed to transform into some manner of smoke creature. Watching the fell monster fly towards him, Martel dearly wished she had been right.

Swiftly, he pulled out his golden dagger and tossed it to Eleanor. It was the only physical weapon they had between the three of them that stood any chance of hurting the creature. Displaying no signs of fear, only determination, the two mageknights took position next to each other and raised their blades, aimed at the monster.

Martel knew he should already be slinging spells, but he looked down at the blue-clad man before his feet. If he died, would the creature disappear? If he had summoned it, would his death banish it? For a moment, Martel considered whether he ought to kill the defenceless man, and if that would save his friends and himself from this nightmarish creature.

Killing someone in a fight was one thing; cutting the throat of a man incapacitated was something else. Straightening up, Martel pulled water from the surrounding air to form an elemental bolt and flung it at the monster. He recalled his discussions about its nature with Master Fenrick; if it truly was a jinni, air and earth would be its domain. He needed the opposite elements to hurt it.

The spell struck the shadow creature where its chest would be; it halted for a moment before it continued to fly forward. Reaching the mageknights, both of its arms lashed out to strike them like clubs. They each took a blow on their shoulders, pushing them up against the walls of the surrounding warehouses.

Martel unleashed another water bolt, desperately hoping he was not wrong about its nature. Red eyes set in the face of smoke turned towards him, and a shadowy arm lashed out, becoming twice as long to strike Martel on his chest and knock him back.

The monster floated forward until it had reached the man in blue on the ground, still convulsing. It reached down a tendril of smoke to wrap around his head. Shocked, Martel realised that rather than save the supposed maleficar, the monster was choking him to death.

A gold-edged dagger slashed through the shadowy limb to sever it, and the suffocating smoke dissipated. The monster seemed to shake, the contours of its body becoming blurry; if it felt pain, maybe it would have screamed. Its flaming red eyes turned towards Eleanor. A regrown arm of shadow lashed out to throw her once more up against the wall.

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From the other side, Maximilian's sword cut through the creature, but it looked as if the blade simply passed through air. Getting back on his feet, Martel unleashed another water bolt. He still had spellpower enough for a handful more, but whether they could bring down the creature was another question. The golden dagger seemed the only thing truly effective at harming the monster.

It seemed to have reached the same conclusion; ignoring both Maximilian and Martel, it hovered over Eleanor and wrapped its smoke tendrils around her. Her eyes shot open, and it looked as if she wanted to scream. But neither sound nor air could pass her lips.

Terror flooded Martel's mind, as he stepped over the body of the fallen man to approach the dreaded beast. Acting on pure instinct, he cast the strongest spell he knew. Lightning surged from him to envelop the terrible creature's shadowy form. For a moment, its shape became blurred before it reasserted itself. Still, it continued to strangle the very life out of his closest friend, and all his magic seemed powerless to stop it.

The creature seemed to shake and dropped its hold on Eleanor. It turned around to stare at Maximilian, who had grabbed the golden dagger from her hand and used it to stab their dreadful enemy. As Eleanor sank to the ground, wheezing and gasping for breath, Maximilian struck again.

Whatever the effects and damage to the monster, it was insufficient. Its limbs reached out to grab Maximilian by the arms and hoist him into the air. Immobilised, the mageknight could make no further attacks nor defend himself as the creature once more sent tendrils out to envelop and strangulate him.

Tears in his eyes, Martel released spell after spell. Nothing seemed to work. His friends were dying, and he could do nothing to stop it.

Without warning, the creature released its hold on Maximilian and flew across the alley to slam against the wall. Its shadowy limbs extended in every direction as if strung up by chains invisible to the naked eye – but not for those with magical sight. Magical coils surrounded the monster; Martel followed them with his gaze, turning his head to look behind him down on the ground.

The man in blue lay propped up on one elbow to support himself, his free hand stretched out at the fell creature in their midst. Tendrils of pure power extended from his fingertips to keep it bound. With a strained expression, he got on his feet and extended his other hand to point at the monster as well. Closing both of them into fists, he pulled them apart as if snapping an invisible twig. The shadowy form of the beast seemed to fall apart as well, and finally, it vanished.

Coughing and snapping for breath, the mageknights got on their feet and joined Martel as all three stared at the unknown mage in their midst. As for him, he looked worn far beyond his years, and

exhausted to the point where he seemed ready to drop. But as he spoke, his voice was steady. His words sounded familiar to Martel, yet not in a language that he mastered.

"Archean," Eleanor breathed. "He is speaking Archean."

The man took a deep breath. "You are Asterian," he declared, switching to that language. "In that case, I greet you again. You have freed me from my curse." He placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head. "Atreus the Spellbreaker is in your debt."

Chapter 504: Spell-broken

Spell-broken

For a moment, none of the young wizards spoke nor moved. They all gazed at the older mage with varying emotions written on their face.

"Atreus?" Martel stammered. "The Spellbreaker?"

"Is that a common name and epithet among your people?" Maximilian asked.

"You said you were cursed," Eleanor added.

Seemingly oblivious to the questions directed at him, whether through words or expressions, the man claiming to be Atreus glanced around at the narrow alleyway. "If this is Aster, what city is this? Morcaster?"

"Indeed. You did not know your own location?" Maximilian wondered.

"The curse left my mind closer to that of a dog than a man. But we should find a safer place to talk. Clearly, my enemy knows of my presence." He looked at where the smoke creature had been vanquished. "Does the Lykeion still stand?"

"The what?" Martel asked.

"That is the Archean name for the Lyceum," Eleanor explained. "And yes, it does."

"Good. Not all was destroyed when Archen fell. Its wards will protect us. I suggest you lead the way, and we may speak at ease once inside its walls."

The young wizards looked at each other, and Maximilian shrugged. "I advocated retreat all along."

"Very well," Eleanor assented. They turned east and began the journey home.

Despite the sense of urgency, their pace was not exactly brisk, hamstrung by Atreus being weak. More than once, he reached out to steady himself against Maximilian or Martel, walking on either side of him; Eleanor, after exchanging a glance with Martel, had slipped behind to bring up the rear, keeping an eye on their new companion from that position. Likewise, Martel found his gaze constantly drawn back to him.

If Atreus was physically worn, his mind seemed sharp and awake. He constantly looked around at the bustling city as they reached the main street, his eyes following pack animals, carts, and day-labourers, craftsmen, and warehouse workers; all of them busy as they conducted the trade of the city. "It's grown so big! I know it has been some years since I was last in Morcaster, but this city is greater even than Archen!"

"You act like you have never seen this before, but we came this way just earlier when you followed me," Martel pointed out.

"That may be, but I can scarcely recall. Already, the memories of my life in my cursed state are fading, like waking from an ill dream you quickly forget, even as the details leave you shaken," Atreus explained, reaching out once again to support himself against his companions. "I do commend you for this accomplishment of lifting my curse. I assume due to your skill and familiarity with the place, you are wizards of the – Lyceum, you called it?"

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"Indeed we are, and all in a day's work for the likes of us," Maximilian declared with a self-satisfied smile.

Martel looked over the head of Atreus to shoot a glance at his friend. "It was Eleanor who recognised the signs, and me who brought the stone along."

"Yes, a commendable effort on our collective part," the mageknight continued.

"But who placed a curse upon you?" Eleanor asked behind them.

"That is a long explanation; not well suited for a public place like this," the older wizard replied. "I shall answer all your questions, once we are safe. I am rather worn from the fight against the jinni, as I imagine you are as well."

"It was impressive what you did," Martel admitted. Regardless of whether this man was Atreus as he claimed or not, he was clearly a powerful mage, and even if he appeared to be on their side, the thought of such spellcraft made him uncomfortable.

"I only dealt the last blow. Your own spells and weapons had done great work against the spirit," Atreus argued.

"How could you tell?" Maximilian interjected. "It was not like the damn thing bled."

"True, but those of my order are trained to fight both magic users and magic beings. Experience gives insight. Ah, that's at least a familiar sight!" Ahead of them, down the far end of the street, the towers of the Lyceum rose against the horizon.

"Where exactly should we go? The castle is full of people. Someone will notice our guest unless we go somewhere secluded." Something about Eleanor's voice sounded unusual, and Martel understood; she was wondering whether they should alert the teachers about this wizard or speak with him alone.

"Well, first, there is one place we have to go," Maximilian declared with a growl.

A short while later, they stood in the western courtyard. They had drawn a few glances crossing the entrance hall, but nobody had bothered to ask them for an explanation. Now, they stood in front of the weathered statue of one Atreus the Spellbreaker, renowned for defeating the fiends that threatened Morcaster as explained on the inscription.

"Damn me to the Nether, but it does look like him," Maximilian admitted grudgingly as they looked from the statue to the older wizard in their company.

Atreus frowned. "My forehead is not that big, is it?"

"It's not small," Martel mumbled.

"A mistake in the inscription," he continued, brushing away rotting leaves. "It says 'fiends', but if there had been more than one, I'd surely be dead now. You don't survive two of those."

"What are they?" Eleanor asked.

Atreus did not seem to hear. "This statue is old." His eyes ran over the weathered stonework. "How long has it been? Last I remember, before the curse sank the fog upon my mind, the city crumbled to ruin around me." He turned towards his companions. "How long has it been since the fall of Archen?"

The youths exchanged glances. "Three hundred years, give or take," Eleanor finally replied.

He released a drawn-out sigh. Slowly, the spellbreaker sank down to sit upon the pedestal of his own statue. "Did anything survive? I know the city itself was destroyed, but what of our outposts? Our repositories of knowledge, our centres of learning and study?"

"Only the Lyceum, I believe," she replied.

"Which was never our stronghold to begin with," Atreus mumbled. "No wonder I languished for so many years before someone had the wit and skill to release me. There's none left but me – me and her."

"Who?" Martel asked.

The spellbreaker looked around in the courtyard. "Though I can handle the cold as well as others, could we retire indoors?"

"The astronomy tower is not in use today," Eleanor suggested.

The Archean wizard nodded slowly. "Let us go there, and I shall tell you my story."

Chapter 505: The Spellbreaker's Tale

The Spellbreaker's Tale

Leaving the western courtyard, the three young wizards and their guest made their way up the astronomy tower, going to the classroom near the top. As they settled down on chairs or tables around Atreus, he took a deep breath and began to speak.

"I trained as a spellbreaker. My brethren and I, we were taught how to combat maleficars and all the evil creatures they might conjure." He caught himself, shaking his head. "No, that is the wrong place to start." He cleared his throat and began anew. "Before its fall, Archen was the pinnacle of magic and knowledge on the continent, and our greatest discovery had just been made. I did not know of it at the time, mind you; only members of the Conclave, our ruling council, were informed."

"What was it?" Eleanor asked eagerly.

"Portal magic. The ability to travel across vast distances in the blink of an eye. I'm sure you can imagine how powerful this would be, hence the secrecy. A handful of wizards began working on this, setting up portals across the continent and exploring the magic while the Conclave debated how it should be used."

Martel's eyes widened at the thought. He imagined crossing the length of the Asterian Empire to find himself home in Engby, seeing his family without having spent a single day of travel. And that was the least of it, of course; there would be no need for dangerous sea journeys, as goods and people could cross the oceans to Sindhu or the Western Isles. As could armies, he thought, realising how the Empire would use such magic.

"Around this time, the fiends of the Nether appeared. My brethren and I fought them on more than one occasion, often taking heavy losses. Because of the secrecy concerning the portals, it took us a while to understand the connection."

Martel could guess the reason, but he still sat with bated breath, waiting for Atreus to continue.

"Using this wondrous magic had consequences. Each time the portals were used, it opened a rift to the Nether, allowing the dreadful creatures to enter our world. As this became clear, the Conclave banned further use of the magic, but that did not prove enough." Atreus coughed. "At this point, I became aware of a threat. Unexplainable defeats, signs of forbidden magic used by our own people, and the like. My fellow spellbreakers and I investigated and realised some manner of cult had taken root in the heart of Archen, our own people corrupted. And their aim, their work, was connected to the portals and the fiends."

"Such treachery," Maximilian growled. Martel agreed. Even if he did not know exactly what the fiends were or what they could do, he imagined them much like the jinni; dreadful monsters, whom ordinary people would be defenceless against.

"A small group of us tracked them to a secret location in Archen. As we did not know who among the Conclave we could trust, we did not seek aid, nor did we dare wait while they conducted their malevolent rituals. We charged in." Atreus' voice had grown low, and they all leaned in to hear his every word. "We found a dozen or so of them, including who proved to be their leader and the mind behind all of this. Elena, a prominent member of the Conclave and among those who had discovered the lore of portal magic."

"Disappointing." Maximilian shook his head.

"Do not interrupt," Eleanor chastised him.

"She was deep in the casting of some great and complex ritual. The magic is unknown to me, but the symbols carved on the ground looked familiar. If I were to guess, she was opening a portal inside of Archen. I cannot be certain of her deeper purpose, but it was undoubtedly sinister. So we attacked."

Nobody else spoke anymore.

"As my brethren engaged the maleficars, I feared the consequences should she finish her ritual. Rather than simply fight her, I intervened to disrupt and destroy her spellcraft. I succeeded far beyond my ambition. The vast amount of magical energy, built up by their long labours and foul sorcery, was released beyond anyone's control. A cataclysm struck, no doubt enhanced by all the magic present everywhere else in the city." Atreus swallowed. "When I finally came to, nothing but ruins remained of the once great city of Archen. I cannot say why I survived. Perhaps because I was in the eye of the storm, or maybe fate saw fit to punish me in this way, for when I woke, I was cursed."

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"But how did that happen? We have been told that curses are very complex and intricate spells," Eleanor argued. "The opposite of the magical mayhem you describe."

"That I do know. As her spellcasting became interrupted, Elena turned on me to curse me. It was her spellwork that left me the way you saw me this morning. But she also received more than she bargained for. I realise that now that my mind is once more my own."

"How so?" Martel asked.

"Maleficars have ways to bind themselves to the victims – that is how they steal their life and strength. Perhaps this is the reason, or maybe the maelstrom of magic being unleashed changed her curse in unforeseeable ways. In any case, it created a bond between us. That could be why I survived, just as she did."

"What kind of bond?" Martel tried not to shiver at the thought of such foul magic.

"I find it hard to describe, as I don't fully understand it. And even now, it is hard to recall," Atreus confessed. "It was like a string tied between us. No matter where she went, I felt a pull in her direction. She would travel from city to city, hiding among other people. But when I did come close – you have seen the servant she can conjure up. Besides my mind and senses, the curse also bound my magic, leaving me powerless to fight it. All I could do was pursue and hope to one day get close enough to finish what I failed to do, all those years ago."

"But if you had no magic, why would this maleficar flee from you? She must be a powerful witch," Maximilian pointed out.

"A good question, and I can only think of one reason. The bond between us must have imposed the same constraints upon her. While I was robbed of my magic, so was she."

"But not anymore," Martel mumbled. It dawned upon him that they had not only released Atreus; if all he said was true, a maleficar of unmatched power had been let loose in Morcaster.

"Yes," Atreus simply said, as if he had read Martel's mind. "She must be stopped. But herein lies the tragedy that you have freed me. While my powers are returned, I have lost the thread that bound me to her. I can no longer sense her presence. I must somehow find her, and swiftly, in case she tries to flee. If she does so, there is little hope I can ever find her again."

"Good luck," Maximilian told him. "Martel here has tried for over a year, as have lots of inquisitors. Why is it you are dressed as one of them?"

Atreus looked down at his tattered clothes. "I'm not sure. I don't know who these inquisitors are."

"You must have realised they hunt maleficars as well," Eleanor guessed. "Disguising yourself as one makes sense."

"It is possible I had such cunning even with my mental capabilities diminished. I do remember going to places where she had attacked new victims, trying to find any signs left behind of her. That is where I saw you," he suddenly exclaimed, looking at Martel. "Your red clothing. It made you stand apart. I had seen you before on my hunt for her. That is why I followed you, hoping you would lead me to her."

"But what has she been doing?" asked Martel. "You say her magic was restricted like yours, but she has attacked victims for two years or longer, carrying out her vile rituals to leave them dead or as good as. How and why?"

"When I hunted her, even before the curse struck me, I surmised she possessed three artefacts of great power. Although unable to cast spells, she must have been able to use them still. One of them is a talisman of leechcraft, which should explain your second question." Atreus' expression turned into a sorrowful smile. "How else could someone live for three hundred years? And so through her bond with me, I have also survived far longer than I should, and the blood of her crime flows through my veins."

Martel's mind reeled from one revelation after another. He almost hoped that all of this was some cruel jest.

"What will you do?" Eleanor asked.

"First, I must sleep and regain my spells," Atreus admitted. "After that, maybe I should return to where we met. She was there as well. As I noticed and followed you yesterday," he said, directed at Martel, "so she must have noticed and followed me. When I lay incapacitated on the ground today, she summoned the jinni to kill me. That is the second of her artefacts, as you can guess."

"At least we got rid of that," Maximilian growled.

"Only temporarily. A spirit like that cannot be slain so easily."

Eleanor furrowed her brow. "What is the third artefact she has?"

"A most devious device that allows her to change her appearance entirely, though it can only influence one person at a time. Useful for luring victims to secluded places, as she may appear as somebody harmless. An old crone, an innocent young woman, or someone else entirely." Atreus exhaled. "In public, she must appear as herself. Maybe now that I can actually speak to people, I should look for witnesses to the attack the other night."

"It's doubtful you'll find any," Martel interjected. "The maleficar, she uses the sewers to move around unseen." Still strange to realise they had been hunting a woman all this time. A woman, hiding in the sewers. And with that, a dreadful thought struck Martel. "Could she disguise herself as a child?"

"I suppose. I'm not intimately familiar with the powers of her artefact. But a girl of fourteen or older, I can imagine that."

A girl terrified of inquisitors, though she possessed no magic. Who feared that a specific mage hunter was on her trail. Who hid in the sewers and only met Martel when alone. "I think I know who she is, and where." All eyes turned towards him. "She calls herself Julia, and she hides in the catacombs."

Chapter 506: An Eagle in Hand

An Eagle in Hand

At length, they fetched food and water for Atreus and left him to sleep atop the astronomy tower, where none would go; while cold and uncomfortable, he was used to far worse. As for Martel's revelation, the spellbreaker agreed that Julia – Elena would be likely to retreat to such a place as the

catacombs and recover her strength, as he had done to the Lyceum. Once Atreus had rested, he would go immediately to hunt for her in that place, hoping to catch her before she might escape to elsewhere.

Eating supper together, the trio sat mutely at the table. "Should we tell someone?" Eleanor finally asked. "Honestly, this entire situation is madness. A mage of legend is sleeping in the astronomy tower, and his next step will be to hunt in the catacombs for the maleficar who has plagued Morcaster for years. And incidentally, she is also Martel's friend." She looked at him.

"I told you, she looked like a child in need! Why should I ever suspect her?"

"Too trusting," Maximilian replied in between bites. "In any case, the fellow said he would leave once he is rested. No need for us to involve anyone. Soon enough, this will be over and none of our concern."

"I'm going with him," Martel declared.

Maximilian let out the longest sigh while Eleanor gave him an exasperated look. "You cannot be serious!" she exclaimed.

"Of course I am. She must be stopped. I've been to the catacombs before, and I know what awaits. If that jinni is still alive as he said, I've experience fighting it and spells that can hurt it." At least, he hoped so. "My dagger too." He patted his belt where the gold-edged blade rested once more. He left out the biggest reason; Julia had played him for a fool, taking advantage of him, and he wanted her dead.

"If that is your concern, tell the teachers. Master Alastair is a battlemage like you with thirty more years of experience," Eleanor argued. "He can provide more help than any of us."

"Atreus is right," Martel retorted. They had already made this suggestion to the spellbreaker, who had rejected it. "Would any of them believe his story? Or follow him into the catacombs, infested by undead, in search of a maleficar whose power far exceeds theirs?"

"All good reasons why you shouldn't go either. Their suspicions may be well-founded – how can we truly trust this vagrant?" Eleanor asked pointedly.

"She has a point. Even if there is truth to his claims... just because he hunts a villain, that does not make him a hero," Maximilian considered. "He might easily be a villain himself."

"I'm not sitting this out," Martel declared. "I'm going now to rest and recover my spells. I'm not asking you to come. But I won't lie to you either."

The mageknights looked at each other, an unspoken question hanging between them.

In his room, Martel made sure his candle sat safely in its holder – being able to conjure flames easily, he had not used it in many months. Now, he drove a nail into it near the base before he lit the wick. This done, he lay down on his bed and quickly fell asleep.

Hours later, he woke from a loud noise. The candle had burned down, releasing the nail to clank against its holder. Getting up, he opened the shutter to look out of his window. The cold night air helped to wake him up; the moon, nearly full, greeted him on the horizon. It was midnight.

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He got dressed in his robes and leather armour; while he doubted it would avail anything against a maleficar, he might as well wear it. Golden dagger in his belt along with fire pots and healing elixir, Martel only needed a staff. He could pick one up from the armoury; they would walk close by to get to the workshop and its entrance to the sewers.

He ascended the astronomy tower and opened a hatch that led to the parapet on top. In the dark, he had trouble seeing Atreus until he used magic to look for heat. Crouched together underneath a borrowed cloak, the supposed spellbreaker slept peacefully, regardless of the cold night air or his uncomfortable bedding made of stone. "Master Atreus?" Martel reached out a hand to gently shake the man awake.

The mage blinked. "Stars, but that does feel good. A mage without spellpower is hardly a mage at all." He got on his feet. "Lead the way, friend."

They began their descent, Martel using his magic to notice if anybody else might be near to stumble upon them. "The workshops have an entrance to the sewer, which gives access to the catacombs. I know the path well at this point," Martel explained, wondering how best to raise the argument that he intended to join in the hunt for the maleficar.

As they walked down the corridor towards the workshops, Martel became aware of two people ahead, thanks to his magic. He stopped in his tracks, fearing discovery by a teacher or the like, until he recognised them. Both of them clad in armour, Eleanor and Maximilian nodded in greeting as the firemage and spellbreaker approached.

"I wasn't sure you'd be here," Martel admitted. When they had split up after the meal, neither of the mageknights had seemed willing to join.

"We said midnight, did we not?" Maximilian growled, throwing a staff for Martel to catch.

"We're not leaving you on your own," Eleanor asserted, glancing from Martel to Atreus.

With a grateful smile, Martel gave his golden dagger to her. "You'll make better use of this than me."

"I think you are confused," the spellbreaker said. "When I asked you to lead me to the catacombs, I meant only that. None of you are equipped to deal with such a foe."

"What, I wasted my time preparing? You know how difficult it was to find glue at this hour?" Maximilian raised his hammer with an indignant expression, revealing the row of golden coins upon its face.

"Martel is right. This witch must be stopped," Eleanor declared.

"You don't understand. You may do more harm than good," Atreus explained. "She has spells to steal your life and strength, or she may turn you against your friends with illusions and mental trickery."

The young mages looked at each other; none of them had considered such a thing. "What of the jinni? Let us contend with that," Martel suggested. "You fight the witch while we deal with her guardian."

Atreus blew out his breath. "I suppose it would be preferable to outnumber her rather than reverse. I will accept this on two conditions. The first is that you keep your distance to her. Her spells of leechcraft require close proximity."

"And the other?" asked the firemage.

"That you can provide me with three silver coins. Their value is irrelevant, but the material is not." Atreus held out his hand.

Confused, the trio went through their pockets until they could place three silver eagles in the spellbreaker's palm. In turn, he placed his other hand on top. A glow revealed magic in use. As he revealed his palm again, any sign of the imprinted eagle or the emperor's face was gone, revealed by Archeon letters.

"I'm not much of an enchanter, but this will last the next hours. Hold them for a moment." Atreus gave the coins to Martel and began tearing strips of fabric from his already tattered clothes. Deftly, he tied each coin inside the cloth, making a crude necklace. "Each of you must wear this at all times. It will shield you from the worst of her mental magic."

"What about you?" Martel asked as he placed the string around his neck; the other two followed suit, though Maximilian did so with a displeased expression after smelling the fabric.

"I have my spells for that. Don't worry about me." Atreus gave a wink and a smile. "Now, let us be off."

They hurried to the workshop and down the hatch that led to the sewers. The smell greeted them immediately. Continuing, they traversed the tunnel to reach the locked grate door. "It's got gold, so we can't just unlock it," Martel told the others. "I guess we just have to break down the whole door."

"Ah, perhaps a less crude method can be employed. Where magic fails, ordinary skills may succeed." Atreus took out some picks from his belt and set to work on the lock. Soon after, it clicked open. "There we are," he announced, pushing the door open. The maleficar's lair awaited them.

Chapter 507: On the Threshold

On the Threshold

Moving through the sewers alongside the small stream of fetid water, they had to walk like pearls on a string. Atreus had taken the lead with Martel second, Eleanor third, and Maximilian bringing up the rear.

"What if she's not in the catacombs?" Martel asked, voicing the fear that had plagued him ever since they stepped into the sewers. He had made the claim that she would seek refuge in the catacombs; if they wasted their time down here while she hid elsewhere, allowing her to make her escape, it would be his fault.

"If she's not, I'll have to work hard to pick up her trail again." Atreus looked over his shoulder to give a reassuring smile. "Your reasoning is sound, friend. A maleficar like her is an accomplished necromancer, so hiding out among the dead, who can be conscripted to protect her while she is asleep and defenceless, makes excellent sense. And should she have gone elsewhere, the chances I would discover where always seemed slim. This is as good a place to search for her as any."

"The last time you faced her... How did your fight go? Before everything went awry."

"We never got that far. I went straight to disrupt a ritual, and that was the end."

"But you know what kind of spells she possesses?"

"I have fought other maleficars, and leechcraft works much the same." He glanced over his shoulder again. "Make sure to keep your distance. It is better that you flee than risk becoming a victim." From the rear, Maximilian made a manner of disgruntled noise.

"How does it work? Although we had lessons on this, our teacher knew precious little."

"As I've never practised it, my knowledge is also limited," Atreus admitted. "Magic can connect people for good or ill. Healing is such a bond, raw power passing from one person to another. Leechcraft is the reverse, though it can be resisted – and spellbreakers have our own secret ways to deal with it. It requires touch, hence why you must all keep away from her."

"How much further?" came Maximilian's voice. "The amount of miles I have walked in these sewers because of you, Nordmark, would astound Sol himself."

"Max, you've been to the catacombs before," Martel pointed out. "You know how far it is."

"You think I have marked my time spent here?"

"It is nearby," Eleanor interjected. "The entrance is up there."

She was right; the doorway loomed to the side of the tunnel. Furthermore, broken boards lay on the ground. "Someone else came this way," Atreus remarked. "From here on out, we should be careful."

"I have chalk to mark our route," Martel said. "It's a labyrinth in there."

"How will we even find this witch?" Maximilian growled.

"We won't. But she'll have brought the jinni back to watch over her, I'm sure. We just have to find that," Atreus declared. With those words, he crossed the threshold to enter the catacombs.

They kept the same formation as before. On the walls, the ancient Archean letters greeted them, creating a barrier that kept the undead from leaving their subterranean resting place. None of them noticed that new letters had been added.

They did not speak as they walked. Martel had summoned two flames to illuminate the path ahead and behind; whenever he glanced to the side, the flickering light showed him the alcoves filled with the dead.

Each time the path forked, Atreus would stop for a moment before choosing one or the other path. Behind him, Martel would mark their route with his chalk, and their progress could continue. They did not question the spellbreaker's choices; to the young wizards, one trail seemed as good as the other.

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Martel kept his senses strained for any sign of enemies, though it was of limited use. In the dark, he could not see much beyond the small area illuminated by his flames. All he heard was the constant jangling made by the armour worn by the two mageknights behind him. As for his nose, the whole

place reeked, which did not tell him much. The only sense that might be useful was that born of magic; every now and then, he reached out to feel for any sources of heat far ahead, whether coming from a witch or a jinni.

Suddenly, Atreus stopped. They were in the middle of the tunnel with no other parts, and the others looked at him in confusion. "I sense something," he muttered, closing his eyes.

Martel extended his magic, but he felt no heat other than that of his companions. As for the mageknights, Maximilian raised his hammer while Eleanor pulled the golden dagger from her belt. "Bad place to fight," he growled. "No room to manoeuvre."

"If it is that spirit he senses, I'm sure it will happily come to us," Eleanor muttered.

A start went through Martel as he felt something cold grip his wrist. Looking down, he saw a skeleton move up from its resting place in the alcove, reaching out its other hand as well. All around them, the undead began to rise.

Martel released a fire bolt into the skull of his attacker. It did not deter the undead creature, who used its other hand like claws to slice Martel's arm open. Another fire bolt into the rib cage finally broke the dark magic reanimating the skeleton, and the bones fell back to the ground.

There was no time to feel elated; from every alcove around them, the undead appeared. Martel's companions had their own struggles; Eleanor wielded the golden dagger to some effect, though their assailants pressed her on all sides. Maximilian had better luck; his hammer crushed bone with ease. One skeleton only got its skull out of the alcove before a blow turned it into dust.

On Martel's other side, Atreus had picked up a femur and wielded it like a club. Trusting the mageknights to fight side-by-side, Martel turned to stand back to back with the spellbreaker. He released a ray of fire into the nearest alcove, burning everything inside. "Well done!" Atreus complimented him, though Martel wondered how he knew with his back turned.

As swiftly as it had begun, the skirmish was over. Another fire spell, a handful of blows, and all the undead creatures resumed their eternal rest. Martel breathed heavily, surprised at how easily it had gone. While he and Eleanor had received some scratches, nobody had been seriously injured. "Was that her? Did she do this?" Martel looked at Atreus.

The spellbreaker shook his head. "She would not have relented so easily, or she would have taken advantage of the confusion to make her own assault. No, we simply happened to disturb the slumber of these long-dead souls, resting uneasily. We should continue."

"I rather enjoyed that," Maximilian confessed. Eleanor gave him a disapproving look. "What? Their skulls make a satisfying sound when you smash them."

They continued down the twisting corridors, all of them quiet and alert. The deeper they went in, the more nervous Martel felt. He knew the fight that lay ahead would be far more dangerous than the quick brawl they had just endured. The jinni alone was a formidable foe, and from how Atreus described her, the witch was worse. Some part of him knew that if their search ended in vain, he would secretly be relieved; the rest of him felt ashamed thinking this.

"There it is again." Atreus halted in his tracks, closing his eyes.

The others looked around at any sign of moving bones.

"Not the undead. No, this is more sinister magic. Chains upon a spirit, turning it to fury and despair." He opened his eyes again. "Martel, extinguish your light. Our enemy is near. From here on, we move in silence. And when we have sight of our adversary, remember to stay back. I shall engage her alone."

The others nodded; Martel allowed his flames to dissipate, plunging the tunnels back in the aeon-old darkness they usually knew. He extended his magic to feel the heat of his companions instead now that his sight had been blinded; in front of him, Atreus began walking once more.

They seemed to have reached an arm of the underground complex; the tunnel no longer twisted and turned, nor did it branch into several directions. They walked slowly and carefully, one hand extended against the stone wall to guide them.

Focusing on the shape of Atreus ahead of him, Martel did not notice it at first. But at length, he caught the flicker of something in the distance. He placed a hand on Atreus' shoulder to alert the spellbreaker and saw the outline of his head nod in recognition.

Closing his magical eye, Martel looked with his ordinary vision to see the light of torches or lamps. More than one, and spread out to suggest a much larger room.

Atreus gestured for them all to stop. The mageknights stepped as close as they could, standing behind Martel. The spellbreaker reached out to touch the hilt of their weapons, indicating to keep them ready. He touched Martel's shoulder as the last, giving it a squeeze before he turned around. Silently and slowly, they continued; the mageknights tread as cautiously as they could, minimising any sound from their armour.

The tunnel opened up to reveal a large burial chamber with the expected alcoves along the walls; in the far end stood a sarcophagus on a dais. Near it, the jinni hovered in the air. On the ground in front of it, a woman sat, mumbling chants while bent over strange symbols scratched into the stone floor. Softly, they glowed with yellow light.

Chapter 508: A Royal Burial

A Royal Burial

Atreus made a gesture for the others to remain back before he crossed the threshold to enter the great chamber. It was clearly a major burial place within the catacombs, easily measuring fifty feet or more across. Walking along the wall as he kept to the shadows, Atreus crept forward.

"No need to skulk about, my love. You tripped my glyph of warning when you first entered the catacombs." The maleficar raised her head and stood up. "I am sure it will come to blows between us, but I should like to talk first. After all, we are the last of our kind."

"Because of you," Atreus replied, stepping forward from the shadows to enter the light of the lamps surrounding her.

"It was your clumsy interference that led to Archen's destruction," Elena retorted.

"And if I had allowed you to finish, the outcome would have been no different." The spellbreaker slowly paced back and forth, keeping distance to both witch and jinni. "And already, you seek to repeat your mistake."

"The easiest way to travel."

"You should have fled on foot or by ship," Atreus told her. "But you never had patience, only arrogance."

"You should talk! You dare come to this place? You think you stand a chance against me?"

He ceased his pacing, standing still to look straight at her. Behind his back, magic began to glow around his hand. "Revenge is powerful motivation. Do you understand what you did to me? Three hundred years of suffering."

"You should not have interfered. You deserved your fate," she declared with bile in her voice. "You think the centuries have been easy for me? Cut off from magic, walking around this world of fools with their petty sorcery and useless powers!" Now she began to pace, worked up. "And always you, snapping at my heels –"

She was interrupted by Atreus releasing a spell, aimed straight at her.

With his two friends, Martel watched from the doorway as Atreus stepped out of the shadows. The latter spoke in Archean with the witch, leaving the firemage in the dark. Instead, he stared at the woman. She had little in common with the Julia he knew, whose personality and appearance both had been a deception. She was tall and thin, with flowing dark hair and a cruel countenance as she practically spat her words at the spellbreaker. And by her side floated the jinni, faceless except for the burning red eyes.

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Watching Atreus release his spell to attack her felt like a release for Martel as well; the fight had begun. His feelings washed away, replaced by instinct. He quickly stepped forward before releasing an elemental bolt of water, aimed at the spirit. It responded as expected, turning towards the firemage. Both mageknights moved around him, casting defensive spells and raising their weapons.

By the sarcophagus, the maleficar cast her own spell. From the alcoves in the walls, the dead began to rise.

The sight of the undead gave Martel a moment of panic, but he suppressed it. They had known to expect this, given the witch had necromantic powers; and as their early encounter showed, they could deal with these enemies. As long as they fought together, they could handle it. Though the jinni did complicate matters.

Martel released one ray of fire after another, burning skeleton upon skeleton. Maximilian swung his hammer, crushing bone with ease. As for Eleanor, her weapon with the golden edge seemed best suited for harming the jinni, and she went against the spirit.

The undead continued to swarm at them from all sides. Any notion of fighting next to each other was impossible as the room swarmed with enemies, and Eleanor constantly retreated to avoid the jinni grabbing her and suffocating her as it had done to them during their previous fights.

"The door!" Maximilian shouted.

Casting a quick glance towards it, Martel realised what he meant; although the darkness concealed most of it, the sound of countless bones moving towards them could be heard. Hundreds of dead lay buried in the tunnels nearby; the maleficar's power reached beyond this chamber, summoning an army to overwhelm them.

"I will hold them back!" the mageknight declared, as he moved to the doorway. "Deal with the others!"

Martel had a better idea. He could not use the spell inside the hall, as it would separate him and his friends, but it was well suited for a chokepoint. Acting swiftly with a thought of gratitude towards his training that let him cast the spell so quickly, Martel released his magic. A wall of flames rose up to create a living door with fire hot enough to incinerate any undead that might pass through.

"That works too," Maximilian admitted, turning back around to attack the nearest skeleton.

On the other side of the hall, the spellbreaker and the maleficar continued their fight. She had a dagger in her hand, glowing with magic in a sickly green colour. Constantly retreating, Atreus evaded her blade while flinging spells at her.

Suddenly, he had to jump away as the great stone lid on the sarcophagus was pushed down from the inside. It landed with a heavy sound on the floor, causing both to crack. Inside the coffin, another undead creature rose up. Unlike the others, where nothing remained but their bones, a circlet rested around his skull as a sign of royal power, while a tattered and faded robe covered his ribcage; his skeletal fingers clutched the hilt of a mace made from bronze and covered in strange symbols with the glow of magic upon them.

Moreover, as he rose to his full height to step out of the sarcophagus, his eyeholes shone with a cold, blue light. His head moved as if surveying the carnage taking place in his eternal home, desecrating his tomb. Stepping out of his coffin, his dreadful gaze fell upon the mageknights and the battlemage, destroying his subjects buried with him.

Despite having neither tongue nor lungs, the skeleton king released a blood-curdling scream that Martel felt rather than heard. With this as his battle cry and his fearsome mace held high, the risen undead charged the firemage.

Chapter 509: Friend and Foe

Friend and Foe

Either the undead king had determined Martel to be the easiest foe to kill, or else he held particular wrath for those using fire against his servants; regardless, he ran with surprising speed across the hall straight at the battlemage. His hand held the bronze mace ready for a crushing strike.

Controlling his fear, Martel released a lightning bolt. The magical energy crackled as it left his fingertips, surging forward to strike the undead creature. It tore through the fabric of his robe,

enveloping itself around his ribcage to make him stop in his tracks, trembling as if his bones threatened to fall apart.

Reasserting himself, the risen king resumed his march towards Martel. With a wall of flames and a horde of skeletons on the other side barring the only way out, the battlemage had limited room to manoeuvre. Martel raised his staff, hoping that his shield spell would work against the bronze mace wielded by his enemy.

Maximilian jumped in front of him, raising his physical shield. "Help her!" he yelled as he took the blow; it came with sufficient force to push him back several steps.

Looking around, Martel saw Eleanor pressed into a corner. Tendrils of smoke came from the jinni, trying to envelop her; she swung the golden-edged dagger constantly to cut them off, leaving her no opportunity to retaliate or fight her way out of her precarious position.

Trusting Maximilian to hold his own, Martel stepped backwards; extricated from the fight with the skeleton king, he turned towards the jinni instead.

In the other end of the hall, sorcery of dreadful potency filled the air. They did not fight with elemental or physical powers, with streaks of fire to burn their enemy or striking blows to harm the body. Instead, the last wizards of Archen duelled with magic to turn the mind mad or spells to set the soul ablaze. The maleficar lashed out with her dagger, coated in spellcraft like venom for the spirit; as Atreus leapt into the empty sarcophagus in evasion, she released a spell with her other hand, and he seized up in pain, only to return the favour immediately after, causing her to scream.

Conscious of his dwindling spellpower, Martel released an elemental bolt straight into the jinni's back. Floating in the air, the spirit turned around and locked its flaming red eyes on the firemage. With one tendril pushing Eleanor back, the jinni flew towards him. Limbs of shadow engulfed Martel, and he suddenly found it impossible to breathe. As much as he tried, no air came into his lungs.

His mouth frozen in perpetual gasping, Martel could not cry for help either. With the panic of suffocation overtaking him, he reacted on instinct by trying to counter air with earth. From the cobbled floor, a stone flew up into his hand; imbued with his magic, he smashed it against the spirit.

Either his idea was poor or his magic weak; it did nothing. Frozen in panic, Martel's body begged for breath that would not come. The red eyes in the faceless countenance stared down at him as the jinni choked the very life out of him.

While Martel and Eleanor battled the jinni, Maximilian stood against the skeleton king. His shield had been destroyed, battered into pieces by the bronze mace; his own hammer, reinforced by gold, had not accomplished anything like that. Still, he laughed each time they exchanged blows.

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The undead monster struck again; this time, its mace met Maximilian's magical shield. Despite the magical symbols that illuminated the weapon, it did not break through his spell, and he took no harm.

"Denied, foul creature!" the mageknight roared in delight, and his own hammer smashed against the skeleton's ribs. Such a blow should have crushed the target, but the magic animating the undead creature seemed to provide its own protection. Another gold coin fell to the ground from the hammer, as the glue loosened from constant use.

Eleanor embedded the golden dagger between what would be the shoulder blades of the spirit; a rift opened where its mouth should be, releasing a silent scream while dropping Martel to the ground.

Seeing his friend face down the shadowy creature without fear, Martel took heart; more than that, he saw its shape flicker as the contours became even blurrier. He understood what Atreus had meant in the alley, recognising the spirit to be injured.

Gathering water to him, Martel poured his last spellpower into the magic. A spike of ice formed between his hands before it flew forward to embed itself in the chest of the jinni.

The entire mass of shadow and smoke began to shake violently. Whether needed or not, Eleanor drove her dagger into it once again. Martel felt it in his magical sense as the spirit fell apart, like the stench of burning flesh in his nostrils; finally, the dark shadow disappeared.

The last gold fell from Maximilian's hammer, and it was once more an ordinary weapon. Still, he raised it for another blow, as the undead king struck with his bronze mace. This time, no magical shield resisted the attack; it landed to crush Maximilian's left shoulder. Ignoring the pain, his own hammer came, this time against the elbow; magic empowering his attack, Maximilian tore the bones apart at the joint, and the lower arm holding the mace flew through the air.

"Hah! Know death once again, abomination!"

In response, the undead king slashed out with the skeletal claws on his remaining hand. He raked across Maximilian's neck, cutting fabric and drawing blood.

Clasping his free hand against his wounds, the mageknight sneered and made a wild blow, hitting only air. He did not notice the silver coin falling from his neck to the ground, barely making a sound.

From further back, a fire bolt crossed the space to strike the undead. At the same time, Eleanor moved behind and made a cut across the spine with her gold-edged dagger. The skeleton king released the same terrible scream as when he first rose, but this time, it sounded almost mournful. All the same, his body fell to become nothing but a pile of bones on the ground.

Still pressing a hand against his wounds, Maximilian smiled at his friends. "I had that sorted, but if others are to join the fight, better they do it on your side!"

Martel did not pay him attention; he looked towards the other end, where Atreus still battled against the maleficar. Martel knew they had to keep their distance, but perhaps he could strike her with spells from afar; watching Atreus writhe in pain even as he fought on, Martel could not do nothing.

Suddenly, Elena turned her head towards them. Martel's heart pounded, fearing what evil she might unleash on him, but her gaze seemed to pass him by, and she returned her attention on Atreus.

"Maximilian?" Eleanor's voice came behind Martel, and for some reason, hearing it felt like ice poured into his veins. Turning around, he saw one mageknight raise his hammer to strike the other. Raising her shield, Eleanor had to defend against her friend. "Maximilian!" she shouted, but he continued.

Looking at him, Martel saw no light in his eyes, nor signs of any emotion such as anger or fear; nothing to explain why Maximilian had turned on them. Martel could only think of one reason; the maleficar ruled his mind.

A fight erupted between the mageknights, one of them trying to defend herself without hurting the other. Martel dared not intervene. He lacked the physical strength to contend with Maximilian, let alone overpower him; looking at his already bleeding and battered form, Martel feared that any spell or strike to incapacitate him might outright kill his friend. At the same time, if they did not stop Maximilian, his attacks on Eleanor were bound to succeed eventually.

Looking up the hall, Martel stared at the maleficar. He had to get involved; she had to die, and it had to be now.

Chapter 510: Broken Resistance

Broken Resistance

Despite his decision, Martel knew he could not hope to intervene in the battle of spells between Atreus and the maleficar. Their magic was far beyond his, even if he had any of his spellpower left. But he had to do something.

To one side of him, Eleanor desperately averted Maximilian's blows without retaliation; to the other, the spellbreaker and maleficar continued their struggle. Picking up the bronze mace from the ground, Martel crept forward.

One blow to the back of her head; the eerie symbols upon the weapon in his hand promised to do terrible harm. It almost felt like they spoke to him, whispering of power, as if the mace itself wanted to be used, to carve skin, cleave flesh, and crush bone.

As he came closer, Martel's other sensory impressions seemed to fade away. The sounds of weapons clashing, the dusty smell of ancient rocks, even the bright flares of spells in the otherwise dark hall; none of it felt as real as the raw impression of pure magic being expounded in the titanic struggle between spellbreaker and maleficar. Martel could not begin to comprehend the nature and effect of the sorcery, nor did he need to. He hefted the mace in his hand, trying to decide whether he should sneak along the wall or simply rush forward and clobber the witch before she could react.

The choice was taken out of his hands, as Elena turned around, clearly aware of his approach. She flung a spell at him with an almost careless gesture before turning her attention back on Atreus.

"Martel, stay back! Don't come any closer!" the spellbreaker shouted.

Even obeying the command, Martel could not simply stand idly by; he did not have to look to hear the noise of the duel behind him, reminding him of Eleanor's plight. Although it would leave him exhausted and unable to squeeze out more magic, Martel went for his strongest spell. He reached into his very soul and drew upon the fire inherent in him to unleash everything he had. Lightning

formed to jump between his hands before it hurled like a spear through the air to strike the witch, punishing her arrogance for turning her back on the battlemage.

Immediately, Martel felt greater pain than ever before in his life coursing through his body, like being roasted over an open fire. It seemed any arrogance being punished belonged to him. As the agony subsided, he finally saw a thin thread of magic, glowing sickly green, tying him to the witch. Although he had never seen or heard of such a spell, he realised what had happened; his own spell had been turned against him, reminding him that he was up against magic far beyond his understanding.

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A gesture from Atreus sent a gale of magic to rush over Martel, and the thread disappeared, freeing him from the maleficar's bond. Martel gasped, knowing he had spent his magic and beyond; another spell would leave him unconscious or worse. His only remaining contribution lay in the mace. Picking it up once more, Martel steeled himself for one final attack.

As before, he never got the chance. The witch turned her head and unleashed another spell, and this time, there was no subtlety to it. Martel could barely see it happening before the effect struck him, and he fell to his knees. His entire being was on fire. He screamed in absolute agony. This was not physical nor mental pain; his very soul was being seared by magic beyond his comprehension. He seized up and fell to the ground, paralysed.

Although incapacitated, Martel felt her presence as she approached; he realised what would follow now. The which would drain him of life and power, just as Atreus had warned. In a battle between archmages, Martel had meddled, although he was not even worthy to be called a novice compared to them; this would be the price he paid.

"Elena, wait! Leave the boy be. Take from me instead," Atreus' voice rang out, speaking Archeon.

She laughed in disbelief. "You would sacrifice yourself for him?"

"Yes. Take me, but let them go."

Her reply came tinged with suspicion. "You will not resist?"

"They are but children. Release them from your spells, swear to me you will let them leave! In return, I'll give no resistance to your spellcraft." He fell to his knees.

The maleficar narrowed her eyes before a cruel smile found its way to her face. "I swear it, upon Archen and its memory." Elsewhere in the hall, the sound of weaponry ended as Maximilian ceased his attacks on Eleanor. She gave Martel a last glance before turning away from him, placing her dagger in her belt. "Farewell, foolish boy. You served me well for a short while." She strode over to where Atreus still remained kneeling. "At last. I shall finish my ritual, the portal shall take me to my home, and I may finally have what has been denied to me for three centuries."

She placed one hand upon his head. Green light filled the palm of her hand, and pain took over Atreus' expression, mirrored by the intense look of pleasure upon hers.

"At last!" she reiterated. "Your power tastes so sweet, my love! So sweet" The triumphant tone in her voice trailed off. The light glowing underneath her hand flickered and changed colour, turning blue. "What is this?" she screeched.

Atreus grabbed her by the wrist, wrenching her away. As he rose to stand, wrath filled his countenance. "Fool," he whispered. "My brethren spent all our youth training to withstand the dark spells and leechcraft of a maleficar. Now feel a spellbreaker's fury!"

She tried to tear herself away, but his grasp upon her was stronger than iron. Now his hand shone with magic, and where he held her, blackness spread along the veins under her skin like venom. She clawed against him with her free hand to no avail. All of his power coursed through the connection she had established; she had opened the door for him. He did not release his grip upon her until she fell limp to the ground. Finally, he took the dagger from her belt and drove it into her heart. The maleficar who had haunted Morcaster and brought Archen to ruin was dead.