

Firebrand 521

Chapter 521: Beyond the Walls

Beyond the Walls

Staff against sword and shield, Martel sparred against Eleanor for an hour in the morning as had become their wont. Their efforts attracted mild attention, mostly from bored soldiers; the tedium of their training sessions had worn off quickly. Accustomed to spectators, Martel did not notice one among them who stood out. As they ceased their exertions and took a step back, the newcomer approached them.

Eleanor snapped to and saluted with her fist against her chest. "Legion prefect," she said, probably mostly for Martel's sake, who mirrored her salute. He glanced at the mageknight who had joined them without trying to be obvious about it. She seemed between fifteen to twenty years older, looking lean, stern, and typically Asterian with brown eyes and dark hair.

"At ease, prefects. I am Sir Lara Chasseur, should my name not be known to you. I do know yours." She glanced from one to the other. "I returned to camp yesterday, and I have been told you have yet to go on any patrols."

"I assume that was on purpose, sir," Eleanor responded. "My charge is too valuable to be used on duties that any legionary could perform."

"Well, if you think that the pair of you can spend the next two decades in camp without being asked to do a single thing, you are sorely mistaken. Your first patrol will be today and once every five days henceforth. Report to the camp prefect within the hour for instructions."

"Sir," Eleanor protested. "If the Khivans discover that a battlemage is regularly roaming the countryside with just a few legionaries for company, they will send entire regiments to kill him."

"In that case, should you have any encounters with the enemy, I suggest you allow none to escape. Or do you doubt your own abilities to protect him?"

As strange as it was being the object of their discussion while he was standing right next to them, Martel had kept quiet until he heard the final sentence. "Sir Fontaine is a most capable mageknight," he replied as calmly as he could, "and I can think of none more able to protect me in a fight or lead a patrol."

"Then I will entertain no further objections. You have your orders." Turning on her heel, the legion prefect left.

"I am not sure either of us endeared ourselves to her with this exchange," Eleanor considered, "but I appreciate your words."

"Come on. Let's see what old Robert can tell us about our task for the day."

They were given brown cloaks to replace the bright red that legionaries usually wore, a flask that they could fill in the river, and some rations for the day. After that, the camp prefect directed them to assemble by the legion standard.

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As the two mages did so, they found ten legionaries waiting. "Sir," one of them said in salute.

Eleanor glanced at them. "You are the princeps?"

"Yes, sir. Awaiting your command."

"You may take the lead, soldier. Lead the patrol as you would do if we were absent," she commanded.

"Very well, sir." The princeps turned towards the ordinary legionaries. "Move out! Single file behind me!"

A few hundred feet from the camp, the treeline began. Though since spring had yet to arrive, the trees were naked and did little to hinder visibility. Nor did they prevent the wind from blowing sharp, and Martel pulled his cloak around him, grateful for its brown colour; the usual red would have stood out from a mile away.

The legionaries moved with speed, following trails made either by boots or animals. None of them spoke, and they constantly looked from side to side. Martel brought up the rear with Eleanor right in front of him; unlike their large infantry shields, hers was smaller and round, suitable for a rider. Martel had his staff, which served him well in keeping his footing, but he wondered if any lurking Khivans would understand the significance of his weapon. He knew Eleanor was right; a battlemage would be a prize for them.

His musings made Martel fall a little behind; he picked up the pace, hurrying to reach the formation.

As the sun moved past its zenith, the princeps finally called for a longer break than merely catching their breaths. Every man sat down where possible, usually on turned over trunks or simply the ground, and pulled out flasks and rations.

Martel did the same, chewing on strips of dried meat before washing it down with river water.

"Sir, is it true you met a Khivan galley on your journey here?"

Looking around, Martel saw everyone looking at him. He cleared his throat. "We did."

"They say you burned the ship to cinders," another soldier chimed in.

"Just the sail. It sank the old-fashioned way with a hole in its hull," Martel explained.

"I knew it! That Khivan alchemy is no match for Asterian magic!"

"Who cares for cannons when we got a battlemage fighting for us!"

A few of the soldiers continued with such merry remarks, but Martel noticed they were in the minority. Most of the legionaries seemed less at ease. Either they wore uncomfortable expressions, looking away, or they stared at Martel with unfriendly demeanours.

"Alright, eat up. Boots back on the ground," the princeps commanded, and they finished their break.

Eventually, they made a turn and moved back towards the camp, reaching it in the twilight hours. It had been uneventful; Martel had seen nothing but barren trees and the occasional animal or bird. Given all he had heard about this posting and the Tenth, he had half-expected to be ambushed once out of the sight from the encampment; so far, it seemed peaceful, especially compared to his experiences in Morcaster. Presumably, winter and barren trees did not provide the best opportunity for ambushes.

The patrol broke up once past the gate, and the two wizards moved towards their tents. "I got the feeling they weren't all keen on me," Martel remarked, wondering at Eleanor's impression.

"I would agree with that assessment."

"Is it because they're worried that I'll attract attention from the Khivans?"

"Most likely. It could also be that they are concerned your presence means an attempt at offensive manoeuvres why else would a battlemage be sent here? They are not privy to the real reason you are attached to the Tenth, I imagine."

"Right." Martel took a deep breath. Martel was not sure anything could be done about that; revealing the truth might just make the legionaries shun him for that reason instead. "Want me to start a cooking fire?"

"Only if it is not too much trouble."

Martel ignited the remnants of the firewood from their last meal. "I'll live."

Chapter 522: Where Elements Meet

Where Elements Meet

Not long after his morning exercises, Martel saw a curious sight coming towards him. Henry the stonemage walked down what constituted the dirt road through the camp with several large rocks floating around him. Just like the legionaries, Martel stared at this, though probably for a different reason. To them, this was a display of magic, as wondrous or unfamiliar to them as when Martel ignited a flame out of the air. To him, it was an interesting demonstration of a different element than his own.

Martel knew that he could at best keep one of these stones raised in the air, and it would tire him to move it such a length. Henry did so with three and did not appear burdened at all. It made Martel wonder how good he might be with the other elements, and if he had fallen victim to specialisation; he was briefly reminded of the last earthmage he had known, whose corpse now rotted in the Undercroft. Despite her experience, she could not contend with the fighting skills of a battlemage. Hopefully his relations with Henry would be more cordial.

The aforementioned stonemage arrived at Martel's tent, allowing the stones to float down before him. Each was about the size of a sack of flour. "Sandstone," he began to explain. "This will hold heat much better than most rocks. I can't get more though, not before summer, so if you need more, you'll have to wait. If you'll enchant one for me, you and your protector may have the other two."

"That's very reasonable. I'll do it this afternoon," Martel promised.

"I'll be back to pick it up tonight, in that case. Spare you the trouble of hauling a rock across camp and town." Henry's eyes twinkled; presumably he knew that Martel would not be able to do this with the same ease as a stonemage.

"Most appreciated."

"How long do your enchantments hold?"

"The lightstone I gave you, it should be good for half a year," Martel estimated. "Certainly it'll last you until the evenings grow bright."

Henry nodded to himself. "With my rocks, I imagine that'll be doubled without any extra effort on your part. We'll see, I suppose."

"We shall, though it'll be a long wait."

The green-clad wizard smiled. "Earthmages are known for their patience. I'll see you tonight."

As the weather was fine and the three stones would barely fit in his tent, Martel decided to simply do his enchanting outside. He was not sure his table could support the weight of such a rock either. Instead, he sat down cross-legged on the ground and leaned forward to place his hands on the object of his enchanting efforts.

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The rock was entirely smooth, like wood worked by a skilled carpenter. It was oval in shape and a few feet from one end to another, but less than a hand's width in height. It would be the perfect skipping stone for a giant; for a moment, Martel remembered happy days in Engby when his older brother had shown him how to pick the best rocks and throw them with a flick of the wrist, making them jump across the water to the other side.

Pushing thoughts aside, Martel concentrated on the matter at hand and began enchanting. His magic trickled from his fingertips into the rock, seeking to entangle itself. It did so easily, as Henry had promised. Heat and spellpower flowed gently from the mage, becoming encapsulated in the stone. It was not so much that the material trapped the magic; rather, two elements fusing together to become one. The embodiment of earth with the heating property of fire.

Martel almost gasped as he finished; his breathing always slowed down during enchanting, and the first breath afterwards felt like returning to the surface from a dive into a deep lake. Even without magic, he felt the heat radiating from the stone. He blinked a few times, slightly disorientated, like waking up from an interrupted nap. Glancing through the opening of his tent at his Khivan clock, he estimated that an hour had passed.

One enchantment complete; two more to go.

When Martel finished, the sun was sinking behind the horizon. He looked around but saw no sign of Eleanor; she had gone on her own errands in the morning. Perhaps he should go into Esmouth for his evening meal; he had silver to spend, and he assumed the tavern served some kind of food. Wait, Henry was coming to collect his enchanted rock well, maybe Martel could wait for him and walk together back to town.

For now, he began hauling out the old heating stones from his and Eleanor's tents, replacing them with his new creations. He was curious to witness the difference between the materials; obviously, Henry had shaped the sandstone compared to the coarse river rocks that Martel had found on his own, but he wondered if the earthmage did other work to make the stones more receptive to magic. Something to ask about.

Raising his old heating stone into the air, Martel floated it outside. It would be a waste to simply throw it away, just because he had a superior replacement, but he was unsure what to do with it.

"How do you do that, sir?" asked a legionary. He looked at the firemage with wide eyes. "I mean, I know magic can make things float, but even from here, I can feel that big pebble awash with heat. It's like you've set a stone on fire!"

Martel looked him over. Just an ordinary soldier, not even a princeps. But ordinary soldiers talked to each other, and they constituted the vast majority of the legion. "Do you want it?" he asked, ignoring the initial question. "You can have it for your tent."

The soldier's eyes widened even further. "Really? You don't want something in return?"

"Just watch my back if we're ever on patrol together," Martel replied in a light-hearted manner, although he meant it earnestly. "Get someone from your tent to help you carry it back, it's heavy."

"I'll go find someone right now, sir!"

As the legionary sped away, Martel remembered the advice of an old princeps and called out, "And your name?"

"Felix, sir, seventh cohort!" The soldier stopped and turned around, saluted, and hurried away once more.

Chapter 523: One Step at a Time

One Step at a Time

Being a small town, barely worthy of the title, Esmouth had only two gates. One to the east as part of the fortifications that guarded the bridge, and one to the north-west attached to the only road in the area. Leaving the town through that exit, Martel soon left the cobbled path to enter the wetlands along the river.

"Glad I fortified my boots before our sea journey," Eleanor remarked as her feet sank into the muddy ground.

"You don't have to come along," Martel told her. "Just go back to town." His staff came into good use, helping him find safe footing.

"If you think I will ever let you step outside the walls on your own" She did not consider it necessary to finish her sentence.

"We're on the western bank," he pointed out with a glance at the river to his right; it was at its widest, entering the delta before emptying into the sea. At a guess, he figured it was at least half a mile to the other side. "Even if the Khivans somehow figured out I'd be here at this hour, I think I'd have time to get away before they manage to swim across."

"We do not know the range of their muskets nor accuracy," Eleanor retorted. "I am not willing to chance it."

Martel looked again at the other side; vegetation was sparse, especially in winter, with little foliage of any kind. "We'd see them coming from a long distance, wouldn't we?"

"Yes, exactly. Which is why I am here to keep a lookout."

"I guess I can't argue with that."

"And yet you felt the need to try," she said. "Now go pick your flowers."

"Yes, sir."

They trudged around the wetlands for hours as Martel searched for herbs. Pickings were slim, given the season, but thankfully, strangleroot was a perennial plant, and he filled his pouch. He grabbed what else he could find that might come in useful in order to build up a small inventory.

"Alright, let's go back," he announced.

Eleanor, who had scarcely removed her eyes from the eastern bank, gave him a quick look. "You are done?"

"For now. We'll have to come back in summer, maybe during a full moon. Not much alchemy in these little weeds." Martel tapped his pouch as he set into motion, using his staff as before to feel his way forward. "But it'll do for a few remedies. Like for the bruise you gave me yesterday."

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"You lived, I notice. But I do appreciate the advantage of having my own apothecary."

"Who said you'll get any?"

Eleanor scoffed in response. "I thought you intended to just buy the simple things from the herbalist in Esmouth," she said a moment later. "Not that I mind the excuse to get outside the walls."

"I wanted to get a sense of the area myself," Martel explained. "What might grow and be available. Besides, I don't have much coin left until next month's pay, so I figured I'd save the money."

"Well, you are in luck, for I am in the mood for a proper meal when we get back, so I shall pay."

"My brave protector, seeing to all my needs."

Martel had frequented half the taverns in Morcaster, from unsavoury watering holes by the harbour to expensive establishments like The Golden Goose with a stage and nightly entertainment.

As for the only locale in Esmouth serving drink or food, it lay somewhere in between. The building itself was small with just one open room; Martel imagined it was a former workshop or such.

Lacking a basement, the owner had dug a root cellar out in the back, and he constantly went in and out to fetch barrels, jars, crates, and what else was needed; a gust of wind reminded the clientele of this every time the backdoor opened.

Lacking a sign, Martel did not originally know if the place even had a name as such; it had taken him a few days before he finally heard someone refer to it as The Salty Mug. Whether that was actually its name or just someone's observation about the crockery, Martel had chosen to adopt it.

While the ale served in the place was not exactly salty, it was barely a step above river water flavoured with hops.

After a long and cold day walking around the marsh, though, he had to admit that the potato soup with bits of crispy pork felt perfect. "Just what I needed," he remarked with a satisfied sigh as the first spoonful went down.

"If nothing else, our good tavernkeeper knows how to cook."

"Unlike us," Martel admitted. So far, all their meals cooked on their own had been the simplest fare.

"Well, we got time to learn. Maybe the owner will even teach us a little actually, what is his name?"

The battlemage shrugged. "No idea."

Eleanor gave him a look. "I thought you had a whole plan to befriend all the little folk."

"We've been here a fiveday," he defended himself. "I had to prioritise. I meant to make more lightstones, but then Henry showed up with the right material for heating stones, so I switched to that."

"I noticed. And thanks," she added between sips of her cup. "I do enjoy my little oven. What did you do with the old stones?"

"Gave them to some of the legionaries. You know, befriending the little folk."

"I thought you would go after people in positions of influence, not random soldiers."

"Casting a wide net, I suppose." Martel scraped the last of his bowl into his spoon. "It cost me nothing to make those stones, so nothing lost by giving them away. Even if the recipients can't give me something in return."

"It cost you time and effort," Eleanor argued. "I suspect, underneath all your talks on the ship about how we should ingratiate ourselves with influential people, you still have the same soft heart. Orphans or legionaries, you cannot help but pick up strays."

Martel wiped his mouth with a rag. "At least these strays got weapons."

"I hope you are ready for the consequences, though. Unless you think you can make such gifts for every soldier in the legion, you will only have appeased a few and made everyone else envious." Eleanor pointedly dabbed her lips with her own cloth. "You may have made more enemies than friends."

"Nah, really?" Martel considered it and shook his head. "I'm sure it's fine."

Chapter 524: Hot Choices

Hot Choices

"Sir Martel, are you the fool who has been giving away enchanted items to the soldiers?" Although phrased as a question, Sir Lara Chasseur yelled it in a manner to suggest she already knew the answer.

This time, the legion prefect had not waited until Martel and Eleanor finished their training, but marched right in between them to stare him straight in the face.

"If you're referring to the heating stones, that would be me," he admitted; not that the source of such objects could be anybody else. "I can create one for you as well, sir." It took him less than a moment to realise that was the wrong thing to say.

Her expression reflected this. "I am not some pampered silkworm that can only sleep in a palace," she said pointedly. "What is good enough for the men is good enough for me."

An authority figure berating Martel for doing someone a kind turn he felt his anger beginning to boil.

"Now, unless you wish to ferment further resentment between the soldiers, you will cease handing out enchanted objects like they are honey cakes and you are the baker's daughter afraid of becoming a spinster. Am I clear?"

Gritting his teeth, Martel squeezed out a reply. "Yes, legion prefect."

"Try to keep him out of trouble inside the camp as well as outside," Chasseur remarked at Eleanor before she strode away.

Martel slowly exhaled, suppressing his anger until he could speak calmly. "How many tents are in the camp?"

"Far, far more than you can enchant to supply them all," she told him. "Before you were done, your first enchantments would have faded away."

Martel frowned, trying to do calculations in his head. Eventually, he had to concede. "Alright. The legionaries will have to do without."

"They have survived every winter before we came here," Eleanor considered. "We are surrounded by trees that need cutting anyway, to keep the walls clear."

"Fine. But now I feel weird having warmth in my tent, where I live alone, while they sleep five together without comfort."

"Well, at least they have each other to keep warm," the mageknight pointed out. "What are your plans today?"

"What?" Martel's thoughts had already strayed back to the conversation with the legion prefect.

"Oh, just an errand in Esmouth. I won't need you, so feel free to do as you please."

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"I shall entertain myself with a game or two of cards, in that case. I will see you later."

"Yes, later." Martel nodded at her in brief farewell, and they separated.

With some of his last coin, Martel went to Esmouth. The town was too small for a glassblower, but it had a potter, which also suited the dwindling contents of his purse. For most of the remedies he could make, small jars of clay would work just as well as glass. It was only alchemical potions that required glass to avoid contamination. Mistress Rana had never given him a detailed explanation why something about the earthen clay interfering with the magic, unlike glass, which was cleansed by the fire so Martel would stick to apothecary work for now and save alchemy for later.

On his way back, Martel considered the legion prefect. Their encounter had felt like being back at the Lyceum with a teacher like Moira or Reynard belittling him, hiding behind authority to be safe from retaliation. It irked Martel to simply accept being berated, but two reasons compelled him to do so. Firstly, he could expect far more severe punishment in the legion than at the Lyceum, and it might spill over to affect Eleanor; secondly, he might already be in bad standing with the legate, and it would be foolish to make an enemy of the legion prefect as well.

With these thoughts in his head, Martel paused as he reached the bridge; rather than immediately cross, he stepped around and descended to the water, searching a little while for a suitable stone. That accomplished, he returned to camp for one more round of enchantment.

When evening came, Martel was done enchanting, and a lightstone lay on his desk. He placed it in his pocket and got up. Extending his magic, he made his heating stone float into the air and follow him outside. Walking through camp, he attracted curious glances; a few soldiers even began following him at a distance.

Martel continued until he reached the biggest tent in the camp. The stench of blood and sickness reached him long before he stepped inside. Some years ago, just approaching would have made him panic, giving him unpleasant images of his father wasting away from an infection; now, he was accustomed to it, and he walked into the infirmary without hesitation, stone floating behind him.

Scores of cots lay distributed around the big tent, most of them full. A few nurses walked around, tending to the patients. Martel had not met the physician, but they seemed absent, so he addressed the nearest nurse instead. "I thought these might help you in your work." He reached into his pocket and took out the lightstone to place it in her hand. "I'll just leave this in the middle. Hopefully it'll help them recover."

The nurses seemed too surprised to speak; the one with the lightstone simply stared at it. Martel floated the heating stone to the centre of the tent, allowing it to fall gently to the ground. He would have to come back in a day and ascertain whether another would be needed to properly heat up the whole area.

"Thank you, sir," someone expressed.

"Sure. If one lightstone isn't enough, I'll make more. Just let me know how many you need," Martel told them. He gave a nod and left; the soldiers who had gathered to watch him quickly scattered as he walked through them.

Once back in his own tent, he looked at his cold cot with its single blanket. He counted out his coin; a few coppers left. Not enough to buy a second comrade for his solitary blanket; not until he got paid next month. With a sigh, he undressed and crawled into bed, though he kept on his woollen socks from Eleanor.

Chapter 525: Cold Tracks

Cold Tracks

It began to snow the next day as if the Stars themselves found it amusing how Martel had chosen to give up his source of heating. After a cold morning practising against Eleanor, he went alone to the river and found a large stone along with two small ones, and an afternoon of enchantment ensued.

Once done, he brought it all to the infirmary; if winter was about to become harsher, Martel could guess a single heating stone would not suffice. Once back in his own tent, he boiled some water and brewed tea for himself with a few mustard seeds, gaining what warmth that could provide, before settling in for another cold night.

His limbs feeling cold and stiff, Martel did not look forward to sparring when he woke to the sound of the morning bell. As he got dressed and dragged himself outside, wearing his chain shirt and everything, he wondered if Eleanor could be persuaded to skip this morning.

As she left her own tent, she gave him a quick glance. "We are not training today, if that is what you are waiting for."

"We're not?"

"Today is Pelday. We have patrol."

Martel's shoulders slumped. He got his wish, but not in the way he wanted. The Stars were definitely mocking him. "Let's just eat."

The soldiers on the patrol were not the same from last time; presumably, their schedule differed from his and Eleanor's, and they would probably be going out with a new group every time.

The route chosen by the princeps was different as well. They went straight east, into the forested hills now covered by a blanket of snow. It all looked serene with nary a bird or beast disturbing the landscape; it reminded Martel of paintings he had seen in the palaces back in Morcaster. The only sound to be heard came from their boots, crunching against the snow with each step.

Walking in the back, Martel was the last to see why the others had suddenly stopped walking. As they crowded around something on the ground, Martel pushed forward to join them.

Sets of tracks across the otherwise pristine snow.

"Three of them, by the look of it," one soldier remarked.

"Could it be yesterday's patrol? It had already snowed by then."

"They wouldn't separate out here, letting three boys go alone." The princeps, bending down, shook his head. "These are Khivan footprints."

"Locals or soldiers?" Eleanor asked.

"No locals still around these parts, sir," came the reply. "But what do we do? Investigate?"

Martel looked in the direction that the prints led. The path sloped down, in between hills. Ahead, the land was otherwise barren; they had just left the treeline some hundred paces behind them.

"This has a bad smell," the princeps remarked, but he gave no orders, looking at the mageknight instead.

Eleanor slowly nodded. "Open land, lower terrain. Those tracks lead nowhere good. We pull back and stay within the treeline follow along it to see if we spot anything else, but stay within cover."

"Very good, sir." The princeps stood up and looked at the legionaries. "As she said. Pull back."

They had barely set into motion before the first shot rang out.

It took Martel a moment to understand what he had heard. The Khivan cannons on the galley had sounded deafening; this was subdued in comparison, like distant thunder. But given the clear sky, it could not be any sound made in nature; he had heard a Khivan musket firing.

"Martel, behind me!" Eleanor yelled, stepping in front of him; he saw her magic flare up, and he activated his own magical shield as well, trusting it would stop a Khivan bullet as well as an Asterian sword.

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"Shields together!" the princeps called out, and the legionaries did as commanded. "Retreat!" One step at a time, the soldiers moved backwards, hiding behind their shields.

Using their improvised wall for cover, the two mages did the same a few paces ahead, trying to crouch low while still moving.

Repeatedly, shots pierced the air, and Martel heard the sound of wood splintering again and again. Outbursts of pain followed, but none of the soldiers faltered. Step by step, they continued the retreat.

Glancing over his shoulder, Martel saw the treeline slowly come closer, but at far too sluggish a pace for his liking. He dared not stand up and look over the edge of the shields if the Khivans did not kill him, Eleanor would so he could not see what danger they faced specifically.

But his magic did not depend on eyesight. He allowed it to sweep over the hills, closing his eyes for a moment. A confused sight met his inner gaze. The eleven Asterians in front of him obscured his perception with their body heat, but Martel felt strong flashes of fire some hundred or two hundred feet ahead. It had to be the Khivan weapons, he assumed, as the warmth of a person did not flare up and down like that, but it made it hard for him to ascertain their numbers. At least five, but probably more.

Traces of heat to his left. "They're flanking us!" he exclaimed, looking over his shoulder again. Ten steps to the treeline.

"Keep moving!" the princeps commanded.

Shots came from the left, but Eleanor had already taken position, and her magic glowed. Whether by her physical or magical shield, the bullets were stopped.

Five paces. Martel reached out with his magic and felt it. The warmth where the Khivan powder had ignited; the slim metal barrel heated up by the shot.

Distracted while walking backwards, Martel tripped and fell. Eleanor reached down, grabbed him with her free hand, and dragged him the final steps before dropping him behind a tree. Around him, the legionaries broke ranks and likewise hurried into the relative safety of the treeline, using the trunks for cover.

"Princeps, what do we do?" yelled one soldier. Several of them looked at the mageknight in their midst.

"We pull back, draw them into the trees if they pursue us. That will give us the chance to close the distance without being in the open," Eleanor reasoned.

"What if they're already behind us?" another asked in panic. "We don't know how many?"

"We do," Martel declared. "Give me a moment." He let his magic flow out behind the group. The Khivans might be able to hide from the naked eye, but they could not disguise the warmth of their bodies. Nothing met Martel's inner sight. "It's empty," he told the others. "They're only ahead of us."

The legionaries exchanged glances, perhaps hesitant to trust his judgement without knowing what he based it on, but Eleanor had no such reservations. "Back, now! Martel, lead!"

He nodded in acknowledgement and got on his feet. Trying to stay low while still moving, he awkwardly made his way forward between the trees, constantly using his magic to feel for heat ahead.

After a hundred paces or so, he stopped to let everyone catch up and let their small group reconstitute itself. The legionaries reached his position moments later, all of them crouching behind a tree as they came to a halt; Eleanor appeared as the last. "Anything?"

The question was directed at Martel, who crawled through the line of soldiers to avoid their heat interfering with his senses. Once clear, he let his magic sweep out. "Nothing," he replied. "It doesn't look like they followed."

"How can you know?" asked a soldier. "They could just be hiding, or sneaking up on us from another angle!"

Martel gave him a hard glare. "They can't hide from me. There's nobody close to our position. We're safe."

"If the mage says so, that's how it is," the princeps interjected. "But what do we do now?" He looked at a legionary who had been shot; the fabric and metal rings of his sleeve were torn to shreds.

"Back to camp," Eleanor decided. "Too much of a risk to stay here and with nothing to be gained." She looked at Martel. "Lead the way. Straight west."

He glanced up at the sky. The sun was approaching the horizon, darkening their surroundings, but at least it made it easy to know the direction. Keeping the setting sun straight ahead, Martel began the journey back with the patrol behind him, Eleanor bringing up the rear.

They reached the camp without incident, and Martel finally breathed easily as they passed the gate. The guards gave them questioning glances, seeing the damaged shields and the one legionary pressing a hand to his arm; they had bound his wound, but he had begun shivering.

"Take him to the infirmary. I will report to the legion prefect," Eleanor decided, and the princeps saluted before leading his wounded comrade away.

"I'll go with you," Martel told her, just in case he could be helpful.

They made their way through the camp, and Martel felt his emotions slowly settle. Although the ambush had happened hours ago, and he was accustomed to such dangers, it had been an unsettling

journey back home; even with his magic, he found it hard to shake his fear of Khivans hiding behind every tree they passed. He began to understand why nobody wanted a posting in the Tenth.

"Sir Chasseur, we return from patrol," Eleanor called out as they stood by the legion prefect's tent.

"Enter."

She sat in the middle of her small domicile, eating bread and pieces of fish from a plate. "Anything to report?" She placed her food on the small table in front of her.

"Yes, sir. The enemy attempted an ambush approximately ten miles east of here."

"Casualties?"

"None. One soldier lightly wounded, that is all."

"Number of enemies?"

"Hard to say." Eleanor glanced at Martel, who would have the best impression.

"Five to ten engaged us," he explained. "If there were more, they weren't close enough for me to notice."

Sir Lara nodded to herself. "Very well. Just another skirmish, in that case. Dismissed."

The two mages saluted and left. "Well, we have had our first taste of the enemy. It could be worse, though I despise how they stay at range," Eleanor considered.

Martel felt too worn to think of a witty remark. This had been their second patrol out of hundreds to come; he hoped this encounter had been a rare occurrence, but he suspected otherwise, given the weary state of the Tenth's legionaries. "I'm going to rest."

Chapter 526: A Gathering of Black

A Gathering of Black

When their morning spar had ended, Eleanor stepped back and gave Martel a scrutinising look.

"How do you feel? After yesterday, I mean."

"Fine," he replied truthfully. "It could have gone a lot worse."

"I guess you have been in fights before."

"Once or twice. And you?" Martel suddenly felt guilty that he had not given her the same consideration. She had seemed at home in her reactions to the ambush; it had not occurred to him that she might be feeling troubled by it.

"After what we went through in the catacombs of Morcaster, I doubt any Khivans could ever frighten me," she told him; a sentiment he agreed with. "Well, maybe their cannons might make me reconsider. I truly do not know if my magic shield can stand up to such force."

"Let's never have to find out."

She laughed a little. "No risk of that here, it seems. They would have to drag that monstrosity for miles through forest and hills, avoiding our patrols, just to get within range of the camp."

And yet Henry enchanted the walls to be certain they could withstand such a barrage; it could simply be because of excessive caution, but presumably, it was not beyond the realm of possibilities. "Yeah."

"Plans for today?"

"None, besides a bit of apothecary work. Feel free to roam without me."

"Well, the other mageknights are gathering at the tavern tonight."

"The Salty Mug?" Martel asked, mostly to confirm whether that was indeed its name.

"Yeah, do you know of any other watering hole?"

"I do not."

"There is your answer."

"This feels reminiscent of Morcaster," Martel related. "Me and a bunch of black tunics."

"They are your only peers in this place," she remarked. "Wizards befriend wizards. Other than the stonemage, I suppose. Still, it would not hurt for you to come along tonight."

"I'll see you there," he promised.

Several trips to the river with a pair of buckets filled Martel's tub, and a dash of magic heated the water. Lowering himself down, he closed his eyes and enjoyed the sensation of warm water relaxing his body. Once that had been accomplished, he considered Eleanor's invitation. He had no intention of backing out, but he did not expect much. In any case, he would not stay long; he had maybe five or six coppers left until he got paid.

Once clean, dry, and dressed, after he had moved the tub into Eleanor's tent, Martel sat down to begin writing a letter. It was for Mistress Rana, detailing several questions about alchemy, mostly concerning the plants and herbs he hoped to harvest come summertime. He did not finish the letter, as he imagined he would think of more questions in the coming days, not to mention that sending it by Imperial post would cost nearly all his remaining coin.

Martel could sell enchanted objects if he needed money, of course, but he preferred to keep them exclusive; something he could barter for favour, trading items which the recipient could not easily get elsewhere. Better to wait a few more days until he received his first payment for being a battlemage.

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Putting the half-finished letter aside, with his mind still on alchemy, Martel checked the herbs drying in his tent. The carpenter in town had built him a small, simple rack for him to hang long rows of plants upon. He could probably use magic to dry them faster, but he was in no rush, and the slow, natural method seemed the safest way. Besides, he could not afford a mortar and pestle yet.

The rack did take up a lot of space in his now cramped tent, but Martel considered that a necessary evil. Although the circumstances of his life had changed radically, making his life in Morcaster seem almost like a distant dream, it had only been a few months since he laboured day and night to

create potions against the pestilence. Should anything like that happen here, Martel preferred to have his own alchemy available rather than rely on others.

The tolling of the bell in Esmouth could just barely reach Martel in his tent, telling him it was last bell; while he had not agreed any specific hour with Eleanor, the mageknights would probably be gathered at the tavern by now. Picking up his pouch with its few coins, Martel left camp.

According to regulations, the gates to both the camp and the town were closed after last bell, but an exception was always made for prefects, and Martel crossed the bridge without trouble.

Entering the tavern, he immediately noticed the other prefects; they took up half the space. Walking up to the counter, Martel placed two coppers on it, receiving a mug of ale in return. Thus armed, he walked over to the mageknights.

"This must be our battlemage! And out of uniform, that makes eight to four!" one of them declared, wearing a black tunic rather than armour. In his red robes, Martel squeezed in between two of them, giving nods around the table in greeting. Three of them besides Eleanor were women.

"We wondered when you'd make an appearance," another remarked gruffly. He was much older than the others, at least in his fifties. "Not just tonight your counterpart made the rounds to greet us the day after arrival."

"I've had my hands full," Martel explained. He exchanged looks with Eleanor, who gave him a wink.

"So we hear! A battlemage who enchants. Fancy that."

"Urgh, I remember that class at the Lyceum. That fellow, Master Jerome's apprentice, Stars bless him, he tried. I did not learn a thing."

"Here we are, already reminiscing about school days," interjected the older mageknight.

"Don't mind Lucius," said the one next to Martel, much younger in years. "He's the only one here without magic, and it irks him to no end."

"Indeed I am," Lucius proclaimed, "and I had to work twice as hard to make prefect! I've served longer in this legion than most of you have been alive!"

"Certainly been drinking twice as much," another muttered.

"Wait, we're still missing one. Where's Avery?"

"Out on patrol. Some concern that the Khivans might have been able to cross in small numbers, up north."

"Is it not the responsibility of the Thirteenth to prevent that?"

"Sure, but if they don't, it's us that'll feel the consequences! Can't blame the legate for being cautious."

Unable to keep up with the conversation, Martel simply kept quiet.

"Firemage, Fontaine claims you defeated a berserker. As a novice, no less." The remark cut through the chatter and came from the mageknight at the end of the table, one of the few wearing armour.

His soldier's pin did not show an eagle, but a horse, declaring him to be the decurion, leader of the mounted cohort and third in command of the legion.

He regarded Martel with scrutinising eyes, who spent a moment chewing on the remark. The tone reminded him of the same condescension shown by Reynard, the Master of War at the Lyceum. But perhaps Martel judged him too hastily; in any case, it seemed best to remain calm.

"I did, with some help. I had a mageknight providing distraction. You lot are good at that," he added with half a smile, glancing around the table, and he was rewarded with laughter from a few.

"How did you accomplish such a feat?" the decurion asked.

"I strangled him with a golden chain." Martel sipped from his cup, pretending not to notice the incredulous looks.

"Bloody Tyrians!" another mageknight exclaimed. "My father and brother both died fighting those bastards."

"Maybe you will get your chance at revenge soon," the decurion remarked and got up.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You will find out when you are supposed to. Now excuse me Avery should be back by now, and the legate expects me present when she reports." With those words, the decurion left.

"Is he always like that?" Martel asked the old mageknight by his side.

"Ah, don't mind him. You put that horse pin on a prefect, they immediately get too big for their breeches. Now, Martel, what sort of name is that?" Lucius asked, slamming his empty cup down. "Sounds Aquilan."

"It may very well be, though I hail from "

"Not the worst to have at your back, Aquilans!" the old mageknight continued. "I remember once, on campaign, mind you"

Martel took a deep breath and signalled the barkeep for another drink.

Chapter 527: The Long Ship

The Long Ship

Martel and Eleanor were still sparring when they both noticed a slow, but steady stream of soldiers leaving camp. Exchanging looks and a shrug, Martel threw his staff aside, removed his chain shirt, and joined the others together with Eleanor.

Once outside the camp's gate, they had to push through the crowd and walk onto the bridge before they finally saw what caused the stir. On the southern pier by Esmouth's harbour, a ship of particular build lay moored. It was long and slender with barely any keel, a vessel made for swift transport of men rather than goods, able to traverse rivers and shallow waters. And the people who unloaded their provisions and belongings from the ship were tall, and several of them fair-haired. While the distance made it impossible, Martel guessed that they all had blue eyes; they were Tyrians.

"I guess we know what the decurion meant," he mumbled. Eleanor made no reply.

A few ornery optios and centurions dispersed the soldiers, commanding them back to camp. Under no obligation to do the same, Martel and Eleanor crossed the bridge and approached the pier. Given the structure of the ship, the Tyrians had little beyond their personal belongings to unload; Martel noticed that all of them carried weapons, either on their person or in their packs.

One of them, nearly as tall as Martel, walked all the way up to stand before the battlemage. He spoke rapidly, clearly expecting to be understood. He wore leather and hide as armour, and a big axe rested in some kind of strap on his back.

"Sorry, mate, but I don't speak Tyrian." Certainly when spoken at such a pace.

"What?" the Tyrian looked at Martel in surprise, switching to Asterian. "But you are handsome like us, not all dour like these southerners!"

It was such an absurd remark, Martel almost laughed. "Be that as it may, I am southern like them."

"A shame. But your clothing you do the magic?" The Tyrian's eyes ran up and down the red robes worn by the wizard.

"I'm a mage, yes." There seemed to be no reason to deny it, though Martel wondered why it mattered to the northerner.

"Hah, that makes us kin!" The Tyrian gave as wide a smile as could possibly fit on his face, raising one hand in a flailing gesture. "I do the berserk." On his wrist, the edge of a rune could be seen where the sleeve had fallen down a few inches. Besides his axe, he also carried several knives in his belt, and while slightly shorter than Martel, he was definitely more muscular.

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Eleanor took a small step forward and to the side, her shoulder moving in front of Martel's. "And why exactly have you made port in our camp?"

"Invited by your leaders, woman with furious face. It seems you could use some help in this war of yours!" He laughed and walked off, following the trail of the other Tyrians towards one of the ruined buildings that lay by the harbour.

"Two things I never expected to see here," Eleanor muttered. "Tyrians and mercenaries."

Martel did not reply; his attention was caught by one of the last people to disembark the longship. Unlike the others, he had brown eyes, and his clothing looked to be Asterian. As he walked off the pier, he glanced at the two mages, but hurried past them.

When there was nothing further to be gleaned, the pair of mages turned back towards camp. "I didn't know the legions used mercenaries," Martel remarked.

"It was more common long ago when the Empire was smaller. Nowadays, I believe it is only done when they are needed for tasks where ordinary legionaries are less suited," Eleanor explained.

"Makes you wonder what particular task they might be needed for. I didn't see that many of them they are hardly a force to be reckoned with."

"I think I counted about twenty, but some of them might already have left before we arrived. Maybe the number is closer to thirty."

It had not occurred to Martel to make a headcount; Eleanor was more the tactician than him. "Not a lot compared to the legion, several thousand strong. But they must have sailed the entire western and southern coast of the Empire to get here," he considered, "a journey of several months, I should imagine. In the worst season of the year."

They passed through the gate to the camp, where the soldiers on duty straightened their backs as the prefects walked by. "And we know at least one of them is a berserker."

Martel was not keen to remember his own encounter with one of that breed, and he seized on his first thought to steer the conversation away from that direction. "Maybe their ship is the very reason they have been hired. Didn't the mageknights make talk of that last night, patrolling the river? That vessel would be well suited for swiftly traversing up and down the river." It might even be faster than using horses, who would tire riding through the wetlands, and the Tyrians would be able to disembark on either side of the river to fight any Khivans they came upon.

"That is a good point," Eleanor admitted.

"No need to sound surprised! I pay attention. I can put two and two together," Martel told her with mock indignation.

"I am only a little taken aback because the thought had not occurred to me that they might have been hired for their ship," she defended herself. "In any case, since we have not been told anything, the Tyrians would not seem to be relevant for us."

"You say that now, but if you look at who else is out of place in this legion besides the mercenaries"

She came to a halt. "That makes a little more sense than I prefer. Well, nothing we can do about it now, nor should the orders come."

"Indeed." Martel looked towards their tents, just ahead. "Supper together?"

"Sure. Seventh bell."

"Sounds good to me." They continued, each going to their own tent.

Chapter 528: Fifteen Coins

Fifteen Coins

After their morning spar, Eleanor pulled back and caught her breath. "I do not suppose you know where we are to collect our salary?"

"Not a clue. Wait, that's today?" To Martel, the days all felt the same, except Pelday when they had patrol.

"What would you do without me?"

"Right, I would never have figured out this well-guarded secret that today's the first of the month."

"That would be my assessment as well," Eleanor said lightly. "Well, let us seek out the camp prefect. He must know."

After a wash and change of clothes, the pair crossed camp to reach the tent of the camp prefect. They entered and found Robert behind his desk, piles of parchment in front of him. "What is it?" he asked, only to answer his own question. "Oh, you want your money."

"You make us sound like mercenaries," Eleanor protested.

"Usually that would be handled by the clerk in your cohort, but since you're not attached to one, I shall deal with it," Robert declared with a stressed expression, and he began digging through his drawers.

"Sorry to cause you such trouble," Martel said with only a touch of sarcasm.

"It's fine, I'll handle it," the camp prefect muttered, grabbing a small lockbox.

Martel had to bite his tongue from thanking the man in the most sarcastic of tones.

"Alright, what's your scheme? You getting full pay or splitting it?"

"Half to the Imperial treasury, half paid out," Eleanor replied.

"Oh, yeah, me too," Martel added.

"Alright. Prefect's salary, subtracted your repayments to the Lyceum, divided by half" Robert wrote down a few figures and finally stacked fifteen golden coins in front of each of them.

They both collected their pay and left; Martel stared at the gold in his hand with a smile as they walked. This would pay for just about anything he could think of.

"Not exactly much for a whole month, given we are mages," Eleanor remarked, placing her coin in her purse.

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Martel shot her a look; he had never owned this much money at once, and the same amount lay in the Imperial treasury wearing his name. "To be fair, we only work once every fiveday." Even if that included the occasional chance of Khivan bullets.

Eleanor laughed before she sighed. "Quite. Wait, who is that?" Outside their tents, a servant stood, clearly out of place compared to the soldiers that occupied the camp. freeweb .co m

"Ah, Sir Martel and Sir Fontaine?" The servant read their names aloud from two envelopes, handing one to each of them. "From my master, the legate." He bowed his head and hurried away.

Sir Martel,

You are cordially invited to join the celebration of Saint Agnes at the home of Legate Titus Varus, second Solday of this month at last bell.

Titus Varus

Legate of Legio X Astra

"A party?" Martel gave a frown. "Here?"

"When you are gone for years, you celebrate when you can. This must be the saint that the legate's family venerates," Eleanor considered.

"Right, like your family and Saint Cuthbert."

"You remember. Yes. Do your family not have affinity for a particular saint? Or your town?"

Martel shrugged. "Honestly, we barely know about Sol, let alone the saints."

"Well, it shall be nice to attend something out of the ordinary. We got time, after all."

"Indeed. Well, I have letters of my own to send," he told you. "See you later."

The quartermaster who doled out food rations had explained the system to Martel when he first arrived. He simply had to make a list and leave payment, and the quartermaster would get the purchases shipped to Esmouth on the next possible ship once the request had arrived in Morcaster, of course.

Gleefully, Martel wrote down everything he needed. Mortar and pestle, a cauldron, glass jars, and various ingredients he could not expect to find locally. Soon, he would have his own little laboratory, and his alchemy would surpass what anybody else here could make of such remedies; not that he expected much competition from the mageknights, the local apothecary in Esmouth, or anybody else.

Afterwards, Martel wrote a letter that he had been anxious to send.

Dear mum,

I have arrived at my posting in a quaint little town called Esmouth, not much different from Engby, besides being by a big river and the sea. The journey hereto was uneventful, except I got sea-sick. Nobody ever told me that ships move that much, and constantly. I won't look forward to the journey back.

It is quiet here, especially in winter. We have not seen sight of the enemy at all, and there is little chance we will. Our soldiers maintain a strong patrol, keeping them far from our camp, which has high walls that are enchanted by Henry, a stonemage I have befriended.

And of course, I always have Eleanor by my side. She is the best friend I could ask for. She was the strongest mageknight in our year, and I imagine she will soon be better than anybody in the entire legion. I am never in danger with her protecting me, and she makes the long days go by fast. She taught me a new card game the other day. She also makes me train with her every morning, which I am less enthused about, but it keeps me strong, I suppose.

Say a prayer for Sol to keep her safe and good health, will you? Thank you. Let me know how my brothers and sisters are doing. How was Keith's wedding? Has the child been born yet? I hope everything and everyone is well.

Martel

Exhaling, Martel tried not to feel worried that it had been months since he last received a letter from home. Between the pestilence in Morcaster and him travelling to Esmouth, there had been a lot of disruptions.

As he closed the letter into an envelope, he tried not to think about how it would take months to reach Engby, and as long for any reply to reach him.

Chapter 529: The Feast of Saint Agnes

The Feast of Saint Agnes

After a bath, Martel looked at the clothes in his chest. He should have asked what kind of clothing would be appropriate. A celebration suggested that he wore his finest, but this was an outpost, not a palace in Morcaster, and something resembling a uniform might be preferable.

In the end, he chose his silken shirt and doublet, along with his best trousers and nice shoes rather than boots. He had no mirror, so he could not be sure how his hair looked, but probably a mess. He had also begun to grow stubbles, and he had neither tools nor knowledge for how to shave. It was too late for such considerations; he had spent the day frivolously, enjoying the sun being a little warmer than usual, rather than think about his appearance.

Once dressed, he went outside to wait for Eleanor, who emerged from her tent moments later. "Shall we?"

Martel glanced at her attire, which was the typical black tunic. "Nothing formal?"

"If I ever wear a dress in this place, I will lose any authority I might have over these soldiers. No, it is twenty years of men's clothing for me."

"Now I feel overly dressed."

She shrugged. "It is nice to see you as something other than a prefect or firemage. Come on, let us be on our way." Martel nodded and reached out his hand, dispatching his magic to sweep ahead of them. "What was that?"

"Just freezing the ground. I don't want mud on these shoes."

"You have your uses."

From the outside, the legate's house looked as it had on their first visit, except for cracks of light from within shining through the shutters. As they entered, Martel noticed attempts at decorating the atrium with whatever flowers could be gathered this early in the year; he wondered if magic had been involved to make them bloom.

The master and mistress of the house met them, both dressed as if attending a celebration at the Imperial palace. "Welcome," the legate said gruffly, "to the feast of Saint Agnes."

"Thank you for the invitation," Eleanor replied with a bow.

"Yeah, thanks," Martel added. He already felt uncomfortable.

"You are the last woman to arrive, so my task here is done," the legate's wife declared, and she took Eleanor by the arm. "So glad to have another to add to our number. Come, the others await us in the dining hall."

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As the two women left, the legate looked at his battlemage. "Others are on the terrace. Go on." He made a throw with his head, and Martel went in that direction.

Entering the terrace, he saw most of the male mageknights had arrived as well. The older one, Lucius, made a throat sound presumably in greeting, and Martel nodded at him. Another, Valerius, moved over to place a cup in Martel's hand. "To your health!" he declared.

"And yours," Martel answered, taking a sip. A servant came in carrying a tray of vegetables wrapped in thin slices of meat, and each of the mageknights helped themselves. "So, how often does celebrations like this happen?"

"Couple of times a year," Valerius told him. "I think it depends on whether the legate can attract anyone to provide entertainment."

"What about tonight?"

"Oh, the saint's feast always happens, so he has an arrangement with a group of musicians. They always come," the mageknight explained. "I imagine they get paid well to make the miserable journey here."

"Our battlemage joins us." The decurion whose name, Martel had learned, was Dominic Char stepped towards them. "Since yesterday was salary day, you may want to invest in a razing knife. Even if only a few blades of grass grow on your lawn."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Ah, let the young man be," Lucius declared. "Tonight's a feast!"

"It seems to be every night for you," Valerius interjected.

"Drink tonight, for tomorrow you may be dead," the old mageknight responded, emptying his cup.

"I noticed a curious sight. Our good camp prefect, he has enchanted light in his tent," the decurion continued, staring straight at Martel.

"If you ask nicely, you can have one as well," the battlemage retorted.

"Strange, though. I thought they sent us a battlemage, not an enchanter. If we enter a fight, will you throw glowing rocks at them?"

Martel understood; he would never become friends with this particular mageknight. But if he could not gain friendship, he would use the decurion to gain respect. "If you worry about my abilities, I would be happy to demonstrate them. We could go outside right now." He looked demonstratively at the dagger in Dominic's belt.

The other mageknights all took notice; even Lucius ceased drinking, and their heads turned towards the decurion, who smiled. "A saint's feast is not the occasion. But tomorrow, at the noon bell? I am sure the camp would be thrilled to see what a battlemage can do."

"They won't be disappointed."

Dominic's smile widened. "Excellent."

Henry the stonemage entered at this point; some of the mageknights greeted him while others began a quiet discussion about what promised to be an entertaining morrow. "Did I miss something?" he asked, approaching Martel.

"Come to the camp tomorrow at noon, and you'll see."

The legate entered as well. "Since we are all here, let us not delay. If you will proceed to the wintergarden, the musicians should be ready, and we may begin the celebration."

The mageknights filed inside towards the designated area, where chairs had been placed in a semicircle. At the centre of the room and thus the attention, a trio wearing masks and costumes stood, each holding a different instrument. A flute, a harp, and a lute.

The women arrived as well; as far as Martel could tell, they were all mageknights. Eleanor sat down next to him. "How are you enjoying yourself?"

"I'll tell you after the performance."

Arriving as the last, the master and mistress of the domicile took the central seats. Receiving the signal to begin, the musicians began playing the elegy of Saint Agnes.

Chapter 530: Eight Breaths

Eight Breaths

Martel sat on a tree stump he had salvaged a while back, serving as his seat whenever he cooked meals outside his tent. The pot boiled merrily, turning oats and water into porridge. On the other side, sitting on her own stump, Eleanor unpacked the honey and raisins they usually added. "Not much left," she remarked. "And the trader in Esmouth will probably not have any to sell until the next ship arrives from Morcaster."

"I'll ask around. Maybe others have enough left they are willing to part with." Martel had plenty of coin to spend, after all, even after his various purchases ordered from the quartermaster the other day.

She handed him a plate. "Make sure you eat plenty. Between our sparring and your little fight at noon, you want to be sated."

Pouring oatmeal for himself, Martel wondered if he had made a mistake challenging the decurion. Perhaps he should have asked Eleanor for her opinion before doing so, but she had been in the other room, and it had happened rather fast. "Do you think I made a mistake, picking a fight with the decurion?"

Filling her plate, she looked up at him. "No. I want you to put him in his place."

She returned her attention to her meal, but in the silence, Martel understood something he had hitherto been blind towards.

He had expected condescension from the mageknights, being an elemental mage; he had not realised that Eleanor would be treated the same way, despite being a mageknight herself. But he saw it now; while the others were officers, leading soldiers into battle, she was the protector of an elemental mage, subject to the same bias that he met. That would end today.

"I will. You don't think I should save my strength? You still want to do our morning training?"

"I have seen Sir Dominic train. He fights like a mageknight, thinking only about steel. Against you, I doubt he will last ten breaths."

As the noon bell distantly rang, Martel left his tent. He wore his red robes rather than the attire of a prefect; he wanted them to see him as an elemental mage. In his hand, he carried his staff, though he suspected he would not have much need of it.

He barely had to wait before he saw the decurion stalking up the main thoroughfare of the camp. "I see you are ready, Sir Martel. And no armour bold choice."

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"You are welcome to make me regret it."

"I should warn you that I have fought battlemages before. Both at the Lyceum and here, your predecessors. They did not last long."

"I'm sure." Martel noticed a small crowd gathering, including the other prefects. "I suggest people disperse to the sides. I cannot guarantee the safety of anyone standing behind you."

"A sensible precaution," Dominic assented, gesturing for people to spread out. Drawing his sword, he casually approached Martel, reducing the distance between them. "Shall we begin?"

Martel raised his staff. "Sir Fontaine, will you give the signal?"

"Begin!"

Dominic had already raised his physical shield in anticipation of fire bolts or the like; as soon as the signal came, the mageknight broke into an empowered sprint. He closed the gap between them in a moment, but a moment was all that Martel needed. Closing his eyes, he conjured the brightest light he could in front of himself.

Outbursts from the crowd told him of the effect. Thanks to his ability to sense heat, Martel did not need sight; before his inner eye, he saw the shape of his enemy like a man made of fire, with the conjured, flaming orb hanging in the air between them. Aimlessly, Dominic swung his sword around. His impaired balance made it easy for Martel, who simply poured spellpower into a gust of wind and knocked the mageknight onto his back.

Dispelling his light and opening his eyes, Martel stepped forward to place one foot on Dominic's blade. He reached out a hand to help the mageknight on his feet, just in case he had the wisdom to accept his defeat and accept friendship.

Ignoring Martel's hand, Dominic got on his feet. "Neat little trick," he said with an overbearing smile. "Here I thought we had a battlemage in the legion, not a windmage." He looked towards the crowd, his comment aimed at them; some laughed, but it sounded nervous rather than genuine. "If I had known I was to face such simple tricks, I would have fought differently."

Deciding to hammer his message home, Martel raised a hand and allowed sparks to jump from one fingertip to another. "Do you know what happens to a man struck by a lightning bolt, especially when wearing so much metal? He boils like a shrimp in its shell." Dismissing the effect, he smiled. "No need to worry. When we face the enemy, they'll know that they face a battlemage."

As he turned away, Eleanor joined him. "Eight breaths. I was right."

Walking back to their tents, the pair was joined by Henry, the stonemage. "What a spectacle! Better than the performance last night, though granted, I've seen that show about ten times before."

"I didn't notice you in the crowd," Martel said. "Actually, have you two met?" He glanced at Eleanor by his side. While he had spent a handful of afternoons at Henry's house, he had always been alone when visiting. "Eleanor, my protector. Henry, our resident stonemage."

"Sir Fontaine, yes. We spoke briefly after the performance last night."

"Eleanor will do among friends," she told him.

"Appreciated. Now, where is this magnificent residence you always speak of?" Henry asked, aimed at Martel.

The battlemage pointed at the tent ahead. "I believe I made no exaggerations when describing its opulence. All I have to offer is ale or river water, though."

"Ale will be splendid."

"I will fetch my chair," Eleanor suggested. "Weather is nice enough to sit outside."

They spent the next hours in pleasant conversation, sharing ale and the last raisins.