

The City Guardsman: Telemachus

The backache was the easy part. Sure, the breastplate got a bit heavy around the shoulders, the helmet gave him sores at his temples, and his feet ached and blistered every week. But that was not the worst part of being a city guardsman. The worst part was the *people*.

"Hell of a day," Telemachus heard a voice say in time with the distant thunder. That'd be Tyrus. Tall, thin, with a wisp of a moustache even his mother smirked at.

"Ain't over yet," Telemachus groaned.

Rain pattered against the wooden shingles overhead and tickled the worn cobblestones outside the little guard shack. Large enough for two stools and a table of water bottles and packed rations, it was hardly a palace. The rainwater dripping down Telemachus's leg was enough to say it barely kept the rain out at all.

"What happened with that thief in the Vorago?" Telemachus asked as he scratched some dry crust from the steel of his vambrace.

"Which one?" Tyrus smirked at the mention of one of the most notorious slums in the city.

"The one that pissed on the sergeant yesterday."

"Oh, that one," Tyrus laughed. "Last I heard, he was still in the stocks. But the entire division repaid his little gesture before the night's end. I heard some of their favorite whores made their own contributions."

Telemachus tried to laugh, but it was more of an amused scoff. Nothing that interesting had happened at this post in months. At least the slum guards had never a dull moment. The guards up in the upper city had the deep pockets of the nobles. But here in the middle districts? No such luck.

"It's boring as a tomb, this post," Telemachus said.

"Better than being *in* the tomb."

"Aye. Gods, at least *she* hasn't been here today," Telemachus said, leaning his head back against the planks. He heard Tyrus laugh wearily beside him.

"Don't tempt the fates, Mack."

Telemachus glanced down at Tyrus's waist, where he saw the same standard-issue sword and dagger as his own, along with a short baton hanging from a leather loop. A nonlethal option was essential to enforcement these days, what with the new humanitarian laws and all. Gone were the days of nicking a man's shoulder for talking out of turn or bowing up to the law. No, nowadays, he was to be clubbed within an inch of his life, because apparently, that's kinder than a swift prick of sharpened steel.

Telemachus leaned forward on his stool, feeling the rain on his face and hearing it tinkling against his blue-painted helmet. If these clouds would just part, maybe the shift change would happen on time today. But those hopes were dashed as an old woman's voice echoed up the street.

"Guard!"

Telemachus's head drooped down as he sighed. When he raised his head, he found Tyrus's eyes twinkling at him with amusement under the shadow of his helmet.

"It's the fates, Mack. I did warn you."

"Shut up," Telemachus said as he stood. It would be another wet, sticky shift. The gods had seen fit to save him from the wetness this long, but apparently, it had all been a cruel trick to set him up for this disappointment.

His feet protested as he forced them to walk across the uneven, domed cobblestones, and sure enough, Nemela was waiting just around the corner, still shuffling toward them as fast as her old feet could carry her. When she saw them, she raised her face, revealing the spotted, warty wrinkles and those beady little eyes hiding behind her spindly eyebrows. But the rain was beading up and rolling freely off her cloak. The water dripping down Telemachus's back was enough reminder that Gantius still hadn't issued the new waxed cloaks from Bel Kaidon. It would be winter before that happened, at this rate.

He jutted his chin to old Nemela. "What do you want, then? Out with it."

"It's Fortuna. She's ranting about her..."

"She's ranting about her dead man, wrapped in just a blanket," Telemachus droned, rolling his eyes. "We know. Just let us—"

"No, sir," Nemela said. "She's drunk and stark naked, sir. I'll never get to sleep with her raving like this. She's gone mad, you see."

"Oh, another naked one," Tyrus said flatly. "Terrific. Let's just hope this one hasn't rubbed herself down with shit."

"Aw, cheer up, Ty," Telemachus shrugged, his own voice about as energetic as a tortoise. "She could always vomit in your mouth."

"Hey," Ty chided as they started down the street toward Nemela's house. "I'd like to not get that a third time. It's bad enough being known as the guard who's swallowed it twice."

A small crowd was gathered at the stone steps leading to Nemela's townhome. Two doors down, Telemachus could see Fortuna's door hanging open on its hinges. The people were mostly dressed in waxed cloaks, the lucky swine, but a few stood by with sodden shirts and dripping hair.

"Move aside," Tyrus growled as he and Telemachus pushed through. "Move!"

"Make way for the city guard," Telemachus mumbled.

One man twisted in Tyrus's hands and swung a fist at Tyrus, only to taste Tyrus's helmet on his teeth and then get clubbed on the shoulders. When the crowd's voices rose and the people grew closer to Tyrus, he raised the club and gripped his dagger.

"Get back!" he roared, stinging Telemachus's ears. And the people did back away, quiet and still in the gray rain. "This is the guard's business!"

Telemachus turned toward the steps and found a woman of about seventy years, leaned against the stone railing with a brown bottle in her hand. Her gray hair clung wetly to her face, and her skin was wrinkled with age. And from the look of her, she must be very cold in this rain. Her eyes were closed, but her mouth was still moving. The nearer he got, the more Telemachus heard her chattering. And true to Nemela's report, Fortuna had no clothes on. Telemachus heard Tyrus sigh beside him as they approached.

"It can never be the young, pretty ones, can it?" Tyrus muttered. "The gods hate me."

"Focus," Telemachus said. He nudged Fortuna's leg with the toe of his boot. "Can you hear me, woman? Oi. You there. Hello!"

When he pulled his leg back and gave her a less gentle kick, Fortuna's body jolted and her eyes opened. "It's me 'usband, sir. He's dead, dead 'n gone. The old king was a madm'n, I tell ye. Twasn't right, wha' he did to this good countreh."

"You'll get up and leave, woman," Telemachus said. "Or you'll be made to."

She gestured blearily with the bottle. "This is *my* 'ouse, sir. I'll say wha' I like."

Telemachus pointed at the door. "No, this is Nemela's house. Yours is o'er that way. Now, stand on your feet or you'll be dragged. We'll kindly escort you home, but if you resist us, we'll beat you and put you in the stocks tonight, mark me."

"She ain't done nothin' violentlike," a toothless man called from behind.

Tyrus spun, rain slipping off his shoulders and helmet, to aim his baton at the man's distant nose. "Shut up! This is the guard's business!"

While Tyrus dealt with him, Telemachus kept his eyes on Fortuna. "Can you hear me, woman?"

She nodded drowsily and moved her arms to try and stand. "I hear ye, ye whelp."

"Return to your own home now, or you'll be made to. If you resist—"

"It'll be the stocks," she said. "I knows, I knows."

"Just get 'er up," Tyrus called over his shoulder. Telemachus turned to see his partner holding his baton in both hands. "Let's get done and get gone, Mack."

A step closer, and the smells intensified. Telemachus walked into a cloud of aromas, the two greatest of which were alcohol and urine.

"Oh, gods," Telemachus groaned, covering his nose.

Fortuna was nearly to her feet when she wavered, clearly dizzy, and fell back down to slump against the stone railing. She fell so slowly, though, that it was like she was falling through water or even honey. Telemachus stepped forward then.

"Alright, woman. Let's get you home."

He hooked his hands under her armpits and hefted her to her feet, and suddenly, a new smell greeted him. When he looked down, he found dark streaks on her legs... and his own.

"She shat on you, Mack."

"Oh, shut up and lend me a hand here!" Telemachus said. As Tyrus hung his baton on his belt again and moved to help, the woman squirmed in their grip. Her feet were barely touching the stone, but she was so old that Telemachus barely noticed her weight. "Now, keep still, woman. We're nearly there. If you resist—"

The woman's fist connected with Telemachus's upper lip, and the sound that escaped his mouth was more canine than human. He drew his head back and then drove his helmet into her forehead. The woman's resistance vanished, then, as she went loose and limp in his hands.

"It's the stocks, then," Tyrus grunted as they got her up the steps to her own house.

“Shut your mouth,” Telemachus snapped. “I’ll not carry this old bag all the way back to the Circle. Here she goes, and here she stays.”

They propped her up against the wall inside the door and then pulled it to. It dragged against the jamb, so Telemachus leaned into it and gave the door one last good yank, but the handle broke free, sending him rolling over the low railing on his back and landing on the neighbor’s steps. The plate and mail caught most of the impact, but he heard a voice or two chortling amongst the crowd who’d gathered to watch Fortuna’s rant.

“Damn all the gods of earth and heaven,” Telemachus said as he rolled to his feet and hurled the broken iron handle at the crooked door. It bounced off the door and rang against the stones below.

Tyrus offered a hand and a smirk, but Telemachus shoved both away. “We’re done here,” he said, wiping the rain from his mouth. And with a final glance around the crowd, the look in his eyes sent them taking a step back. “Let’s go.”