

Firebrand 571

Chapter 571: A Light in the Dark

A Light in the Dark

This time, Martel was not in doubt; the Khivans knew to expect him and Eleanor. About ten of them were just ahead, spread out in a semicircle. They must have spotted the mages approaching and prepared their ambush accordingly, taking positions and waiting for the pair to walk into the trap.

Crouched next to him, Eleanor watched him with an unspoken question on her lips. In response, Martel held up all of his fingers. Next, he pointed to the left and described with his finger the semicircle where the Khivans were laid out. She gestured to the right and the left in another unspoken question.

Martel spent a moment considering the positions of their enemies. Straight ahead, four of them were up high, presumably sitting in the trees. They would be the primary sharpshooters, supporting the others from afar. Three on either side were on the ground, wielding pistols and melee weapons for close combat. Once Martel had determined how to best employ his spells, he pointed to the left.

Eleanor nodded and got on her feet, drawing her sword. Once her approach could no longer remain hidden, she broke into an empowered sprint, and even prepared, the Khivans barely could react before she was upon them. Following closely behind her, Martel raised his wall of flames to cut off the remaining Khivans, including breaking any line of sight to their sharpshooters in the trees. Another slaughter began.

The last of them tried to flee. Not taking any chances, Martel unleashed a lightning bolt that struck the Khivan between the shoulder blades, and he fell to the ground. Walking up to the body, the familiar stench of burning flesh and clothes reached him. He extended his magic to crumple up the barrel of the musket before grabbing the soldier and turning him around. He looked typically Khivan, maybe twice Martel's age. Probably an experienced warrior. Now he was just meat for carrion.

Martel bent down and grabbed the soldier's pistol. He removed the bullet with streaks of gold from the barrel and unleashed fire from his palm to melt the firing mechanism of the weapon. Throwing the hunk of iron and wood away, he returned to Eleanor, who had likewise been destroying the Khivan weapons. He threw the golden bullet to her. "One more for the collection."

On their way home, they stopped by a small pond and threw every gold-touched bullet into the water. Martel knew they could be considered valuable, but he had more coin than he could spend, and neither of them felt comfortable holding onto something made to kill mages. Every time he saw the water swallow one of these bullets into its depths, he felt a little more at ease.

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Back in the outpost, they ate a quiet supper. Henry had finished his repairs and returned to Esmouth, and so had Starkad. This left few options for company; prefects did not mix with the regular soldiery.

Taking a stroll through camp just to pass the time before going to bed, Martel was nonetheless approached by a familiar figure. "Sir Martel, do you have time to speak?"

The battlemage looked at the spy, who must have recently returned; he did not recall seeing Wulfstan in the last few days. "What is it?"

"I was told of something that made me curious. I brought this for your troubles." He held out a jar of wine.

"Alright, ask your questions." Martel accepted the gift and took a seat on the ground after Wulfstan had done so.

"I heard that on your initial journey to Esmouth, you brought down a Khivan galley. Burned its sail, much how you destroyed the cannons. No visible spell, just pure magic."

"Yeah, that's true." Martel frowned, wondering why that would elicit any interest.

"My confusion is how you were able to do such a thing. I was given to understand that you could only destroy the cannons because they were heated from usage, but the sail of a ship would be as cold as anything else around it, wouldn't it?"

"That's true, and maybe I explained it too hastily. I don't necessarily need warmth to distinguish between things." He found a twig on the ground and grabbed it with his magic, levitating it into the air. "Reaching out with magic is like Fumbling around in the dark. You're not really sure what your fingers are touching, but you can distinguish between different kinds of material. And the closer it is to you, the easier."

"Fascinating. But if something is hotter than their surroundings, that makes it easier for you to connect?" The spy stared at Martel with a serious demeanour, and the whole situation made him think of being questioned by Master Fenrick during class.

"Yes. It's like someone lighting a torch in the dark. I don't have to fumble around to find it. I know exactly where it is."

Wulfstan nodded to himself. "Most interesting. I feel like a blind man being described how it feels to see."

"Why exactly do you want to know this? This isn't useful except to other mages, and I assume they already know this." Martel did not know how as such it was for other elemental mages, but he assumed they had a similar connection to their own element; he doubted that anything he just said would be illuminating to them.

"You might be surprised. Of course, they all have some idea of how their abilities work and affect their surroundings, but in my experience, once a wizard has finished their training at the Lyceum, they simply continue along the same routines they were taught. There seems to be very little effort in expanding our knowledge or improving our methods," Wulfstan explained.

The spy might have a point in that, Martel conceded; certainly the legions seemed disinterested. Listening to Henry describe his work, it consisted of doing the same handful of tasks over and over. "Well, I wish you luck in your endeavour." Martel got on his feet, jar of wine in hand, and returned to his tent.

Eleanor, sitting outside, look up at him. "What do you have there?"

"I sold my knowledge for a drink. Where are our cups? I think we both earned a sip of this today."

Chapter 572: On Crooked Paths

On Crooked Paths

Before Martel and Eleanor could leave the next morning, they were intercepted by the legionary. "Prefects, Sir Avery bids you join her."

Eleanor glanced at Martel, who shrugged. "Very well."

They quickly traversed the outpost to reach the tent of its resident commander. Stepping inside, they found not only the mageknight, but also Wulfstan waiting for them.

"Prefects. Instead of your usual patrolling, I have a task for you. I will let the legate's liaison explain."

Wulfstan gestured towards the short, small table in the middle, upon which a map lay. "We have not been able to find any concentration of Khivans in the area for a while now. Not since we drove them out of this very outpost. They seem to have dispersed in small bands all across the woods. With plenty of food to hunt and forage, they are self-sufficient in every respect except one."

"Munition," Eleanor declared.

The spy nodded. "And more than that, the Khivan powder that fuels their weapons. They transport it in barrels on carts, meaning they are forced to follow certain trails through the forests. Destroying these supplies will significantly hamper their efforts in controlling this area. You may find your future patrols far more peaceful."

"Is it well guarded?" she asked.

"About twenty soldiers. Which is why sending a force of legionaries is useless. We'd have to send so many, they will be discovered far in advance. But two mages, guided by a scout, may actually have a chance of getting close enough to destroy the supplies," Wulfstan argued.

"Twenty soldiers is a lot, even for us. Especially if they got golden bullets," Martel said sceptically. While the element of surprise would help, they could easily get surrounded when fighting that many. It only took one shot at the right time to kill.

"Another reason I propose sending you," Wulfstan spoke. "After all, you don't have to defeat the entire armed escort. The Khivan powder is highly explosive. It just needs a touch of fire."

Martel finally understood why the spy had been so interested in learning about his capabilities, igniting the sail on the galley or destroying the barrels of the cannons. "You want me to ignite the barrels from afar, burn it all up."

Sir Avery gave him a discerning look. "Is this within your abilities, Sir Martel?"

The battlemage felt slighted that the spy had questioned him under what felt like false pretences. Yet he understood the significance of this mission. If the various Khivan bands in the area were denied their powder rations, they would not pose a threat to him and Eleanor or the other soldiers of the outpost. He looked at her, hoping she agreed with him. "We can try."

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They went to the quartermaster, picking up extra rations for the journey. It would take them at least two days even if they made haste, which Wulfstan had explained was necessary; based on what the scouts could guess, another supply train would happen within the next days. If they missed it, the next chance might not be for a month or two.

Their Tyrian guide awaited them by the gate. Martel knew her name to be Freydis, but little more. She did not speak much Asterian, and like most of the Tyrians, she seemed reserved at least without mead and music being shared. "Ready?" she spoke, seeing the two mages approach.

Martel nodded in acknowledgement, and they left the outpost.

It proved a different experience travelling with the scout compared to their regular patrols. Martel and Eleanor knew how to maintain vigilance, but they did not shy away from a fight if they met Khivans.

Freydis led them along trails that Martel would never have noticed on his own. At times, using the position of the sun as his guide, he noticed that they walked along an uneven direction. They might move east for an hour, turn sharply north for another two, and once more walk east. This had to extend their travel time rather than going in a straight line, but he assumed the scout had good reasons. He could not ask her, nor would he even if she spoke Asterian well enough to explain; they all knew to avoid sound as much as possible.

Martel did notice a lack of water on their route. No streams, ponds, or anything like that. He wondered if this accounted for their route; perhaps the Khivans preferred to stay near such sources, or their patrols just naturally followed such features in the terrain.

They walked until past nightfall, making Martel wonder how Freydis could even navigate in the dark. But she continued leading the way, setting the same rapid pace they had followed all day. It was at least an hour past sunset, if not two, before she halted and made a gesture for sleep.

Despite the lack of language, they arranged how to keep watch through the night. Eleanor and Martel made their runes of warning, which caught the attention of their scout. She still did not speak, maintaining her silence as much as possible, but she nodded eagerly and crossed her arms; Martel hoped that was a gesture meant to indicate approval. He simply nodded and sat down, taking first watch.

They woke early, before dawn. Martel could not tell how long he had slept, but it did not feel near enough. Though compared to when he and Eleanor had marched through the night to reach the outpost in time before the Khivan assault, Martel had been through worse. He did his best to shake off any feeling of being sluggish or dizzy, knowing he had to be alert. A few sips of cold water helped him feel more awake, and he slung his bag of provisions over his shoulder, ready for the day's journey.

They walked as the sun rose up the horizon, reaching its zenith, and continued afterwards until late in the afternoon when Freydis raised a hand to signal a stop. They were still in the forest, though the terrain was rugged, rolling up and down. For the last many miles, they had followed a depression in

the landscape in between hills; now, their scout turned to ascend the slope on the right. The others followed, but near the top, Freydis lay down and crawled forward. They followed suit.

Once they could gaze over the top of the hill, they saw nothing other than more forest. Martel used his magic, but sensed only the expected woodland critters. Though at a second glance, he understood. In the distance, down the slope, the terrain was even. Here and there, bushes had been removed, or branches cut from a tree. A trail had been cut to allow movement for something bigger than humans. This was to be the site of their ambush.

Freydis looked at the mages next to her. "Khiva. Today. Tomorrow." It was time to wait and see if the enemy would spring their trap.

Chapter 574: The Pace of Victory

The Pace of Victory

The two Asterians and their Tyrian scout ran all they could, the latter in front. She knew the terrain and the route home, and even without magic, she was swift; Martel had to use bursts of his power to catch up every now and then. Any sounds of shooting or shouting faded behind them, though Martel knew they were far from having escaped danger; they had a long journey ahead of them back to the outpost.

After they had been running for a while, Freydis finally stopped. As they caught their breaths, she made various gestures towards them. First, she pointed in the direction ahead and showed herself running in place. After, she pointed behind them, grabbing an arrow from her quiver.

Eleanor looked at Martel, and he figured they had the same thought. She drew her sword. "Better to fight where we choose the battlefield."

The Khivans came at full speed, having no trouble following the trail. Three of them at first, probably the small vanguard, which had not been caught in the initial blast. Freydis opened the ambush by releasing an arrow to kill the man furthest away. Leaping up from her hiding place, Eleanor charged the remaining two.

Behind them, Martel could see another handful of enemies. Some of them went against Eleanor while the others raised their muskets. Martel conjured his wall of flames in front of them, disrupting their shots and forcing them to circumvent his obstacle. As they appeared to one side, he unleashed fire bolts while Freydis shot her arrows against those on the other.

Musket fire rang out, and on instinct, Martel crouched low. Having already summoned lightning twice, and now a wall in addition, his spellpower was running low. Rather than spells, he reached out with his magic to destroy the barrel of every musket that had fired. Finding their weapons unusable, the remaining Khivans charged against Eleanor. Against the mageknight with plenty of magic left, they stood little chance. One of them went for Martel instead, who defended himself with his staff until Freydis appeared, stabbing his attacker in the back. He glanced around, searching for the next; he found none. A trail of bodies lay on the ground where Eleanor had progressed, and a little further away, those slain by him and the Tyrian. He dismissed his wall, exhaling deeply.

"Anybody wounded?" Eleanor glanced at her companions.

Martel looked at Freydis and realised she clutched her shoulder with blood pouring forth between her fingers. A musket ball must have grazed her, tearing up the flesh. Martel knew such a wound should not be underestimated; the size of the bullets meant that even a grazing shot could cause terrible bleeding. Enough to have a fatal outcome if untreated.

Freydis seemed aware; she stared at Martel. "Fire!" She added a string of words in Tyrian. "Fire!"

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"She wants you to cauterise the wound," Eleanor explained, having grasped her meaning quicker. The mageknight bent down and picked up a twig, which she gave to Freydis, who placed it between her teeth.

After unsheathing his dagger, Martel held his hand around the blade and heated it up until it glowed red. He looked at the Tyrian scout. "Ready?"

Regardless of language, she understood. She nodded and removed her hand, revealing a nasty gash. As Martel stepped close, she bit down on the twig in her mouth. Steeling himself, Martel placed the glowing blade against the wound, burning the wound to close it and stem the bleeding.

A muffled howl of pain issued from Freydis. As Martel pulled back, she spat out the twig and unleashed what he imagined to be the foulest curse words in the Tyrian speech. Breathing deeply, she ran her sleeve across her brow and afterwards bent down to wipe her own blood from her hand on the nearest Khivan. Wordlessly, Martel placed salve on her injury. Once done, she looked at her companions. "We go. Day. Night. Go." A long march ensued.

As Freydis had warned, they walked whether day or night. They never rested for more than a few minutes, and she kept up a hefty pace, injured or not. Martel found himself impressed with her resilience and stamina, all the more as she had no magic to bolster herself with. He understood the value of these scouts for the legion; it was clear to him that their entire push into Khivan territory, such as the outpost, was only possible due to the intelligence they gathered unseen.

As night fell, their pace lessened, but they still continued. Martel was extremely parched, from both physical and magical exertion; because their route avoided water, he had drunk the last of his many hours ago.

He did not know if the Khivans still pursue them, considering they must have killed nearly all of the escort, but he knew if it came to a fight, he had little left to give. There was also the risk of other Khivan patrols in the area picking up their trail. Their best hope seemed to be simply speed, outpacing any possible pursuers.

When dawn came, it did not bring relief as such. Besides reminding Martel of how many hours they had been on the march, the growing sunlight allowed Freydis to quicken her step once more. Feeling so tired that he feared he might begin to simply sleep while walking, Martel gritted his teeth and hurried to catch up.

They came upon a stream and rested briefly. Martel buried his face in the water, drinking until his stomach hurt. The cold and fresh sensation of splashing water on his face helped to wake him up, and he finally recognised their surroundings. This was the same stream that brought water to the

outpost. They were back in Asterian-held territory. He looked at Eleanor; seeing her smile at the same realisation, he laughed.

Chewing on the last of their rations, they walked into camp. The legionaries saluted and greeted them as usual, apparently not aware of their prolonged absence. A few of them glanced at Freydis, whose shoulder and sleeve were ragged and bloodied, but nobody asked questions. With a curt nod, the Tyrian scout took her silent leave and went to the tent shared by her brethren. As for Martel and Eleanor, they continued with their final, weary steps towards the commander's tent.

"Sir Fontaine, Sir Martel. Both still on your feet, and from the look of it in one piece." Avery gave each of them a scrutinising look. "Did you find success?"

"We did," Eleanor replied. "Every barrel of powder was destroyed."

"Excellent. I shall make note of this in my report. I am intrigued to find out if Khivan activity will diminish in the area as a result." Avery began leafing through a bunch of parchment while Martel and Eleanor simply left.

Every step felt if possible harder than the previous one. He could barely keep his eyes open and nearly stumbled, his hand shooting out to grab Eleanor's elbow for support. Finally, they reached their tent.

"Sleep."

"Sleep."

With this inspired exchange complete, they both lay down to rest.

Chapter 575: Letters and Leave

Letters and Leave

A period of calm followed after the raid. As Martel and Eleanor resumed their patrolling, they no longer encountered the enemy. Day after day passed with no sign. At first, Martel suspected this was only the sort of calm that preceded a storm, and he continued to wait for what he assumed to be the inevitable resumption of ambushes and fight for control of the area.

Yet a month passed and another, without either the mages or the common legionaries seeing any evidence of Khivan activity. The Tyrian scouts were deployed – Martel was not the only one who feared a ruse – and they returned with reports that the nearest Khivans were a fiveday away.

In addition, the trees had begun to lose the first leaves. Harvest season was coming early with colder weather than usual. The lack of foliage made attempts of ambushing harder, and the falling temperatures made camping in the wild less enticing. The birds fled for southern skies, making game harder to find; soon, snow would cover the ground to chill the bones, while frost would make water a chore to collect.

It appeared that, at least for now, the Khivans had ceded ground. Martel figured that they would return past winter, once the campaigning season returned, but for now, he praised each morning that proved colder than the last. A child of the North, it did not bother him yet, and he had plenty of gold to buy furs from the Tyrians for his tent if needed. While life in the outpost was harsh and simple with few comforts and no luxuries, in the absence of fighting, Martel felt content.

As they returned from another uneventful patrol, Eleanor went to the commander's tent to enquire after mail while Martel began preparing something hot to eat. She had gone on this errand for more than a fiveday, so far to no avail. But this time, as she returned, she held an envelope in her hand.

"Luck finally smiled on you," he said as she reached him. "You have been anxious about that for a while now. News from home?" It had been a long while since Martel last received a letter from home. The distance from his current location to Engby could be felt.

Eleanor did not reply as she opened the envelope and read the letter inside. "Yes!"

He looked up at her, one hand stirring the pot containing their supper. She was not the type to act excited. "What is it?"

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"A while back, I wrote to the military administration in Morcaster. I detailed our exploits, number of skirmishes thought, our actions during the various assaults on Khivan encampments and the defence of this outpost, and lastly, our successful raid into Khivan territory," she said, practically rambling.

"Alright... I remember, I was present. And what's that, a note from them thanking us for a task well done?"

"I requested that we receive leave during this winter, given that we have seen more combat this season than most legionaries see during all the years of service. I may also have written to my father, asking for him to put in a good word for us," she admitted. "And this is confirmation that we have been granted leave for three months!" She waived the parchment about. "Enough for us to return to Morcaster, spend the solstice in the capital, and make it back here before springtime."

The news was so unexpected, Martel did not know how to react or what to think. "Why didn't you tell me about this?" The couple of times he had enquired about why she was so eagerly awaiting the post, she had brushed him off.

"I did not wish to raise your hopes. Being granted leave during war is rare, especially giving this is our first year. But given all our work, and since we are not strictly needed, I thought there might be a chance." Her happy expression faded as she noticed his conflicted look. "Why? Do you not wish to leave?"

Martel knew little about the workings of the Asterian military administration, but he figured Eleanor was right in one regard; soldiers being granted leave during war was close to unheard of, especially during their first year of service. It was the reason that so many legionaries had their families follow them to camp. He worried that the primary influence in making this decision was Eleanor's father rather than because they had earned it through their actions.

In other words, this was a privilege afforded to them due to personal advantages that ordinary legionaries and maybe even the other prefects would never enjoy. Accepting this would not endear Martel to anybody in the legion.

On the other hand, if he refused to go, so would Eleanor. Her sense of duty as his protector would never allow her to leave while he remained this close to the front. Thus, he would deprive her of the opportunity to see her family, including her sister, whom Eleanor barely had been able to spend time with since she was cured of her never-ending sleep. And while this leave had probably only

been granted because of her father's influence, Martel did feel that she deserved to sleep in a real bed, take hot baths in proper facilities, and eat better food than porridge for breakfast and stew for supper.

"Don't be silly. I can't wait." He did his best to smile.

"Wonderful! We have received permission to leave at once, so there is no need to delay. After all, it will not take us long to pack." She laughed, and hearing that sound made all of Martel's reservations melt away. "I will find it hard to sleep tonight."

Martel yawned. "I won't. All this walking around, breathing the forest air after living two years in Morcaster... I almost got used to it."

She finally began removing her armour, going in and out of their tent, while Martel continued to stir the simmering pot.

The next day, as they woke up, the first snow had fallen.

Chapter 576: An Optio and an Officer

An Optio and an Officer

Three days later, Martel and Eleanor walked into the camp of the Tenth Legion. Since they had to wait for the next available ship sailing to Morcaster, they settled back into their old tents. With time to spare, Martel crossed both bridge and town to visit his friend.

"Come in, take a seat," Henry spoke in invitation. "They've finally taken the leash off?"

Martel entered the home of the stonemage and sat down. "You could say that."

"Here, something to keep us warm. It's starting to get cold." Henry rubbed his hands together before he dug out some cups and wine. "I had wondered if they'd make you camp all winter in that outpost. I suppose as a firemage, you got ways to stay warm, but even so."

"On the contrary. Well, I can believe the legate would be happy to make us stay there, but we got word all the way from Morcaster, granting us leave," Martel explained.

Sitting down, the stonemage gave his visitor a scrutinising look. "You've gotten leave? Already? I know you've been busy, of course, fighting so much."

Martel suddenly felt awkward, having admitted the truth; he did not know how long Henry had been stuck in Esmouth. Most likely, he went years without receiving leave to go anywhere. "Yeah. Eleanor requested it for us. Wrote a report about all our fights. I guess she convinced them."

The stonemage took a sip from his cup. "I'm glad," he finally said. "I've seen it before. Soldiers holding an extended position, fighting days on end during sieges and the like. It changes them, and not for the better. Some recuperation far from the front will do you both good."

"You're probably right," Martel assented, just happy that his friend did not judge him or resent him. Since Henry knew who Eleanor's father was, he could probably figure out the circumstances of why they had been granted leave.

"The Tenth has a reputation for a reason. People think the siege of Nahavand is worse, but little happens in that place. Neither side can advance, so they dig ditches and glare at each other. Not like here." Henry refilled his cup. "They don't like talking about it, but Robert, the camp prefect, once

admitted to me that the Tenth has the highest casualty numbers of any legion in the Empire. More than twice that of the Thirteenth."

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"I had no idea." Martel knew that the Tenth was considered among the worse postings, but he did not realise it was the very worst. He felt a sudden pang of guilt that he had dragged Eleanor here, a recurring feeling; they would never have been assigned to this legion if not for his feud with Duke Cheval.

Henry nodded to himself. "Enjoy every moment you are away from here. As hard as this summer has been, another waits next year." He raised his cup in a salute.

"I'll be sure to bring back a jar or two of the best wine Morcaster's got," Martel promised, raising his own cup.

On his way back to camp, Martel passed The Salty Mug. It was already dark, and plenty of legionaries crowded the place. Some of them saluted him as he passed by, though most seemed too drunk to take note of their surroundings.

"The battlemage of the Tenth Legion himself! Come to share a drink with the common soldiery?"

Confused at being addressed in this manner by a voice unknown to him, Martel looked around in the dark until he finally located the speaker. It was the optio of the sixth cohort, whom Martel had once overheard voicing complaints about him. Realising the words were spoken sarcastically by a man too drunk for his own good, Martel resumed walking away.

"As expected. Too good for the likes of us, these wizards and prefects."

Martel froze in his tracks. It was unthinkable for even a legionary to address a prefect like this. Although a low rank, for an optio to speak in this manner to a superior officer, in the presence of his own men – the fellow had to be heavily intoxicated, or he harboured even greater hatred of the battlemage than Martel had surmised. He turned on his heel and stared at the optio, ten feet or so separating them.

"Now I've done it. We all heard how the battlemage treats those who speak out of turn." Although visibly drunk, slurring his words, the optio had a dangerous glint in his eyes, like he was picking a fight that he knew he could never win.

Martel remembered the last soldier who had insulted him; Martel had sent him flat on his back. Nobody would give him trouble if he did this to the optio after repeated insults. But on the previous occasion and others like it, Martel had struck a blow out of anger, acting on instinct. He did not actually enjoy punching people, nor did it seem a good solution to this. At the same time, he could not simply let this slide.

He looked at the other legionaries present. "Soldiers," he barked, and reflex make them snap to attention. "Your optio has had more to drink than is good for him. Escort him back to camp and place him in the stockade to sober up. Now!"

The soldiers saluted, some more correctly than others, and a pair of them grabbed the optio by the shoulders, probably more to support him than force him anywhere. Together, they began moving towards the camp.

Martel turned his attention on the remainder of the soldiers outside the tavern. Some of them looked away, while others stared unashamedly. Digging into a pocket, Martel found a gold crown and threw it to the nearest legionary who looked sufficiently alert that he might catch it. "Have a round on me, and mind that you share it with all."

"Yes, sir!"

Various expressions of gratitude, most of them slurred, came Martel's way. He nodded briefly in acknowledgement and resumed his own journey back towards camp.

Chapter 577: A Living Weapon

A Living Weapon

As Martel woke, he glanced around his tent. Most of his belongings had been packed in his travel chest; they would leave camp before second bell to board a ship bound for Morcaster. The sight of it made him feel eerie, as if he could not quite believe they would be away for three months. With his luck, a Khivan galley would sink their ship halfway there.

But first, he had an errand to run. After getting dressed, he left his tent; Eleanor sat outside, already preparing breakfast. He sent her a quick smile as a quiet greeting.

"Where are you going?" she asked, seeing him walk past her.

"Something quick I need to deal with."

"Hurry! As soon as we have eaten, we should be on our way," she called out. "The captain wants to leave sooner rather than later!"

"I'll hurry," he promised, glancing at her over his shoulder before he continued to the stockade.

The camp of the Tenth had a small pen used to house animals brought here for slaughter. At some point, the fences had been replaced by sturdy posts that it might also contain Khivan prisoners, who at times were captured during patrols and skirmishes. And on occasion, legionaries causing trouble were thrown in here as well to cool their heads or await their punishment.

Although occupied, the stockade was not guarded currently; that only happened if Khivans were inside. Martel unbolted the door and pulled it open, revealing a sleeping optio inside the enclosure. He sat with his back against the wall, probably to minimise his exposure to the cold ground.

"Soldier," Martel spoke.

It took a few moments, but the optio finally opened his eyes. With stiff movements, he got on his feet and made a passable salute. "Prefect."

Martel could practically hear the hangover in his voice, but he did not seem otherwise burdened by his conduct last night. Certainly, nothing about his demeanour suggested contrition or remorse.

"What is your name, optio?"

"Petrus of Aquila, sir, optio of the third centuria, sixth cohort." He rattled off the string of words with a neutral voice.

"You really hate me, Petrus of Aquila, don't you?"

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The optio refrained from making any reply.

"Name your reasons for your enmity."

"Sir, is that an order?"

"Yes."

Finally, Petrus looked the battlemage in the eyes. "During our passage here, you risked the lives of everyone aboard by deciding to engage a Khivan galley and its cannons. And when the ship was disabled, you extinguished the fire, giving them a chance to fight back and forcing my men to risk their lives to take the ship. While you stayed behind."

"I doubt a merchant vessel could outrun a galley, but go on. Anything else?"

"During the assault on the outpost, while we held the defences being shot at, you hid after making that little wall of fire. I saw you, sir." The title was spoken with an acerbic tone.

"And the night before, I crawled outside the walls to destroy two of the cannons, retreating with plenty of shots being fired at me."

"I heard that, but it rang false in my ears," the optio declared. "Regardless, this is happening because of you. The increased patrols, making ourselves vulnerable with the outpost... The legate has a fire-touched battlemage, and he wants to strike a decisive blow against the enemy, no matter how many of us must die. But I've seen what Khivan cannons can do." His voice grew foreboding. "One shot ripped the head off a battlemage, like a child tearing it off a doll. I've seen them spray splinters of metal across a field, felling a dozen men at once. Your presence here will be the death of my centuria, my entire cohort, most likely. Sir."

Martel returned his gaze, refusing to look away. "Petrus of Aquila. You're far from home. Why did you sign up to join the legions?"

"Seven siblings at home. Someone had to leave and make their own way. And if you're going to tell me this is what I signed up for, the Empire wasn't at war back then. I never heard of cannons, let alone seen what they can do to a whole company of men." A hard look filled the optio's eyes. "You won't shame me by arguing duty. Despite it all, I've always done what was asked of me."

"You chose what seemed the best opportunity for you at the time. The difference between you and me, Petrus, is magic, of course. A gift, it's considered." Martel kept his gaze on the optio. "But I didn't choose it. Nor being fire-touched. And the moment the Imperial administration knew, all choices were taken from me. I was trained for the sole purpose to fight. Every day, they send me out to kill. And the Khivans, they know all about me. So every day, another ambush. Another chance to kill me. Because I'm a living cannon, Petrus. I can kill more men than any other kind of mage, any other soldier. I'm a living piece of artillery, I strike with unerring accuracy, and the legion will keep making me kill until I die, probably in a ditch somewhere, having accomplished nothing. Believe

me, Petrus of Aquila, I'm not here of my own will or desire." Martel exhaled, having spoken far more than he intended. "I'd leave if I could."

The optio made no reply, his face impossible to scrutinise.

"You can go. Re-join your centuria. But if you ever speak like that again to a prefect in front of the ranks, don't expect your back to remain unwhipped or for you to remain an optio." Having said his piece, Martel left.

Eleanor looked up as he approached and held a plate towards him. "Eat up before it gets cold. We should leave as soon as you are done."

"Alright." He accepted the plate, grabbing hold of the spoon on it.

"Did you handle your errand?"

"I did."

In silence, they finished their meal, concluded packing their belongings, carried them all to the small harbour, and boarded a ship that would take them to Morcaster.

Chapter 578: Familiar Sensations

Familiar Sensations

Martel had forgotten about seasickness. The first few days, he spent all waking hours on the deck, strategically near the railing, should he need to make any deposits into the water. He could not determine whether he wanted or feared a Khivan galley might show up; he was unsure whether he would be able to fight, but on the other hand, it would give him a target to unleash his frustrations upon.

At least he had plenty of space, unlike the first journey to Esmouth. Rather than half a cohort, the ship only had a few scores of wounded or crippled legionaries, dismissed from the legion as they could no longer serve. Likewise, the hold barely contained goods. The soldiers of the Tenth consumed many different wares, but they produced none, and anything the people of Esmouth created, they could likewise sell in full to the legion.

Thus, the vessel only carried furs bought from the Tyrians along with a collection of Khivan uniforms and broken weaponry, curiously enough. In one of his better moments, Martel had asked the captain about this, who had explained that he sold such items as curiosities to the wealthy of Morcaster. Proof that plenty of people existed with more money than sense.

"How are you feeling?" Eleanor sat down beside him. Unlike their first journey, she did not train or spar with anyone. Instead, she spent time with the veterans, listening to their stories of how they were injured or their experiences in the legion. Some demurred, but others spoke freely, no longer bound by any reverence for their commanding officers as they had been dismissed from service.

"Please, ask me anything other than that," Martel told her. "Anything that'll distract me."

"Oh, sure." She frowned in thought, sitting down next to him. "How did you discover you had magic?"

"I was about three or four," Martel related, grateful to have something else to think about. "In the town, my father's forge was the most interesting place. I loved watching him shape metal on his anvil, turning a lump of iron into something useful. And the furnace intrigued me. My brother would use the bellows, making the coals flare up."

Eleanor adjusted herself, back against the railing, and watched him.

"I don't know how, but looking at the flames, it felt like they wanted me to – join them, or something like that. I stretched out a hand, and my father immediately yelled at me." Martel chuckled at the memory. "He thought I was going to touch the scorching hot furnace. But I just wanted the flames to come to me. And they did, filling my palm."

"How did your father react to that?"

"More yelling. He told me to never do that again. I didn't understand what I had done wrong. It took me a long time to realise what magic even was, and that I possessed it." He looked at her. "What about you?"

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"Pretty simple story. I was six, and I had cut myself terribly. Stitches down my arm. As it healed, my mother realised that it left no scar behind."

Martel had never considered that. "You sure that you don't have the gift of healing?"

She laughed. "Sadly, I heal as slowly as you."

It would have been an unbelievable coincidence if both of Martel's friends from schools possessed that rarest of traits. "Have you heard from Max?"

If the change of topics seemed sudden to her, Eleanor did not let it show. "I wrote to him a while after our arrival to Esmouth, to which he replied. I rarely thought about writing letters after that, though, with everything we went through."

The same held true for Martel; given they had spent nearly every day wandering for hours, he rarely had the presence of mind to consider writing letters to anybody. As he recalled, he had only written the one letter to his family while at the outpost. It could not really blame Maximilian for never writing when Martel had not done so either.

"But we shall see him soon," Eleanor continued, giving him a smile. "I can only imagine how thrilled you will be. And we shall have the better stories to tell, compared to some praetorian."

"You're right. That's going to eat him up."

She laughed. "By the way, you are obviously welcome to stay at my family's home."

"Oh. I was just going to get a room somewhere, like The Golden Goose. I got more money than I need, after all." Considering that Eleanor had abandoned her career as an officer to become Martel's protector, he doubted that her father would be pleased to have him as a guest.

"Nonsense. How much sleep will you get in a place like that? Our home has extensive baths, and I dare say every meal served will be better than anything you will get in a tavern."

Martel find it hard to argue with any of that. "Alright, thanks." He smiled until a wave crashed against the ship, and combined with the mention of food, he felt his entire stomach churn.

The first nights, Martel barely got sleep. While the ship had plenty of room below deck, the smell of unwashed people stowed together kept him awake. Eleanor offered that he took the captain's cabin, which had been placed at her disposal, but he could not make himself do that. Eventually, he figured that resting directly on the deck could not be worse than on the forest floor, and with the fresh air, he managed to sleep. At least on the nights when it did not rain.

The days of the journey passed without events; no Khivan galleys tried their luck this time. At last, the walls of Morcaster came into sight. Martel stood at the railing, looking towards the shore as they sailed past Smallport. It brought up strange memories of the people in whose company he had visited that place; most of them were dead, one by his own hand, another by his failure. He was happy as the ship continued and began its approach into the main harbour. He looked up at the lighthouse, atop which a windmage would be directing traffic. On a winter's day like this with few vessels, that would be an easy task.

As soon as the ship was moored, Martel disembarked. Immediately, he felt eerie. Not just from having solid ground under his feet, or because the port seemed almost sleepy in comparison to the busy days of summer.

He finally realised what it was. Whenever he had gone to the harbour from the Lyceum, the smell of sea and salt in the air would tell him when he was getting close to the docks. But after a month breathing that air already, he did not notice it at all standing on the quay. Regardless, all the surrounding sights were familiar. Almost to his own surprise, Martel felt like he had come home.

Chapter 579: Head Above Water

Head Above Water

Unwilling to cross the entire city on foot with all their luggage, Martel and Eleanor hired a cart and a driver. They placed their belongings and themselves in the back and began the journey northeast towards the noble quarter. Dressed in his red robes with flaming embroidery, not to mention the ruby-tipped staff in his hand, Martel looked the very image of a wizard, and as they drove through the streets, the sight of a mage in the back of a cart drew plenty of stares. But only until he had passed them by; there was always something stranger coming right around the corner in Morcaster.

The path took them across the square in front of the Lyceum, and Martel felt all sorts of emotions seeing the castle, enough to overwhelm him. His time with the legion had most days been so exhausting, he had barely had time or energy to think about his former school. Now, as the wagon rumbled past its gates and towers, he realised how much he missed it. Even if so many of his days have been spent alone; he had still made two friends, one of whom had been by his side ever since, he had been blessed with such mentors as Master Alastair or Mistress Rana, and he had met kindness shown by the likes of Master Jerome.

As they drove through the gate to enter the courtyard of the mansion belonging to House Fontaine, Martel briefly reflected on the stark contrast with the walled encampment outside of Esmouth. Their driver seemed uncomfortable, perhaps feeling out of place; as soon as he had received his pay, he drove off swiftly. Grabbing their belongings, Martel and Eleanor trudged up to the front doors and knocked.

"Lady Eleanor!" exclaimed the servant who opened.

"Inform my parents of our arrival, if you please."

The servant ran off, and the two mages stepped inside. Martel felt self-conscious allowing his worn travel chest to touch the marble floor, and they spent a brief while in silence until they heard footsteps resounding through the open space. From atop the great staircase leading to the upper floor, a girl some years younger than Eleanor appeared, and she hurried down to jump into her sister's arms.

"You are home!"

Eleanor squeezed the girl before pulling back. "Genevieve, you remember my friend, Martel."

The girl gave him an embarrassed smile, and he bowed his head. While he had seen her on a few occasions, she had been unconscious, and he doubted she would have recognised him without Eleanor's introduction. She probably had no idea who he was.

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More footsteps followed, this time at a slower, but still firm pace. Eleanor's mother arrived first, descending. "Dear child!" She greeted her daughter the same way that Genevieve had, and Martel felt almost awkward being present for this private moment between Eleanor and her family.

At last, the legate of Legio I Urbis appeared. While dressed as a typical nobleman, his bearing and movements revealed him to be a soldier; Martel recognised the posture and gait by now. He placed his hands on his daughter's shoulders, giving them a squeeze. "Welcome home."

"Thank you, father."

The legate turned and extended his hand towards Martel, who reached out and grasped it. "Sir Martel."

"My lord legate."

Eleanor glanced from one parent to another. "I invited Martel to stay with us during our leave. I assume that will not cause any problems?"

"Of course not," her mother swiftly replied. She turned towards the servants who stood lined up against the walls. "Prepare my daughter's room and a guest room for the prefect." Martel watched as his luggage was hauled away, feeling weird about a stranger handling it. "Also, prepare the baths. You must both long to wash away your journey. And when you are ready, supper shall be served."

Warm water and savoury meals, just as Eleanor had promised. Martel could not complain. "Very grateful, Lady Fontaine."

Martel sank into the water. Even before he stepped into the basin, he could feel the heat permeate the space, both physically and magically. It wrapped itself around him, welcoming him into the hall. As the water finally surrounded him, he let out a sigh. If the legion camp could only build something like this, he would almost be fine with his posting.

After a while – Martel had lost track of time – somebody else entered the bath. Looking up, Martel found himself staring at his host. Undressed, the legate stepped down into the pool and leaned against the edge on the side opposite of Martel. "Tell me, Sir Martel. I hear there has been fighting surrounding the outpost built by the Tenth."

"Some." While the man was a legate, his responsibilities did not extend to the Tenth Legion, and Martel was unsure how much he should reveal. "The Khivans tested our defences and found them capable to the task."

"My daughter wrote to me that they used cannons, which suggests a rather serious effort to regain control of the area."

"True, they did. And they failed."

The legate leaned his head back into the water, closing his eyes. "What of Eleanor? How is her performance?"

"She is the strongest mageknight in the legion. Nobody works harder than her."

"I'm not interested in empty flattery, Sir Martel."

"Nor do I offer any. The other mageknights, they spend their time training soldiers. In our first year, I daresay Eleanor has done more fighting than any of them throughout their entire service in the legion. Age is irrelevant when she has nonetheless gathered more experience than them," Martel argued.

"Good to hear." In the silence that followed, Martel wondered if he should speak, or simply take his leave rather than risk further conversation. Before he could decide, the legate spoke again, still with his eyes closed and head tilted back to touch the water. "If something happens to my daughter, I will hold you personally responsible."

Martel could not blame him for that. "So will I."

Chapter 580: Familiar Grounds

Familiar Grounds

The sound of a door opening woke Martel. Confused about his surroundings, Martel thought that someone had disturbed his rune of warning, sneaking up on him in camp. He sat up, fire filling his hands. Before he released his spell, his eyes saw a young woman in servant's clothing, looking scared out of her mind. She stared at the wizard lying on the floor. In her hands, she held a lit candle. "I beg your pardon, master. I came to start the fire." She glanced towards the hearth in the room.

Martel looked at the wood placed inside the fireplace. Dismissing the spell around his hands, he ignited the firewood instead. "You don't have to do that." Closing his eyes, he leaned back while the servant disappeared.

He tried to return to sleep, with little luck. He had spent a while last night in the bed, completely unable to be comfortable. At length he had accepted that it was simply too soft, throwing the covers down to make himself a primitive bed on the wooden floor instead. That solved one problem, though the eerie silence was another. In camp, there was always noise coming from somewhere. Even sleeping in the woods on the journey between Esmouth and the outpost, the animals of the forest would still make some kind of sound.

Not so in this house of stone, and it made the whole building seem deserted, like Martel might wake up in the morning and walk from room to room, finding them all empty. Martel had dug out his

Khivan clock from his chest, and the rhythmic sound of its mechanical movement had finally allowed him to fall asleep. At least until the servant woke him up.

A cautious knock on the door. "Enter," Martel called out.

A distinguished man dressed better than the other servants appeared, holding a tray. The scent in the air revealed to Martel it contained food, even if his low-lying position did not allow him to see this. He recognised the man to be the majordomo of the house. "Would it please the good master to have his breakfast?"

"Sure." The servant stepped inside the room and placed the tray on a table, low enough that Martel could see bread, jam, eggs, and cold cuts of meat. "It looks and smells delicious."

"The kitchen will be pleased to hear this, sir." Standing up straight, the majordomo hesitated before he spoke again. "May I enquire, sir, is there an issue with the bed that we can remedy?"

"Oh. Not really. For the past year, if I haven't been sleeping on a field cot, I've done so on the ground. Lying in that bed makes me feel like I'm drowning."

"We do have a number of cots available, for the staff of visiting guests. Would the good master be satisfied with such a solution?"

It did not make a big difference to Martel, but he got the feeling that it would please the old servant. "Certainly. That sounds great."

"Very good, sir."

Letting Eleanor spend time with her family alone, Martel left the house. She had offered him the use of a carriage, and just the prospect made him uncomfortable. Instead, he walked. It was cold – although not yet solstice, winter had arrived in full force – but Martel was still a northern boy. Until his breath turned to mist, he was not bothered.

He walked south-west towards the heart of the city. Approaching the Lyceum from the north, the closest entrance was the backdoor to the infirmary, but Martel wanted the full experience. He walked around the castle until he stood before the front gate and could enter. Stepping past the threshold, he looked at the Archeon writing on the walls, acting as protective wards to repel any with hostile intent. For a moment, he imagined himself thrown out of the building, but nothing happened. He looked at the clerks behind the desks in the entrance hall; none of them were familiar to him. While likewise they could not know his identity, they did not bother someone who was obviously a mage.

It was the middle of the bell, meaning Master Alastair would probably be busy teaching a class. Instead, Martel went down the corridor to his right and entered the workshops. He followed the sound of activity, including a booming voice, until a large, bearlike man wearing a smith's apron came into sight.

"Boy, it's you!" The artificer flung out his arms and closed the distance between them to sweep up Martel in an embrace so tight, Martel thought his bones might break.

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"Master Jerome," he wheezed, "happy to see you."

"Still in the robes of a battlemage, but you're here. Have the legions released you?"

"Just for the solstice. We'll have to go back before winter's end."

"We?"

"Eleanor Fontaine, my protector."

"Ah, yes, I remember the girl. Very skilled. Come boy, tell me everything you have experienced!"

After visiting the artificer, Martel went back the way he came and crossed the dining hall instead, thinking briefly on just how many meals he had eaten in this place. Once on the other side, he went into the infirmary and finally the apothecary. The rhythmic sound of ingredients being chopped ended as Nora put away the tools and turned to look at him. "Yes?"

"Is Mistress Rana here?"

"She is upstairs working, but I can help with whatever you need."

Martel frowned before it gave way to a wry smile. "Nora, it's me. Martel. I'm just here to offer my respects."

"Oh! You look so different. You – well, your hair is longer, and you have stubbles."

Martel scratched his cheek. He had not shaved since Esmouth, but he still found it amusing that she had not recognised him. "Well, do you think Mistress Rana will forgive me for interrupting her work?"

"I'm sure she'll let it slide. The door is open. You can go right ahead."

A moment later, Martel knocked on the door to the upstairs laboratory. A voice came from the other side. "Come in."

Martel stepped inside, and the sights and smells of countless curiosities reached him. Amidst it all stood the Sindhian woman who had taught him an invaluable craft.

"Martel! Come here, boy." As he approached her, she gave him a scrutinising look. "You look thin. You must eat more, and perhaps a fortifying elixir would do you good. Do you have any troubles with your health? Loss of appetite?"

He could not help but laugh. "I eat all I can, when I can. Given my current lodgings, that will not be an issue. I am more than fine, Mistress Rana." Despite his mirth, he found himself touched by her concern. She had always seemed so strict and aloof, but he knew that deep down, she cared. About her craft, people in need, and also her students. It was nice to know that extended to him.

"Very well." She looked at his red robes. "Such a pity that they forced you into the legions. You could have made a decent alchemist."

Knowing her opinion about Asterian alchemy and its practitioners, Martel considered that high praise. "I did have great need of your teachings. An outbreak of blue plague in camp. Your knowledge saved many lives."

"Your knowledge, and your work. I am glad you never gave me reason to regret teaching you," the alchemist declared. She turned around to open her cupboard full of potions and began to rummage through them on the shelves. "Now, let me find that fortifying elixir..."

As the bell rang, Martel stood outside the Hall of Elements. The doors burst open to reveal a whole gaggle of novices practically tripping over themselves as they left. Their loud discussion became briefly silenced as they noticed the tall battlemage in the corridor. Giving him odd looks, they hurried past and resumed their eager chatter.

Peering inside, Martel saw a short, balding Master of Elements returning the area to its former state, making the earthen floor smooth again. He took a few steps forward and suddenly found that his voice shook. "Master Alastair," he finally managed to say.

The teacher turned around with the dawning smile. "My dear boy." Water being pulled out of the dirt fell back down as he walked over and embraced Martel. "How are you back?"

"We've been granted leave for the winter, my protector and me. We just returned yesterday."

"You must tell me everything. Your timing is excellent, as I have no class next bell. Come, let's go to my study. We can at least sit down."

They left the Hall of Elements, crossing the school towards the faculty wing. Martel noticed the various glances he received from novices and acolytes in the corridors. It struck him how young they were. While he had been old already upon arrival, there had still been other acolytes his age or older. And although only a year set him apart from the oldest acolytes, he looked at them and saw only children.

"Who else are you here to visit? I assume I'm not the only teacher to receive your intentions."

"Oh, I have been to see Master Jerome and Mistress Rana. I was also thinking I'd visit Master Fenrick. I always greatly enjoyed his classes and everything he taught me about magic and lore."

"Ah, in this regard, your timing is less fortunate. He left the other day with a group of students to the Stone of Archen."

Martel remembered his own trip to that place. "No matter. We are here for a while. I will come back and catch him another time."

They reached Master Alastair's study, and for the next hour, the old and the young battlemage shared experiences, laughter, and company.

As Martel left his old mentor, he stood indecisively in the hallway until he moved deeper into the faculty wing and knocked on another door. "Enter."

Martel did so and looked at the familiar room belonging to Mistress Juliana. As for the overseer, sitting by the desk, she turned to water visitor. "Martel of Engby," she said after a moment of silence.

"Mistress Juliana." He bowed his head.

"A surprise. What brings you by?"

"I've received leave for winter, and I thought I'd visit my old teachers."

"They must have been happy to see you."

"They were." Martel cleared his throat. "I know you went to great lengths to help me, at the risk of losing your position. I just wanted you to know I appreciate it, even if I didn't always listen."

"A teacher's place is to instruct. Your choices are your own to make, as you are the one who must live with the consequences."

Martel touched the red fabric on his sleeve. "That's true."

"I have just bought a new Sindhian vintage. Would you care to try it with me?"

"I'd be happy to."