

Firebrand 511

Chapter 511: A Healthy Suggestion

A Healthy Suggestion

Martel stared down upon the maleficar's body. He had expected to feel some kind of vindication, but in truth, he just felt tired. Maybe because the woman on the ground looked nothing like Julia; in terms of appearance, she was a stranger. Furthermore, her body was rapidly decaying; years of rot took place before his very eyes.

"Three centuries are catching up," Atreus remarked. He knelt down next to her. "When my time comes, I suppose I shall look the same."

"How did you do this?" Martel asked.

"Leechcraft is a bridge between mage and victim, transferring power. But all bridges can be travelled in both directions." For a moment, Atreus' countenance turned harsh as he looked at the dead maleficar, her body falling apart.

Different amulets became apparent, resting on what had been Elena's chest; Martel felt their magical power clearly, and he knelt down as well to take a closer look.

"Best not to touch," the spellbreaker warned him. Using her knife, he cut a large piece of fabric from her dress and used it to pick up the artefacts without touching them, turning it into a small bundle. "I'll dispose of them if I can and hide them away if I can't."

Remembering his friends, Martel got up and turned around. Already, the mageknights approached them, Maximilian once more pressing a hand to his wounded neck. "That turned unpleasant, like a dream you could not wake from. I need a strong ale."

Wounded, but well enough otherwise, Martel surmised; he looked at Eleanor. "Are you hurt?"

"Nothing of consequence. Is it over?"

Martel looked down at the rotting corpse. "Pretty sure it is."

Meanwhile, Atreus had picked up the bronze mace, and he returned it to the sarcophagus.

"I would argue those spoils belong to me," Maximilian protested. In his hands, he held the golden coins he had once glued to his weapon.

"We have done enough to disturb the dead," the spellbreaker told them. "Let us return the bones to their resting place as best we can. Return them to the dignity that she would deny to them."

It took a while to restore their hall to the best of their ability; the stone lid of the sarcophagus remained cracked, but they hoisted it back into place, once the skeleton king or rather, his different parts rested inside again. They did their best for the remaining bones scattered around the hall, returning them to the alcoves, and finally left. The maleficar's body was allowed to stay where she fell; a warning to other intruders violating the peace of the dead.

They walked with quiet steps through the catacombs; even Maximilian avoided unnecessary noise or conversation. None of them felt up for another brawl, should they attract the attention of the

restless inhabitants of the tunnels. But whether through luck or some reward for the respect shown in the burial chamber, they made it through the tombs without further incident, reaching the sewers. Martel never imagined he would be so happy for the stench of those waters to fill his nose.

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Out of the catacombs, they finally allowed themselves to relax. "I should be cross with you, Nordmark," Maximilian declared, the first to speak. "Many times you told me to join you on your hunt for the maleficar, claiming it would bring us glory to eradicate her evil. Finally, we actually track her down and put an end to her, but who will believe us? Other than the inquisitors, who will no doubt consider us all tainted by association with the witch. You especially, given your friendship with her."

"Alright, no need to bring that up," Martel replied with annoyance.

"We will know what we did," Eleanor chimed in. "That will have to suffice. We saved many who would otherwise become her victims."

"One question that still bothers me," Maximilian admitted.

"Just one?" Martel glanced over his shoulder at the mageknight.

"Begone with your cheek. As I said, one question. This witch went after easy victims, such as children in the copper lanes. But she also used her wicked magic on students of the Lyceum, which seems highly dangerous. Why take such a risk?"

All the young mages fell quiet, waiting for Atreus to answer. "I can't rightly say," he admitted.

"Maybe she thought that by stealing their power, she could regain her magic or break the curse by fuelling her own powers."

They walked past the row of pipes leading water from the Lyceum into the sewers, where Martel had first seen Julia. He wondered if she had intended the same fate for him, or why she had never done so had it simply been a question of circumstances, or had she found him more useful supplying her with materials and potions?

"Some of her victims are still alive, though only barely," Eleanor suddenly spoke up. "Master Atreus, do you have knowledge of healing?"

"That depends. I cannot do much against physical ills, but some maladies I might be able to alleviate."

"We should take you to Gerard," Maximilian suggested. "One of her victims. He is in the infirmary."

Martel had all but forgotten about him. While he did not particularly care about his fate, the idea of watching Atreus heal him was exciting.

"I don't have it in me to carry out any magic until I rest, but I can certainly take a look at the boy once we're back at the Lyceum. A quick examination will let me determine if I have any powers to help him."

They continued onwards; ahead, the grate door awaited their return.

First bell rang as they appeared in the Lyceum; they had been gone the entire night. Swiftly, they traversed the school to reach the infirmary before the general inhabitants of the castle woke up.

"What is this? What are you doing here so early, and who is this?" The nurse on duty glared at them.

"Good sister, we only wish to visit our friend briefly before we should be on our way. Will you let us have a few moments?" As Atreus spoke, Martel felt a tinge of magic, though he could not identify it as such.

Looking confused briefly, the sister's expression softened. "Very well. Be quick about it. And take a bath afterwards. You smell like you've been rolling around in refuse."

The spellbreaker bowed his head in acknowledgement and looked at the others. "Where is he?"

They led him to the patient, still lying without response on a cot. Martel recalled when they had tried to revive him using the potion discovered by Eleanor, and how only Master Kelsos' intervention had saved the boy's life.

Atreus placed his hand on Gerard's forehead, closing his eyes. Moments passed where none dared to speak; Martel watched for any sign of magic. Finally, the spellbreaker removed his hand and stepped away. "Alas, the injury is in his very soul. It is beyond me to heal."

"Would you be willing to examine another patient? Her wound is different from his, but likewise beyond Asterian skill to heal." Eleanor stared at Atreus even as the others stared at her.

"Given all the aid you have rendered me, I won't refuse such a request. Where is she?"

"At my home. About an hour's walk from here," Eleanor explained.

"In that case, I suggest we separate and recover ourselves. First bell has rung let us meet at fifth bell." Atreus looked at the door in the infirmary that led outside. "I should make myself scarce from the castle, but I will meet you on the street at the agreed hour. You can bring me to your home."

"That will be without me," Maximilian growled. "My family expects me this afternoon."

"The rest of us will be there," Martel declared. Eleanor gave him a grateful smile.

Chapter 512: Sleep Unending

Sleep Unending

Martel went to the baths, as did Maximilian; neither of them spoke as they soaked in the hot water. Other students appeared, washing away last night's sleep while chatting merrily. As for the battlemage and mageknight, they left soon after, walking up the dormitory tower quietly. "Goodnight," Martel mumbled, reaching his floor. Maximilian made some brusque noise in response, continuing further up. Soon after, Martel was fast asleep.

When he woke up in darkness, Martel struggled for a moment to gather his wits about him. The events of last night came back, but the time spent underground left him confused as to the hour until he remembered it was winter, and the days were short. He had slept from sunrise to sunset, but looking at his Khivan clock, it was not yet fifth bell.

Getting dressed, he found some money and left the castle to buy food. Walking around and enjoying the fresh air compared to the sewers of the catacombs, he went through everything that had

occurred. Being above ground and in familiar surroundings, he almost found it hard to believe that the battle with the maleficar and everything had truly happened.

If Eleanor or Maximilian had come to him now and denied anything had come to pass, he would be inclined to simply assume it was all a dream. Part of him almost expected that Atreus would not show up, and that the spellbreaker would have disappeared as easily as he had appeared from nowhere.

But should Martel never see the legendary wizard again, he knew it had happened; they had fought side-by-side with a mage of Archen. Even if others would never know, Martel did.

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Fifth bell rang. Martel walked around the Lyceum, enjoying being outdoors despite the cold. He stood on the street by the infirmary gate, waiting. He summoned a flame, providing warmth and some illumination in the fading twilight. People passing by glanced in his direction, but as he stood leaning up against the Lyceum, nobody seemed surprised or bothered by the display of magic.

"Good to see you, friend." Atreus seemed to simply appear out of the dark next to Martel. Instead of the dirty inquisitor robes, he was clad in simple but sturdy travel clothes made from leather.

"Is that why you left the castle? To buy clothes?"

"Mostly to rest. But our good companion, Maximilian, gave me a few of his golden coins. This seemed a prudent way to spend them." The spellbreaker flourished his black cape around him.

Maximilian, that sly fellow; Martel had not noticed him giving Atreus any money. The door to the infirmary opened, and Eleanor stepped outside. Martel thought she looked relieved; perhaps she had also wondered whether the spellbreaker would be present. She smiled at them both. "Shall we go?"

They crossed the city northwards to reach the noble quarter. Few words passed between them. While Martel could easily imagine a thousand questions to ask Atreus, it did not seem the right place to ask them out in the open, surrounded by other people on the street; nor did he imagine the Archean wizard would be inclined to answer them. Given the importance of their current errand, what they needed Atreus to do, Martel considered it best not to bother him.

At length, the residence of House Fontaine loomed ahead of them. "It is perhaps best we use the back entrance. It would be difficult to explain your presence to my father," Eleanor admitted. Atreus simply responded with a wry smile, and they followed her to walk around the small estate.

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As they passed through the kitchens, the servants looked surprised and scrambled to get out of the way, bowing and greeting the daughter of the house and her companions. Eleanor paid them no mind, walking on hasty steps to the upper floor and finally her sister's room.

It looked exactly like how Martel had seen it before. A well-furnished chamber as could be expected in a patrician home, and a young girl with brown curls lying on the bed in what seemed like peaceful slumber. A maid sat next to her on a chair, watching the patient.

"Leave us," Eleanor commanded, which the maid did.

Atreus walked forward and took her vacated seat. "What happened to her?"

"An accident. She hurt her head and has not awakened since."

"How long ago?"

"Years." Eleanor's voice quivered ever so slightly. "Since then, my parents have tried all manners of elixirs and potions. Any sign of injury has long since healed, yet still she does not wake."

"Although connected, the mind is still separate from the body. One has healed, the other has not." Atreus exhaled. "This may take a little while." He placed one hand on top of Genevieve's head and closed his eyes.

Moments passed. Martel dared not speak for fear of interruption; likewise, Eleanor did not make the slightest movement or say anything. Knowing all that she had done in search for a cure for her sister, Martel dearly hoped that she would not be disappointed yet again.

"What is the meaning of this? Get away from my daughter!" Both battlemage and mageknight turned around to see the master of the house in the doorway, fuming with anger.

"Father, he is here to help." Raising her hands, Eleanor approached him.

"I have had enough of charlatans! Remove him at once!" As he stepped forward, Eleanor firmly pushed him back. "You dare defy me in my own house?" He tried once more to get past her, but for all his strength, he could not contend with a mageknight. "Guards! Guards!"

Martel took a deep breath. He did not relish the prospect of fighting the legate of the First Legion and his guards in his own house, but it appeared to be necessary. He took a step forward to close ranks with Eleanor, presenting an impenetrable wall.

The first guards appeared, their swords already drawn. Martel raised the wind behind him to push them back and warn them what they faced. They had to know they stood no chance against two mages.

The legate, it seemed, did not care. "Brigands! Rogues and villains, my own daughter among them! Begone, I tell you!" He tried to push Eleanor aside with predictable results.

An outburst of magic behind him caught Martel's attention. He turned around to find that Atreus was on his feet, stepping away from the bed. As for the child, her eyes had opened. She parted her lips, but only a croaking sound appeared, barely audible thanks to the noise in the room. Her second attempt was more successful. "Thirsty."

Lord Fontaine, still being held back by his eldest daughter, froze completely. As for Eleanor, she let go of her father and turned around as well. "Fetch my mother," she told the nearest guard, who nodded and disappeared.

"Genevieve," her father spoke hoarsely, approaching to kneel by the bedside.

Seeing this, along with an expression of pure happiness on Eleanor's face, Martel felt himself choking up. Slipping behind him, Atreus tapped him on the shoulder and gestured towards the doorway, and he followed the spellbreaker out of the room. "Let us leave the family to their celebration," Atreus suggested, following the route back that had taken them into the house. With one last glance back inside the room, Martel did the same.

Atreus did not stop until they had left the estate entirely. Once back on the street, Martel looked at him, a little surprised. "I'm sure if you had stayed just a moment, they would have thanked you for returning their child to them."

"No doubt. And after that, they would ask me how I did it. Where I got the power. Who I am, and so forth. No, I am more comfortable avoiding attention."

Martel could not fault him for that. "But what will you do now? There's so much you could teach us about magic."

Atreus nodded thoughtfully. "Indeed. But knowledge was the downfall of Archen. If I taught all I knew freely to the mages of this land, do you think they would treat such knowledge with greater wisdom and care?"

Considering how the Empire had treated him, Martel had his doubts.

"For now, I must be reacquainted with the world where I have lived as a sleepwalker for so long. Perhaps that will enlighten me on what I should do next. After all, I'm still a young man of some three hundred and thirty odd years." He gave Martel a knowing smile that reminded him of Regnar; sly and full of tricks, but certainly a useful friend to have. "Farewell, Martel. I suspect I shall hear your name spoken again by others, and perhaps it will bring me back to you. In any case, know that this old spellbreaker will always be grateful for what you did for him." They clasped hands for a moment before Atreus turned around and began walking away. About as swiftly as the mage had appeared out of legend, he disappeared down the street.

Chapter 513:

The routine of previous fivedays returned for Martel. No further sign nor word of Atreus reached him or his friends. When they got together, they did not speak of their sojourn to the catacombs; it seemed too strange an event that it could be discussed in the familiar, almost mundane surroundings above ground. Not that Martel saw much of either; Maximilian was busy being introduced and prepared as necessary for joining the Imperial court, and Eleanor spent her time with her family, now restored to its full number.

As for Martel, he used his hours practising his spells and skills, such as enchantment. He visited his friends at The Golden Goose and otherwise waited for his time at the Lyceum to reach its end. And about seven days before winter solstice, two things happened; the quarantine of the copper lanes was announced to be over as the pestilence had finally released its grip on the district, and Martel received a summons to Mistress Juliana's chambers.

Wondering what the overseer wanted with him, considering he was no longer a student, Martel went to Mistress Juliana's room and knocked. Given admittance, he entered and took a chair opposite her.

"Good, you are here. I heard something strange regarding you that I thought best to share."

Martel looked at her; her description could fit any number of activities. "What is it?"

"I have friends in the Imperial administration from my days of soldiering. The military council convenes in a few days to determine the postings of our wizards, but apparently, a decision has already been made regarding you."

Unfamiliar with the process, Martel did not know if that was weird or what it portended. "Alright. What does that mean?"

"This in itself is not odd. Those with influence may use it to ensure that their children are given a specific posting."

Martel remembered Eleanor speaking of her own family's connections in this regard. "And?"

"Obviously, your family did not influence any councillors on the decision of your posting. Especially not given the choice." She took a deep breath. "Martel, you will be stationed with the Tenth."

Martel frowned as it took him a moment to understand. Everything he had heard about Legio Astra came back. A legion of the hardest and roughest soldiers, for better or worse, thanks to their gruelling task of defending the Savena delta. The legion once led by Eleanor's father, and which suffered more losses than any other. "Why?" it burst from him.

"A good question. Currently, all battlemages are sent to the legions at the siege of Nahavand. The Tenth holds a position of hills and forests, fighting skirmishes where the range and destructive power of a battlemage is less useful compared to the danger it poses for you. Only someone with great influence and equal hatred of you would have done this."

She gave him a knowing look, and he realised who she meant. "Duke Cheval." The nobleman had even told Martel as much, the last time they met. He had already decided Martel's fate and set it in motion in such a way that nobody could blame the duke when a Khivan bullet claimed Martel, yet everybody would know he had caused it to happen.

"Yes. Especially as the legate of the Tenth Legion is one of his allies, who owes his position to the duke. While a battlemage is a most valuable asset that any commander would be a fool to throw away, politics have made commanders do far worse." She cleared her throat. "I am sorry, Martel. You will receive official confirmation in a few days, but I thought you deserved to know right away."

Martel clenched his fists, trying to hold it together. "Thank you, Mistress Juliana."

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Once he left her chamber, Martel had to spend a moment supporting himself against the wall. His vision darkened briefly, and he felt as he had done when he first realised he was to become a battlemage. Back then, death in battle had felt certain to him, but after a while, he had become almost numb to the thought. And then his skills grew, as did his experience, and he began to think that he might have the power and wits to survive his twenty years of service.

With this news, all such hope evaporated. He was no longer being sent to war with merely the risk of dying; his death was the express purpose of his posting.

But he could not change this. He had already decided, on the day of his examination, that he would not desert. He could not change his fate, but he could do something about the fate of others.

He found Eleanor doing light training in the gymnasium; noticing him, she interrupted her exercises to join him. "Yes?"

"You mentioned that you could pull some strings and get posted in the same legion as me. Have you done that?"

She shook her head. "The military council meets in a few days. I was going to meet my father's friend tomorrow."

"Good. Don't ask to be assigned to the same legion as me. Choose which other would be best for your career."

"Why?"

Martel hesitated, but he would not lie to her. "Mistress Juliana informs me that someone has gone to great lengths to get me assigned to the Tenth."

A trickle of disbelieving laughter escaped her. "That makes no sense. The Tenth fights skirmishes in forested terrain. Your offensive powers would be wasted, and you are far too easy a target for an ambush."

"I suspect that is the very reason." He attempted a wry smile, but it failed. "Looks like making enemies caught up to me. In any case, it's a terrible place for you. I don't want you to join that legion as well." Martel swallowed, knowing this would leave him friendless at his new destination. "Anyway, don't let me interrupt your training." He said this more for his own sake, giving him an excuse to leave at a brisk pace.

After collecting some coin and his winter clothing, Martel left the castle on his second task of the day. While this could wait, it gave Martel something to do rather than sit in his chamber and feel despondent.

He went to the marketplace first, spending his coin on various supplies; mostly some food, different herbs, and a few blankets. All of this gathered in his arms, he continued south.

Walking down the familiar streets of Morcaster, Martel thought about when he first arrived. Back then, the city had seemed a strange and intimidating beast. Now, he had been to every district multiple times; he knew the shortcuts, which baker sold their bread a little cheaper at the end of the day, and when his favourite haunts would have new kegs of ale delivered. While Morcaster had been a harsh acquaintance, teaching Martel heartache and pain, he could not regret his time in the city.

Reaching the harbour, he walked past The Broken Crown in the latter stages of being rebuilt. Ahead, he saw the masts of the few ships in the harbour; he remembered sitting by the docks together with Shadi, thinking about being a seaman and crossing oceans upon those great vessels arriving and leaving port. He wondered if the ship that would take him to his posting already lay anchored.

Continuing westwards, Martel walked down the street that until recently had held the gate into the copper lanes. It had already been demolished with only a few traces left of the watch post. He crossed the line where the gate once stood, entering the district.

Reaching a fork in the road, Martel looked down one direction. If he went that way, he would reach The Copper Drum. He thought about Kerra and all she had done to him last year. Back then, he had been a novice; if she had treated him the same way now, Martel would have dealt with her as he had done Vitus. Martel hoped she knew to consider herself lucky.

Choosing the other direction, Martel walked until a familiar, derelict house came into sight. Being this late and cold, the children were not outside on the street, but he felt their eyes upon him from their little spy holes allowing them to keep watch of their surroundings. He entered through the back door and smiled seeing them surround him with their usual clamour and excitement.

"Martel! What did you bring us?"

He unfolded the blankets on the table, showing the other items he got from the market. "I am afraid this will be my last visit. I am leaving soon, to take up my new post. I'm done at my school, you see, so I'm being sent away for my new employment."

"Won't you be able to visit us when you come back?" asked Badger. From the stairs, Weasel appeared, but he said nothing.

Martel did his best to smile. "Maybe." He looked towards the rock in the middle of the room that he had enchanted for them. He walked over and placed one hand to feel its residual warmth. "This won't last through winter, I suspect. Best that I renew it." He looked around until he saw Sparrow. "Enchantment is a good skill to have. A good way to make a living while helping people, providing them with things they need."

"Is that what you're leaving us to do?" The little Mouse looked at him with big eyes. "To do work that helps people?"

Martel's voice almost broke. "Yes," was all he dared to answer with an unhappy smile. Bending over the heating stones, Martel set to work, conveniently forcing him to push all emotions from his mind. Slowing his breathing, he wove his best enchantment yet.

Chapter 514: The Final Letter

The Final Letter

For a few days, Martel lived in the frail hope that Mistress Juliana had been misinformed. After all, he was a battlemage; too rare and valuable to be thrown away because of a personal vendetta. Sending Martel to the Tenth would be a waste of his powerful skills; the same went for whichever hapless mageknight was chosen to be Martel's protector and sent to meet the same fate. It was hard to believe that the Imperial administration would tolerate such waste. And yet, it was harder to believe that anyone could undo Duke Cheval's schemes or resist his influence.

Passing through the entrance hall, Martel was hailed by Henry, the airmage manning the desk. "An official letter for you." Accepting the missive, Martel saw the Imperial eagle upon the red wax. Despite having delivered the letter, Henry remained, almost tripping in place. "That your official summons?"

"I assume so." Martel stared at Henry, unsure about this attempt at conversation. While they had once been on friendly terms, the airmage had barely spoken to Martel ever since the latter was revealed to be fire-touched.

"Great. I still haven't received mine. Examination is next month."

"Alright."

As Martel moved to turn away, Henry quickly spoke again. "I heard about what you did down at the copper lanes. Not just helping out with alchemy, but that you ran inside to extinguish a fire, even if it put you at risk to get sick. I just wanted to say that was really impressive."

Martel disagreed; fire posed no threat to him, and at the time, they still had plenty of potions left should Martel have contracted the disease. But he saw no reason to reject the compliment, nor did he care to discuss its merits, so he simply nodded in acknowledgement and walked away.

Breaking the seal to read it immediately, Martel's eyes ran over the words quickly.

Master Martel,

The Imperial administration is proud to congratulate you on your entry to His Imperial Majesty's legions with the rank of prefect. You have been assigned as battlemage to the Legio X Astra, currently posted at Esmouth. You will be sworn in tomorrow at third bell, the fourth Solday of this month, at the fortress of Saint Marcellus. Attendance is required. The day after, the fifth Pelday of this month, you are to appear by second bell at the third pier to board the vessel Red Emerald, which will take you to your post. Failure to appear will be considered desertion, punishable by death.

In the name of His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Corvinus the Third,

Felix Aurelius, military magistrate

There it was, black on white, clear as day. Martel was in the Tenth Legion.

He quickly returned to his chamber and sat down at his desk to write a letter of his own.

Dear mum,

I have received my posting. I am now a prefect in the Tenth Legion. This is good news, as the legion is posted far from the siege of Nahavand, where most of the fighting is. This means I probably won't even see combat. And should it happen, as a battlemage, I have a mageknight assigned to me as protector. I don't know who yet, but since they are all highly skilled warriors capable of powerful, defensive magic, I'm bound to be safe no matter the situation.

I have been told by Master Alastair that rather than have all my salary paid to me, the Imperial Treasury can store it for me. This is useful, since there won't be much for me to spend money on, living in an army camp. It also means that you can access it, should need be.

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You will have to travel to Morcaster, and you should bring not only this letter, which states my permission for you to access my payments, but also letters from people like Father Julius and

Master Ogion, verifying yours and my identity. Should they still give you trouble, you should go to the Lyceum and ask for Master Alastair, who will gladly help you on my behalf.

I know that travelling to Morcaster is quite the journey, but this will be much better than the old method of me sending a silver letter. It would just take too long for any letter from you to reach me over in the eastern provinces, let alone waiting for a reply. You'll be able to go to Morcaster and return before any letter from Engby would even reach me, probably.

I'm sorry this letter is short. I have many preparations to make before my journey. I'll be sailing to my posting, which will be exciting. I've never been on a ship before. Let my siblings know I think fondly of them all. When you have the chance to write, you should simply write your letters to Legio X Astra. The Imperial post will know how to get them to me.

All my love, Martel

The letter finished, Martel took a new sheet of parchment and wrote down a note in the manner that Master Alastair had instructed him.

I, Martel of Engby, prefect of Legio X Astra, authorise the Imperial Treasury to pay out all salary owed me to my mother, Hilda of Engby, in the event of my death. Should she be unable to collect, the same authority is given to any of her children.

His correspondence complete, Martel let out a deep breath. He would see both missives posted this afternoon, just to get it done. But first, he was curious about what letters his friends might have received. Maximilian was named a praetorian, undoubtedly, but Martel wondered what legion Eleanor might have chosen. If she had joined any of the legions at the siege, she would also have to travel by ship up the Savena River, and they might be on the same vessel. At least they could share that journey before splitting up.

Making his way towards her chamber to see if he could catch her, Martel spotted Maximilian in the hallway between the dormitory towers. He also noticed that the mageknight was in a furious state. "You! I suppose you are satisfied!"

Before Martel could question anything, Maximilian strode past, using his shoulder to push the battlemage up against the wall. "Max!" He watched the mageknight stomp off, feeling upset and a little hurt, but he knew it was pointless to talk to his friend when he was in such a mood. Trying to push his annoyance away from his mind, Martel continued towards the girls' dormitory tower.

When he reached Eleanor's floor, he noticed her door standing ajar. "Eleanor?" he asked gently, slowly pushing the door open until he saw her sitting on her bed, looking distraught. "What's wrong?"

She stood up and took a deep breath, composing herself. "Just an argument."

"I saw Max storm away. Pushed me aside and everything. Is he the cause of this?" Martel's frustration returned, angry that Maximilian would upset her.

"Of sorts. He is furious that I decided to change career. I have volunteered for protector duty rather than becoming an officer."

Martel's first thought was a tinge of disappointment; as a praetorian, Eleanor would remain in Morcaster, and they could not travel together on the ship to the Savena River. He realised this was an absurd reaction, and relief filled him at the thought that Eleanor would not go to war, but stay safe. He no longer had to worry of one day receiving the news that something had happened to her in battle. "But wait, why is Max angry? He should be thrilled that you're staying in Morcaster."

"I am not joining the Praetorian Guard." She picked up her letter from her bed and handed it to him, and Martel began to read.

Lady Eleanor Fontaine,

The Imperial administration is proud to congratulate you on your entry to His Imperial Majesty's legions with the rank of prefect. You have been assigned as protector to the Legio X Astra, currently posted

Martel looked up again. "Eleanor, I told you not to join the same legion as me!" He glanced down at the parchment again. "And why would you not become an officer? Who in the Tenth Legion even needs protection " As he once more looked up to catch her eyes, her expression made him realise the answer. "Why would you do that?" he asked with a quiet voice.

"How long do you think you will survive without me?"

"They would have assigned another mageknight to guard me," he argued.

"Yes, someone lacking the skill to become a praetorian. Who has received the worst posting in the Empire because of you. Whose only chance to escape that posting is in the event of your death. How skilled or motivated do you think they would be to keep you alive?"

Martel wanted to protest, but he realised he had no arguments. He knew she was right, but he dearly wished he could point out another way; a reason why she did not have to do this.

"I have already had plenty of Maximilian yelling at me, so do not dare to chastise me as well!" Her voice grew soft as she added, "Not when I did this for you."

Bereft of words, Martel simply stepped forward and swept her up in a tight embrace. He realised this was a gesture of friendship unlike any other he had ever known or would know. "Thank you," he mumbled into her hair.

She gave no response other than placing her own arms around him.

Chapter 515: Loyalty

Loyalty

The next day, as third bell approached, Martel walked towards the fortress of Saint Marcellus. It did not lie far from the Lyceum, but being in the north-western palace district, Martel had never been there before. He had driven past it a few times when going to the Imperial palace, and on occasion noticed its towers in the distance when walking through the merchant quarter; that was the extent of his knowledge, other than it served as the headquarters for the First Legion in its capacity as the city guard. That left it under the command of its legate, Eleanor's father.

She met him in the courtyard of the fortress where the ceremony was to take place. The other mageknights from their year were likewise present along with the remaining firemagas. William nodded at Martel; Harriet ignored him, and Edward just looked uncomfortable in general.

"Not a bad place to work. Your father must have a good view from his study." Martel glanced around at the surrounding walls. Even now, patrols of legionaries came and left, and Martel could see an armoury and other storages of various supplies. Even if Martel had no desire to join the legions, he had to admit it all looked impressive.

"I suppose it will do. It is an old fortress. The fortifications are rudimentary with just a single gate between here and outside, the towers are few and of no impressive height, and the surrounding buildings of the district offer cover against defenders on the walls. It is really just a large barracks and training yard," Eleanor remarked, clearly less impressed.

Martel looked over at Maximilian, who seemed in a jovial mood, joking and laughing with some of the other mageknights. Martel was still annoyed at him about yesterday; not just for how he had behaved towards Martel, but also how he had upset Eleanor.

Besides the graduating students of the Lyceum, a group had gathered in the other end of the courtyard. Martel recognised Maximilian's father, the count of Marche, along with his wife and daughter. Several other members of the nobility were present as well, though Martel did not necessarily know them; he recognised the crest for Alain's family, but not the others. They all seemed to be nobles and relatives of the mageknights; Martel wondered if any of his fellow firemages had family members present. It did not appear so.

Naturally, Eleanor's family had also come; a short trip for her father, the legate, but her mother and younger sister were also present. Genevieve waved in his direction, and Martel almost reciprocated until he realised it was meant for Eleanor; while he knew the girl, she could not be expected to remember or recognise him. "How is your sister?"

"She is well. My parents are spoiling her, as to be expected. Though she is sad that I will be leaving so soon after she was returned to us," Eleanor told him.

Trumpets rang, and more people entered the courtyard, including one elderly man wearing the purple-hemmed robe of a magistrate. Behind him came two servants transporting a chest on carrying sticks inserted through rings on the lid. The ceremony was about to begin.

The mageknights quickly lined up in a row, and the firemages took the hint and did as well. The magistrate let his eyes sweep over the wizards and began speaking. "On this auspicious day, we welcome a new year of wizards into the Asterian legions, to serve with honour and dedication as did blessed Saint Marcellus so many centuries ago. As the enemy broke through our walls, he defended this Citadel as the last, fighting until his dying breath and thereby setting the example we can all only aspire to..."

The magistrate droned on, but Martel had already stopped paying attention. He looked towards the chest being carried in carefully so that the servants would not directly touch it. He assumed it held a relic for the oath-swearing, perhaps the bones of the saint himself. If so, it had none of the powers that Martel had clearly felt radiating from the hand of Saint Laurentius. Perhaps something else was inside the chest, or perhaps the Faith of the Sun was less discerning with sainthood than it should be.

"And remember the words that every soldier of the legions must live by," the magistrate continued. "Loyalty yields discipline. Discipline yields strength. Strength yields victory!"

The mageknights roared in response, as did many of the onlookers, including soldiers of the garrison. Martel clapped his hands, mostly because standing completely still and remaining silent felt awkward.

The magistrate beckoned for the nearest graduate to approach. "Are you ready to swear the oath of allegiance to your emperor?"

"Yes," Alain answered.

"Place your hand on the remains of blessed Marcellus and repeat after me. With Sol as my witness, I swear..."

It took a while until it was Martel's turn. He stepped forward and placed one hand on the chest as the others had done.

"Are you ready to swear the oath of allegiance to your emperor?"

Martel wanted to say no, but he knew that was not an option, unless he wanted to see his family sold into slavery to repay his tuition. "Yes."

"Repeat after me. With Sol as my witness, I swear loyalty to His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Corvinus the Third."

"With Sol as my witness, I swear loyalty to His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Corvinus the Third," Martel repeated monotonously.

"I shall obey every command given me."

"I shall obey every command given me."

"I shall fight the enemies of the Empire until victory or death."

"I shall fight the enemies of the Empire until victory or death."

"My legion is my family, my legate is my father, and my comrades are my brothers."

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"My legion is my family, my legate is my father, and my comrades are my brothers."

"This I swear, with Sol as my witness."

"This I swear, with Sol as my witness."

As Martel finished, the magistrate placed a small pin upon his chest, showing an eagle with outspread wings; in its claws, it held the letter X. Finished, Martel stepped back into the line.

Once all had received their pins, the magistrate spoke further words and finally ended the ceremony. His servants picked up the chest containing the relic and carried it out. Meanwhile, the wizards broke from their row into groups or scattered to find their families. Looking at Eleanor, Martel found her already removing her legionary's pin. "What are you doing?"

"My father believes I have joined the Thirteenth Legion. I prefer if he discovers the truth once I am gone. I will have to speak with them briefly before I can make my excuse to leave, which is the

purpose you serve," she explained, placing her pin inside a pocket. "You and I have plans to celebrate, so I must leave them to join you. Would you mind waiting for me outside?"

"Certainly." Having no reason to stay, Martel made his way out of the gates and leaned up against the outer wall.

"Fancy meeting you here at Castel Saint Marcel, of all places." Maximilian's growling voice reached the newly minted battlemage, who looked over at the mageknight.

"It didn't feel like an invitation I could refuse."

"Same here."

Martel considered what to say next; the tension from their last encounter hung in the air. Martel could guess why Maximilian had approached him, and considering he would be on a ship tomorrow morning, it seemed the wrong time to hold grudges. "Eleanor and I are going to celebrate." While they had not exactly agreed to that, Martel figured they might as well turn her excuse into the truth. "Would you care to join us?"

"I see how it is. You lot of the Tenth stick together, eh? Well, you better have a praetorian by your side. Morcaster is a dangerous city for outsiders," Maximilian declared in his boisterous manner. "Best you have a native like me at your side."

"You're going to make this feel like a long day, aren't you?"

"It is what I do best."

While they made a tour of it through the taverns of Morcaster, they inevitably ended up at The Golden Goose to catch the evening performance. Afterwards, the acting troupe joined them for mead, music, and general merriment.

Martel leaned back in his chair, enjoying his mug of ale and the spectacle; while some of the actors played their instruments, Eleanor danced with the young boy Ian, while Regnar created flashes of light that sparkled throughout the room.

"Well, Nordmark, we made it. We survived to the end of our education, despite your best efforts to drag us into all manner of conceivable trouble." Maximilian sank into the chair next to him, hoisting his own cup.

"As I recall, you were never shy about charging headfirst into any fight that came our way."

"Well, if a fight was to be had, why hesitate?" He drank from his cup. "That said, while I was not enthused to learn of Eleanor's choice, I suppose it is done. But I hope you will at least try to stay out of trouble for the next five years until she has served her time."

Martel was confused until he remembered; as Eleanor's family no doubt had paid for tuition, she was only obliged to serve five years in the legions. After that, she was free to return to Morcaster if she wanted; presumably, Maximilian expected as much, given their engagement. "If it were up to me, neither of us would leave the city. I doubt we'll get much say in the matter as to what happens, once we're at the front."

Maximilian's reply was to empty his cup. "I need another." He got up and left.

Before long, Regnar took his spot, finished with his spellwork. "That'll have to do for amusement tonight," he declared. "And I'm told tomorrow is your day of departure?"

Martel nodded. "It is. I'd tell you to come east, but you aren't the travelling type anymore."

The hedge mage shook his head with a smile. "A permanent roof over our heads suits us just fine."

"Probably for the best. Not exactly peaceful around those parts."

"I'm not too worried," Regnar said.

"Of course not, you're staying here."

"I meant on your behalf, lad. How long had you been studying magic when you strangled a berserker with a golden chain?"

"Couple of months, I guess."

The hedge mage grinned. "And now you're a battlemage. I almost pity those Khivans. And I noticed that the letter on your pin is the same as upon the gracious lady in our midst." He looked up towards the stage where Eleanor still danced with the boy.

"Yeah. We've been assigned to the same legion. My fault, really. Eleanor volunteered just to keep an eye on me."

Regnar smiled, leaning back with crossed arms. "I'm not surprised. I remember a night much like this when we were still a travelling troupe and you a fairly recent arrival to the city. Foresight's a fool's game, but some things you can tell."

Martel was not certain what Regnar meant by that, but given that the hedge mage always had one drink in hand, he chalked it up to that.

"Speaking of such things, why are you sitting here? I don't know how much dancing there will be where you're going I suggest you take advantage of this moment." Regnar nodded towards the stage.

"I'm not really much for that," Martel claimed. "The only dance I know is the Aquilan step." Taught to him by none other than Eleanor, back when he was going to attend the celebrations in the Imperial palace.

"Not a problem," Regnar declared. "Theodore! Play 'The Maid in the Meadow'! It's the only rhythm that our fiery friend can dance to!" Up on the stage, the storyteller nodded and began strumming his lute. The hedge mage turned towards Martel. "Music's about to start. Better hurry."

With a grumbling noise, Martel got on his feet and stepped onto the stage to grab Eleanor's hands and lead her into the dance.

Waking with only a slight headache next morning, Martel left his chamber at the Lyceum for the last time. He had a small chest under one arm, carrying all his letters, his writing tools and some parchment, and his coin. In the other hand, he carried a bag holding all of his clothing.

Eleanor waited for him by the entrance. She had a large chest and a few other items. "A cart will take us to the harbour," she explained when Martel raised an eyebrow at seeing her luggage.

"Alright. I still haven't received any uniform or anything like that. Not even a weapon."

"It will be on the ship." Eleanor picked up her belongings, clearly using magical strength to haul it all.

"It's just us? Nobody else going on the same ship?"

"Nobody else being sent to the front, it seems." They walked outside where the promised cart waited for them. After loading their goods into the back, they climbed up as well; Eleanor found a seat on her chest while Martel sat in the bottom of the cart, and the driver set the wagon in motion.

Martel had thought this several times of late, walking through the streets, how eerie it was to be leaving Morcaster. Now it was real. He might never look upon any of this again. He glanced at every house as if it held special meaning to him, thinking about how often he had walked past them without giving any of them a second thought.

This early, few people were on the streets, and they made good progress. Martel wished the cart drove slower.

Far too soon, the masts appeared on the horizon, and the smell of salt lay in the air. Martel figured that would soon become familiar; he did not know how long the journey took, but more than a fiveday, at least. Probably two or three.

Eleanor did not speak either; perhaps the weight of the moment had likewise set in for her. The silence was filled by the cart rumbling and people moving about, starting their day, opening their shops and stalls, and everything else entailed by life in the city; as they reached the third pier by the docks, the sound of the second bell was added to the noise.

The two young wizards emptied the cart of their belongings and themselves. Ahead lay a small merchant vessel gently floating in the water, with a band of legionaries on the deck; sailors moved about, adjusting the rigging or stowing away supplies. Looking at each other, Eleanor and Martel exchanged a small nod and walked forward to board the ship and set sail for war.

Chapter 516: Red Emerald

Red Emerald

The waves made the Red Emerald constantly roll back and forth, like a punishment from Sol. So far, Martel had avoided emptying the contents of his stomach, but it had been a close call more than once over the course of the last several days at sea. When the movement was at its worst, he watched with envy as the sailors confidently crossed the deck doing their tasks.

At least Martel was not the only passenger with this struggle; besides two mages and supplies for the front, the merchant vessel carried half a centuria of soldiers and their optio, and more than a few of them lacked their sea-legs as well. A little to Martel's annoyance, that number did not include Eleanor; the mageknight casually strolled around on the deck in her black tunic. Her armour and weapons lay along with Martel's equipment in the captain's cabin, which had been placed at her disposal; the captain had taken a bed in the crew's quarters, where Martel also slept or made attempts thereof.

"Still feeling queasy?" Eleanor arrived at his side with a smile, though she did not look at him directly.

"No," Martel claimed, getting on his feet. He resisted the urge to reach out and grab the ship's railing for support. "Just bored. All the times I dreamt about sailing away, I didn't think about how dull it would actually be, trapped on a ship."

"Still faster and easier than travelling on land," she countered. "We can spar?" came the suggestion. Eleanor had already trounced a handful of the legionaries aboard, even without using magic.

"I feel like I've done a lifetime of that at the Lyceum," Martel declared. He took a step to lean over the railing of the ship, pretending to admire the view. While starboard showed only the Emerald Sea, port showed the southern coast of Aster, as they followed it towards their destination of Esmouth and the Savena Delta.

"I shall allow you to be spared while we are at sea, but once we are settled in camp, expect daily training."

"Why? You're not my teacher," Martel protested. "We're not obligated to do that anymore."

"If I am going to be responsible for your life," she began to say with overbearing patience, "and go into battle by your side, you can bet your Stars that I will keep your fighting skills sharp."

He could not really argue with that. "Alright." A moment later, because he felt he had not said this often enough, Martel continued, "And thank you. For coming with me."

"You are welcome."

"Does your father know yet, do you think?"

"Probably. I imagine he found out almost as soon as we left. But if you are worried about interference, do not be. He does not have the reach to have me reassigned to another position or legion."

"I wasn't. I just hope he won't be angry with you."

"I am sure he is. But it is done, and it will be a long while before we can return to Morcaster, so he will have time to get over it."

"That's good." Martel fell quiet, instead watching the cliffs as the ship continued past.

"Well, I shall find someone else to keep my skills sharp." Eleanor disappeared towards her cabin.

Martel was only left alone briefly before a legionary approached to stand next to him, and the wizard shot him a look. So far, nobody had spoken a word directly to the battlemage except for the captain, inquiring about whether he had any capabilities with wind.

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"Sir," the soldier spoke in greeting. He was an old greybeard, compared to most of the centuria on the ship, who were clearly new recruits, many of them around Martel's age.

"Soldier," Martel replied, not really knowing how else to address the man.

"Keeping an eye out for Khivan ships?"

"I can't imagine there's any. We're in Asterian waters. And wouldn't they be coming from the other direction?" Martel glanced over his shoulder, across the ship to the side where the open sea met his gaze.

The greybeard shook his head. "Too easy to spot. They'll be hiding somewhere in between the cliffs. Most of our warships are in harbour for winter, being refitted. So they lie in wait, should any lone merchant vessel like ours chance by." He gave a sardonic smile. "That's why the captain asked you on the first day if you're a stormmage. It's not that he needs more wind for the journey he wanted to know if you could deal with an enemy ship."

"But surely we wouldn't have been sent on this journey, without an armed escort, if there was a high risk of Khivans intercepting us?" Martel had gotten used to his status as battlemage protecting him, back at the Lyceum; the thought that the Imperial administration would so carelessly risk an asset like him seemed dubious. On the other hand, Duke Cheval had pulled strings to get Martel assigned to the Tenth Legion; maybe another thread had been tugged to put him on one of the riskier transports.

The soldier shrugged. "It seems incomprehensible to us, who are in the thick of it. But the fellows in the administration, they just see numbers. They might send a hundred vessels to the front a year; if two or three are lost, they note that in their columns and compensate. And if the lure of seizing a transport makes the Khivans risk their own ships, and they lose one or two a year, it might even be considered a good trade."

Martel turned around, placing his back towards the cliffs to watch the spectacle of Eleanor fighting a legionary. The ship had around seventy people aboard, made of flesh and blood. But he knew the greybeard probably had it right; the clerks in the Imperial administration, they only saw the number.

The days continued along the same routine with the wind filling the sails of the Red Emerald, pushing it ever eastwards. Martel slowly became accustomed to the constant motion, though his sleep remained uncomfortable, leaving him irritable. He suppressed it around Eleanor, who did not deserve to be subjected to it; as for the soldiers and crew, nobody approached the dour-looking battlemage for conversation.

As for Eleanor, she continued her daily sparring. Lacking other entertainment, the soldiers and sailors alike crowded to watch every time. Despite restricting herself from using magic, Eleanor bested every opponent; compared to a knight, the recruits stood little chance.

After another bout, Eleanor gave a bow and retreated to her cabin. The soldiers applauded and laughed, throwing in a few barbs at her victim of the day. "She only won because she got magic!" it burst from the sore loser, still rubbing his hand where Eleanor's sword had disarmed him.

"Nobody saw any sign of that," someone retorted.

"Well, you can't see magic, can you," came the biting reply. "No other way someone with a sword could beat a spear otherwise! Especially not a woman!"

Martel stalked over. Despite his mood, he kept control over his voice and his spells, staying quiet as his presence asserted itself. It took a moment for all the soldiers to notice him and the laughter to die down.

"If I hear another disparaging word about the lady, I will throw you overboard as a mercy after I've set you on fire." The wizard gave a piercing stare at the legionary, who lowered his eyes. Satisfied, Martel turned around and strode away, resuming his post by the starboard side, where he stared out at the cliffs. Behind him, conversation and hushed laughter resumed.

Shortly after, the greybeard from the other day joined Martel. "Permission to give unasked advice, sir?"

"Yes?"

"Best you refer to your protector by rank instead of title if you want the men to think of her as that. 'Sir Fontaine' rather than ladyship or anything like that."

Despite his poor mood, Martel saw the wisdom in his words. He exhaled, doing his best to ignore any annoyance clinging to him. "Thanks. What's your name?"

"Very good, sir." The greybeard gave a sly smile. "Show an interest in your men, and it'll take you far with them. I'm Marius."

"I'm Martel."

"Yes, sir."

Looking at his companion, the wizard figured that perhaps he should take the opportunity to learn more about the common soldiery when a cry went up to tear him from his thoughts.

"Ship in sight!" Standing by the bow, a sailor gestured frantically towards the east. Crew and legionaries alike ran towards him to confirm the message with their own eyes and more importantly, the allegiance of the vessel. Martel felt his heart sink as he saw the flag atop the mast. It was a Khivan galley.

Chapter 517: The Beating of the Drum

The Beating of the Drum

The captain shouted commands that Martel did not understand, but which sent the sailors scattering across the ship. Slowly, the vessel began turning, but it seemed obvious even to Martel that it would avail little; the wind was in the wrong direction, and the galley had oars. Battle was inevitable.

He looked around for Eleanor and the optio of the soldiers; between them, they would have to take charge and prepare defences. Martel did not know what to expect from Khivans in a fight, but they had two mages along with fifty legionaries.

Martel saw Eleanor race past him towards the ship's wheel and the captain, and he quickly followed. "Turn around!" she commanded. "We are more than able to fight!" Evidently, she had reached the same conclusion as Martel.

"You think they'll let us get that close?" the captain roared. "Their ship's got cannons! Once they see soldiers on the deck, they'll sink us rather than risk a confrontation!"

"We should hide," the optio suggested, arriving as well. "Keep every soldier below deck and lure the Khivans in to board us."

"That might work," Eleanor considered. "But we shall be vulnerable when making our way up to the deck again the stairs are narrow, and they might hold us back. If we are not swift, they will simply defend the chokepoint."

"I assumed a mageknight would be able to lead such a charge and break through," the optio argued.

"I would, but if anybody following me will survive is another matter."

The sound of thunder, despite a clear sky, tore the air. Martel blinked as he looked around in confusion.

"They're firing! Stars blast them, they won't risk getting close! They'll blow us to pieces long before there's any fighting," the captain shouted. "Our only hope is to outrun them before they hit us!"

Martel ran to the back of the ship. The galley had turned, showing its side to the Asterian vessel. All along the hull, little gaps had opened up with large metal tubes sticking out. The crash of thunder came again, and Martel finally understood. These were the dreaded Khivan cannons.

Great metal balls flew through the air, landing in the water churned to foam by the Red Emerald. The galley began to turn again, resuming its pursuit of the Red Emerald as oars beat to pick up speed and get close enough that the next volley might hit.

"Our only hope is to turn and attack them head-on!" Eleanor yelled.

"I'll not bring my ship one inch closer to those guns!" the captain retorted.

Martel did not listen. He closed his eyes and let his magic sweep through the emptiness between himself and the enemy ship. Too far. He felt nothing but air and sea.

"There's no shame in raising the white flag!" the optio added. "Else we'll all drown!"

"And allow the Khivans to capture my battlemage?" Eleanor shot back. "I will not fail in my duty before we even reach the front."

"Let them close the distance." Martel appeared in their midst again. "Slacken the sails," he added, repeating a phrase he had heard the other day. "Let them approach."

"They'll blast us out of the water!" the captain shouted.

"I won't let them get the chance." Martel stared at the old sailor. "I'm a battlemage. I will deal with this."

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The captain looked from Martel to Eleanor and the optio. Neither of them spoke. "Stars damn us all!"

With the wind unfavourable, the galley quickly gained on the merchant vessel. All the legionaries stood on deck, clad for battle; Eleanor likewise wore armour and weapons. Martel did not, as he had not dared to leave his position by the helm, standing as close to the edge of the ship as he could. Constantly, he reached out with his magic to form a connection with anything other than saltwater. He knew that he had assumed responsibility for every soul aboard, most pertinently Eleanor's; if he was wrong and the Khivan cannons reached further than his magic, she would die.

Martel could do this. He had outstripped every other fire acolyte at the Lyceum, including when they practised how to extend the reach of their spellcraft. With all his emotions surging through him, Martel pushed his magic to the limit.

Standing with closed eyes, Martel told himself he could hear the rhythmic beating of the drum from the galley, even as he knew that was hardly possible; perhaps it was his own heart that beat with such ferocity. He allowed himself a glimpse and saw his most pressing fear come true; the Khivan

galley had begun to turn. Soon, they would be in position and begin their barrage, sinking the Red Emerald.

At last! He felt it. The timber of the ship, the rigging that ran like sinews throughout, and the spots of heat from all the people aboard.

He chose his target like the time he had sunk a ship in Morcaster's harbour. Although furled together, making it harder to feel, the canvas would burn more easily than the soaked wood and rope that constituted the ship.

With a burst of spellpower that left him worn, Martel ignited the sail.

Fuelled by magic, it burned swiftly and fell from the mast to lie across the deck, spreading the fire further. Even from a distance, it was clear to see that chaos had erupted on the galley. Some vain attempts to contain the blaze were made, quickly abandoned. Already, somebody began lowering the boat to make their escape.

A strange sight also met Martel's eyes; the gaps in the hull that allowed the cannons to shoot were pushed further open. Soon after, the big machines of war came rolling through the holes and plunged downwards to the depth of the sea, breaking several oars in the process.

"What are they doing?" he asked.

"They're afraid we'll capture the ship. They won't allow us to seize any of their cannons," the optio explained.

"A needless concern," the captain added. "Sails back up!" he shouted at his crew. "Let's get as far away from here as we can!"

"Why?" Martel asked. "All the men below deck, they'll burn or drown!"

"So?" the captain replied. "They're probably Khivan criminals, all of them."

"Or Asterian prisoners of war," Eleanor interceded.

"Look, you know what makes those cannons work? Khivan powder. They must have barrels of the stuff on that ship, and once the flames reach it, the whole thing explodes! I'm not risking my ship for some Khivan scum!"

Martel did not have to close his eyes. The conflagration behind him almost eagerly seized the connection to his magic. Another burst of spellpower, his last, and every flame went out. "No risk of that. I suggest you make haste before the Khivans in the boat decide to turn back and salvage their ship."

The captain stared at the battlemage with disbelief turned into anger, but Eleanor spoke before he could. "You heard the prefect. The ship is safe to board. Close the distance now, or the Imperial administration will be told of your unwillingness to support us in battle."

Another moment passed. Interspersed with curses, the captain barked new orders and grabbed the ship's wheel.

"Optio, prepare the men for battle!" Eleanor commanded, and the soldier saluted and left the helm. "Do you have any spellpower left?" she asked Martel.

He shook his head.

"Stay below deck, just in case. Fighting should not take long."

He gave his protector a smile. "Yes, sir."

The Khivans in the boat did not turn back, taking their chances with the cliffs rather than the Asterians. As for those unlucky to have been left behind, they surrendered without a fight. Soon, the deck of the galley was filled with the former oarsmen freed from their chains. Most were Khivans, and they regarded their liberators with suspicion; a few were Asterians, and they cried hysterically.

As for the galley itself, the captain determined it had to be left behind; they lacked the sailors to crew both the Red Emerald and the seized ship. However cramped, everyone had to be taken to the Red Emerald. Anything worth salvaging from the galley was taken as well before a few well-placed blows with an axe condemned it to a slowly sinking fate.

As for the Khivans taken prisoner, whether oarsmen or sailors, the chains from the oars were returned to use. Faced with two mages and half a centuria of legionaries, they could only grumble in their own tongue as they had to accept manacles once more. Once they were all secured, including soldiers to guard them, the Red Emerald continued its journey towards the Savena Delta.

Chapter 518: The Legate and the Battlemage

The Legate and the Battlemage

Nearly two fivedays later, the Red Emerald reached its destination. Martel stood at the prow, no longer troubled by the rolling movements of the ship. Ahead, he saw all the construction that made up the town of Esmouth and the camp of Legio X Astra.

On both sides of the river, fortifications rose in stone. To the west, they enclosed the town; to the east, the camp. In between lay the river with a wooden bridge connecting them both. It seemed curious at first that it would not be built in stone until Martel guessed the reasons for parts of the construction; it was a drawbridge, which could be pulled up to allow ships passage.

The Red Emerald had no need to cross the boundary; the port of Esmouth, small as it was, lay south of the bridge. In truth, it was little more than a few piers. Evidently, Esmouth had no trade or other such traffic requiring much of a harbour; even Smallport back at Morcaster was greater than this. The townspeople would have a hard time getting their hands on any goods they could not make themselves.

The crew moored the Red Emerald, the only ship currently in the harbour. If for no other reason than that, people gathered to watch them; interest and clamour only grew seeing the rows of prisoners leaving the ship.

"I'll take these to the legion prefect and also let her know about the Khivans who escaped," the optio declared, to which Eleanor nodded in acknowledgement. The officer nodded at his men, who picked up their equipment and began the walk across the bridge to the camp on the eastern bank.

"We should report to the legate," Eleanor told Martel, who nodded and grabbed his belongings, slinging a bag over his shoulder.

Walking through Esmouth was an eerie sensation. From the outside, the walls looked strong and in good condition; yet just past the harbour gate, the houses and buildings lay in ruins. Not simply from neglect, but destroyed walls and caved-in roofs, like a magical battle had destroyed the surroundings.

As they advanced down the main road of the small town, this changed; the structures in the eastern part remained standing. Yet despite being in good condition, not all seemed occupied. More than one had an open door, showing an empty room inside. For an uncomfortable moment, Martel remembered the Undercroft before the cold wind reminded him he was not underground.

"This is a strange town," Martel muttered, as much to himself as to Eleanor.

"It is not really much of a town anymore. The residents fled when the war began and battle came," she explained. "Those you see here, those not in uniform, are camp followers. Craftsmen supplying the legion or the families of legionaries."

That explained the lessened demand for trade; perhaps the occasional arrival of a merchant vessel like the Red Emerald was sufficient to supply the few luxuries and comforts that made life bearable. Summer would see ships arriving more often, presumably.

Winter kept people indoors, Martel imagined, but simply from appearance and sounds, he could identify some of the buildings. Rowdy songs, laughter, and drunkards outside told him what had to be the public house of the town. Another place allowed Martel a glimpse inside as the doors opened briefly, revealing a number of women in different states of undress; his familiarity with establishments like The River Pearl allowed him to recognise its purpose. And somewhere in the distance, a hammer against anvil spoke of a blacksmith at work, briefly reminding Martel of his childhood home.

They reached what had to be the largest structure in the town. Martel imagined that if Esmouth had been big enough to warrant a magistrate when it still functioned as a town, this would have been their abode. A legionary stood watch outside, and he saluted at the sight of two prefects approaching. "This should be the legate's residence," Eleanor remarked as they continued past the threshold.

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They found themselves in a pleasant atrium with a small pool at the centre; in summer, this would undoubtedly be a pleasant place, but it was too cold at present for anyone to enjoy. The sight of servants moving about and a child's laughter in the distance told Martel that the legate's family had come with him on his assignment.

"The legate's study is through here." Acting as someone familiar with the place, Eleanor led her companion across the atrium and down a corridor, which had another guard posted at the end. "Announce our arrival," Eleanor commanded, dropping her belongings to the floor; Martel did the same.

The soldier saluted and opened the door, sticking his head inside the room. A moment later, he stepped aside. "The legate will see you."

The room was as bare as it could be, containing only a chair, a desk, and a drawer. Occupying the only seat, Legate Titus Varus looked up at them. Clean-shaven like any legionary, the hair on his head was closer to white than black. He had a heavy build, and despite living in the field, his life

contained sufficient leisure and luxury to add to his waistline. But Martel knew the legate was a mageknight, and regardless of extra weight, he could move faster than the leanest sprinter in the legion. He looked up at the two prefects in his study with eyes lacking cordiality or even much interest in his visitors. "So, you are the battlemage assigned to the Tenth."

"Martel of Engby, sir," he spoke, not sure what he was meant to say.

"I know your name. And Eleanor Fontaine. The Stars have a sense of humour to once more bring a Fontaine to the Tenth." The legate regarded them both, still with the same amount of interest that one might behold a stray dog running by. "Well, I have little use for a battlemage at present, but maybe orders will change. Go to the camp. Report to the prefect. Dismissed."

Eleanor bowed her head; sensing the movement, Martel did the same. They turned around and marched out of the study.

Crossing Esmouth again, Martel realised something. "When your father was legate of the Tenth, did your family also go with him?"

"Yes. In some ways, we just saw my childhood home, though I was not old when we left."

"Were you present during the first battle? When the city was destroyed?"

She looked straight ahead as she replied. "Yes."

"It must be strange to be back."

She made no answer as they continued, reaching the bridge that spanned the Savena River. Crossing it as well, they entered the camp of the Tenth Legion. Like the town, stone walls surrounded it, but otherwise the two places had nothing else in common. Tents rather than buildings filled the space, and countless legionaries could be seen in between. They were occupied with all sorts of tasks: cooking food, washing clothes, cleaning equipment, and the like. More than once, Martel saw a ring of soldiers on the ground, crowded around a board serving as the surface for dice games; stacks of copper coins exchanged hands after each throw, accompanied with outbursts of disappointment or howls of laughter.

Asking for directions, they were shown to the tent of the camp prefect. Before they could enter, a short man in his fifties stalked towards them, coming down the road. "Prefects!" Both the mages turned around. "You must be our new arrivals. Follow me." He turned around and led them towards the middle of the camp. "Each mageknight usually sleeps with his cohort, but as you're not assigned to any, we've given you a spot in the centre. You'll find supplies and everything you need waiting for you. For provisions, see the quartermaster as needed. In case of the alarm being raised, gather at the standard of the legion." He pointed at a large pole, which had a golden eagle atop; below its claws, a banner flew depicting three stars and the words Legio X Astra. "The legion prefect or the decurion will give you your orders in such a situation. Otherwise, your time is your own. Legate might have orders for you, of course, but that's his business, not mine."

They finally reached two large tents, side by side; unlike those for legionaries, these were tall enough to allow someone to stand inside. Looking past the entrance, Martel saw a cot, a small table, and a low chair. All of this reminded him of his first day arriving at the Lyceum.

"I'm Prefect Robert, should you need to know. Anything amiss, you may see me to rectify the situation. But while in camp, I am in charge," he impressed upon them. "I don't care if you're wizards. In this place, only the legate or legion prefect may command me. I won't take orders from you, and complaints about me won't get you anywhere. Understood?"

"Of course." Not the friendliest demeanour, but Martel figured that the middle-aged man had seen his share of mages making demands of him. "We know where to find you if need be."

The camp prefect gave a grunt and left. "Hardly a cordial welcome," Eleanor remarked. She looked at the tents. "I assume they contain the same. Pick the one you prefer."

"I'll just take this one," Martel declared, choosing the one closest to him. He threw his belongings inside the opening. "But before we get settled, help me find two large stones. I'll need your help hauling them back."

She raised an eyebrow. "What for?"

"I didn't spend all those hours learning enchanting for nothing. No reason either of us should freeze, just because it's winter."

Chapter 519: Esmouth

Esmouth

At first, it had been a little weird to sleep on a cot that did not constantly roll back and forth, but Martel woke up feeling refreshed. The big stone in the middle of his tent, heating everything up like an oven, helped as well.

Eleanor joined him for breakfast, which they made by fetching water and mixing it with oats and salt for a simple porridge; Martel provided the cooking fire. As soon as they had finished, the mageknight demanded that they trained. Knowing the wisdom in keeping his skills sharp, Martel made no objection, as much as he wanted to.

Their sparring attracted some attention until it became obvious that no magic was at display, only a sword and shield against a staff. When they were done, Martel returned to his tent, washed in the cold water from a bowl on his small table, and dressed in his more familiar red robes. The uniform of a legionary, chain shirt and everything, still felt strange to wear. He chose only to wear the cloak among his soldier's garb, also dark red in colour.

As Martel left his tent, he found that Eleanor had no qualms about her clothing; she wore her uniform like yesterday, including armour and the stitched crown above the legion insignia on her sleeve, declaring her rank as prefect. "Ready?"

Martel patted the purse by his belt. "Let's see what Esmouth can offer."

A quarter of an hour later, they had crossed the bridge and entered the town. This time, rather than go straight through the place along the main thoroughfare, they took their time to explore. A part of the ruined section had been cleared and turned into a pen for animals, providing meat and leather for the legion. Craftsmen of every kind had set up workshops in the abandoned houses, scattered all over Esmouth. Cobblers, weavers, the blacksmith that Martel had heard yesterday, a ropemaker and a carpenter, and even a herbalist.

The mages separated Eleanor went to purchase thicker socks for herself while Martel investigated what the old crone had to offer when it came to herbs and apothecary remedies. He ran his fingers over the sewn pockets in his belt, containing his current stock of potions and fire pots. If he wanted to do alchemy, he would most likely have to collect the ingredients himself to ensure their magical properties, but the herbalist had at least the needed items for making simple remedies like skin and blood salve. Martel bought what he needed for that and continued.

Looking around and going back a little, Martel eventually found the carpenter. This time, he already knew what he wanted, and he gave her a few specific instructions along with a handful of silver. Bowing her head, she went to work.

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Strolling about, Martel noticed a man in his thirties also walking around making purchases. By his clothing, he was neither a soldier nor a camp follower of any kind. He wore a dark green robe with grey patterns. His hair and beard grew wild with little attention from any combs, and as he turned towards Martel, he gave a sly smile seeing the mage approach.

"You must be the battlemage they speak of."

"I didn't realise that was noteworthy news. You're a stonemage?" Martel asked.

"There hasn't been a battlemage in the Tenth Legion for years. And aye, I am. Henry's the name, from Aquila originally."

"I'm Martel, from Nordmark. My protector is Eleanor Fontaine. You'll probably meet her at some point."

"Undoubtedly." The wizard did not speak further but simply regarded Martel with his twinkling eyes.

"Are you a prefect like me?" the battlemage finally asked. Even though he wore no uniform, he could still be a soldier, just like Martel preferred his red robes over his chain shirt.

"Ha, nothing of the sort. I've never been to battle, and Stars willing, I never will. I was assigned to the legion for my twenty years of service, but not as a soldier, and I hold no rank. No, instead, you are surrounded by the work of my craft." The mage gestured vaguely at their surroundings.

Martel understood; he was the mage who had raised the walls that encircled the town. The camp too, probably.

"I have work that beckons, but I make my home near the legate's. Ask for the stonemage, and you shall find it. Come visit me another day," Henry spoke in invitation, and he glanced over his shoulder in the direction of his home.

"Gladly." Martel knew he would welcome the company of another elemental mage, even if several years separated them. And although their powers and specialities had nothing in common, he might learn a thing or two from an experienced wizard. If not about magic, maybe about how to navigate life in the legion. Martel had not forgotten Mistress Juliana's warning that Legate Varus was an ally of Duke Cheval's.

The stonemage nodded in farewell, and they parted ways.

In the afternoon, Martel returned to camp after searching the riverbank for small, suitable stones. An evening of enchantment awaited him, but he had another task in mind first. The carpenter had done swift work, delivering Martel's purchase to his tent. It looked to be a wooden trough, though the carpenter had increased the height of the container, allowing it to hold more water.

With a little difficulty and a spark of empowering magic, Martel dragged it into Eleanor's tent. Finding a bucket, he took several trips to the river and back to fill it. When he was done, he went into his tent and found something to eat, waiting for Eleanor's return.

"Martel, why is there a trough in my tent? Do you plan to water the legion's animals?" Eleanor's voice reached him from outside, and he left his tent to enter hers.

"Just figured you would enjoy this after our sea journey. Bring it over to my tent when you are done, will you?" With a gesture towards the water and a burst of spellpower, Martel heated it up until steam rose from it, transforming it into a hot bath.

"Martel, you are a gem."

With a smile, Martel went back into his own tent. Their first day in camp slowly approached its end; over seven thousand more days awaited before he could hope to be free of this place. His head full of considerations on how to ensure both he and Eleanor would survive the next twenty years, Martel began enchanting.

Chapter 520: Making Friends

Making Friends

The next morning followed what Martel figured would become the established pattern, cooking breakfast with Eleanor before a training session. When they had been at it a long while, Martel wiped the sweat from his brow and looked inside his tent. "That's nearly an hour. That has to be enough," he declared.

Eleanor frowned. "How can you know? Wait, did you bring your Khivan clock to the camp?" She spoke the offending word quietly.

"Of course! It's the most valuable thing I own," Martel pointed out.

She simply shook her head, muttering to herself as she disappeared back into her tent. Martel went to his own, washing himself and changing clothes.

"See you later," he shouted in the direction of Eleanor's dwelling as he left again; with a full pouch hanging by his belt, today was a day for visitations.

Martel chose the closest location first, making his way to the camp prefect's tent. Robert was at work by his desk with a pile of documents and parchment. Long lists and columns, detailing the minutiae of the legion's supplies, personnel, and everything else he had to keep track of. He looked up as Martel entered. "Prefect. What brings you here?"

Martel pulled out a lightstone from his pouch. It easily illuminated the tent far better than the pale morning sun could. "I thought you might have use of this. No need to refill oil on your lamp, or concern about a fire breaking out."

"I'd never be so careless," Robert declared, even as he reached out a hand to accept the gift.

"Well, it certainly smells better than lamps or candles."

"I don't smell anything."

"Exactly."

"Alright, well, thank you. But if you need something from me, gifts aren't required. They're not even useful. My decision will be whether your request is within the regulations or not."

Martel raised his hands in front of himself in a show of innocence. "I have no requests, prefect. This was a simple thing for me to make, and I thought it might make your evenings a little easier. We're all on the same side here, after all."

"I suppose that's true enough." Although frowning, Robert placed the lightstone on his desk, still looking at it.

"A blessed day to you, prefect," Martel told him and left.

Headed into town, Martel found Henry's home with little difficulty. After knocking, he waited only briefly until Henry opened the door. "Master Martel," he spoke with a glint in his eyes. "Please, enter my humble residence."

Martel did so, entering a room furnished with a thick carpet, a dining table, and several chairs. A small writing desk stood to the side, and a chest filled the remaining available space. A closed door led to the remaining rooms, including a kitchen and bedroom, presumably. "You may call it 'humble', but it's quite a step up from my tent."

Henry chortled. "One reason I'm glad to be a civilian. Even if I'm attached the legion, I'm afforded some privileges you'll have to do without." He gestured for Martel to take a seat.

"You've built the walls, right?" Martel asked, sitting down.

"Not those surrounding Esmouth. They're from before my time," the stonemage explained as he dug out two cups. "I've simply repaired them as need be. But the wall around the camp, aye, that's me." He left the room briefly and returned with two jars, using one to pour wine into Martel's cup. "I'll let you decide how strong you want it."

He placed the other jar before Martel, who grabbed it and added water to his wine. "To your health," the battlemage spoke, raising his cup, which Henry reciprocated. "How long have you served in Esmouth?"

"Since I graduated, which was seventeen years ago. Before the war, though, I occasionally went elsewhere to help with constructions, as need demanded. But since war broke out, I've had my hands full. They don't want to risk the enchantment upon the stonework fading, or the Khivan cannons won't have trouble smashing the walls to rubble."

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Martel thought about his brief encounter with the fearsome weapon when the galley shot at them, though Henry's remark reminded him about the reason for his visit. He drew out a lightstone.

"Speaking of such work, I thought you'd might like this."

"Well, well, what do we have here?" Henry picked up the stone and clasped it. "Decent work, especially given the stone is rough and less suited for spellwork."

"I would certainly listen to advice from a master when it comes to selecting stones for enchanting," Martel suggested.

Henry gave half a smile. "I can do better. When I have time, I'll get you something shaped by my own hand, which will soak in your magic like a sponge."

The very offer Martel had hoped to receive. "I'd be most grateful for that. Besides light, I can also provide you with heat, if you can get me a rock suitable for that."

"Certainly." The stonemage regarded his visitor with discerning eyes. "I've met a few battlemages in my time, and none of them have been like you. I didn't even realise any of your sort did enchanting work."

Martel smiled, picking up his goblet. "I'm a different kind."

After a pleasant conversation, Martel left Henry's home. Walking down the main road, he did not set a course for the camp, but stopped outside one of the two main establishments in Esmouth. He wondered if it had a name, or if everyone simply referred to it as the brothel. Regardless, he turned and walked in.

His presence drew attention; either because he was new in town, or his appearance revealed his status as a mage. Perhaps it was both. Regardless, several women approached him with their offers being apparent in their smiles even before they spoke.

"Who is the mistress of this establishment?" Martel asked before any of them could speak.

"You don't need to deal with her, good sir. We'll handle any request you have, any need or desire," replied the nearest girl. She looked as young as Martel, with eyes framed by dark red cosmetics.

"I've come with a singular purpose. Find her and let her know that a wizard should like to speak with her," he declared.

With a pout that she somehow made look adorable, the girl turned around and disappeared into the back. Waiting, Martel let his glance sweep over the room. A handful of staff scattered around the room, some serving drinks while others already busy with the few customers present; all of them soldiers, judging by their attire and appearance.

Moments later, a woman appeared. Thankfully she was not bald; that would have been one similarity too many for Martel's comfort. She was in her fifties, perhaps, and while her staff was dressed to attract eyes, she wore clothing meant to impress. "I am Josephine. You requested my presence?" While her words sounded friendly, they were spoken with a core of steel; she was not to be intimidated, wizard or not.

Martel bowed his head deeply to soften her initial impression of him. "I did, thank you. I wish to discuss a matter with you, under four eyes. Is there a place we might retire to?"

He could feel her eyes measuring him, trying to determine his intentions. "Follow me." With a sweeping gesture, she turned and walked back the way she came, Martel behind her.

Through a set of doors in the back and down a corridor, the mistress of the establishment took Martel to what served as her study. She sat down on her desk rather than behind it, leaving just a few feet of space between them.

"Tell me, master mage, what is it you want?"

"Firstly, to deliver this." From his pouch, he withdrew the last of the lightstones he had prepared the other night. "A gift with my compliments."

Josephine received it, giving it a long look before gazing at him again. "What have I done to deserve such an honour?"

What she really meant was, what did Martel want in return, and he decided to speak plainly. "I want information."

She frowned briefly before hiding her reaction. "Here I thought you intended to barter stone for flesh."

Martel shook his head. "I have no interest in such services, but I assume that every soldier does, high or low. And I know how talkative a man might get once his head touches a pillow. In return for this stone and more of its brethren, enough to fill all your rooms, I only ask that you inform me of anything worthwhile relating."

"I knew a battlemage once. She was a good customer, except for when she got mad and burned the place down. I can't imagine her strolling in here, offering such a trade."

"I'm not your typical wizard clad in red," Martel replied. "Do we have an understanding? If you enlighten me about the events and people of the camp, I shall enlighten your home."

"We understand each other."

After a day of striking up friendships, Martel returned to camp for his evening meal. This time, Eleanor had beaten him to it; water boiled in a pot in preparation for soup.

Seeing Martel's pointed glance, Eleanor gave him a look. "I do know how to start a fire without your help."

"Of course. How did your efforts go?"

"Well, the fortifications are solid. No obvious weaknesses, a tower at each corner, and there is obviously only the one gate to defend. The surrounding hills do limit visibility, but at least they have cut down all trees within a hundred feet or more," Eleanor explained. "The real weakness is that we are on the eastern bank, of course, and the wooden bridge would be easy to destroy, cutting us off from the town. We are easy to isolate."

"I see."

"Weapon stores are full, at least, and plenty of arrows. But I did feel a touch of concern walking around camp."

"Why's that?"

Eleanor stirred a ladle around the pot. "Lots of soldiers with day-old stubble or equipment in need of attention. If this was a remote or irrelevant outpost, I would assume lax discipline. But given the

clear danger from the Khivans and the importance of this position, I worry that it is something more insidious."

"Well, don't keep me in suspense."

"Weariness. Exhausted morale. Plenty of empty tents, which means the legion is not at full strength, which in turn indicates a general lack of reinforcements. The soldiers are worn down, by my guess."

"Lots of new recruits came with us on the Red Emerald," Martel pointed out.

"Half a centuria's worth. A full cohort would not be enough," Eleanor retorted.

"Well, I'm glad you're keeping track of all that. You have a mind for military matters, unlike me."

"What about you?" she asked. "How did all your errands go?"

He smiled. "I made a friend or two."