

## Firebrand 241

### Chapter 241: Midnight Ride

#### Midnight Ride

"I never leave my study unlocked. Show yourself before my guards have to drag you out, and maybe I will be lenient." The duke's voice rang cold.

Trying not to panic, Martel considered his situation. If they began searching, they would find him easily. He could see the rings of light from the lamps they held in their hands. If it came to it, having distance between him and them would be to his advantage. Taking a deep breath, Martel stood up.

"The peasant novice," Duke Cheval exclaimed. "I show you hospitality, and you betrayed my trust? Who sent you to spy on me?"

"None did. I'm sorry," he stammered.

"Nobody finds their way in here by accident," the nobleman sneered. "Tell me at once or my guards will run you through." The sentinels, holding their lamps in one hand, lowered their spears with the other.

No manner of excuses could get Martel out of this situation, he realised, so he changed tactics. Straightening his back, he looked straight at the duke. "I know what you intend to do. I will tell everyone if you try anything. Let me leave, or I will spoil your plans."

Overbearing laughter came in response. "You are in no position to make threats."

Getting angry, the question burst from Martel's lips. "Why do you hate the Khivans so? Why must you destroy them?"

"I hold no particular enmity towards them." The duke stepped forward standing on one side of the desk with Martel on the other. "I just need them to clear my land. I'm not blind to their achievements." In one movement, he grabbed his dagger and lunged forward, aiming to slash the novice across the chest. "Kill him!"

Leaning backwards, Martel avoided the blade and retaliated. With a powerful blast of wind, he knocked all three of his assailants to the ground. Empowering his legs, he made one jump onto the desk and another to clear the fallen body of the duke.

As he sprinted out the door, he heard the guards scrambling to get on their feet and a voice crying out, "Get him!"

With extra speed in his legs, Martel could not be caught. He ran the same way back; there might be closer exits, but he could not afford the risk of getting lost.

Continuing down the servant passageways, Martel saw nobody following him as he glanced over his shoulder. He had put some distance between himself and his pursuers for now, even if no doubt they would comb the mansion in search of him. Still, he ended his spell and felt himself slow down. Pushing down three people in addition to his frenzied escape had drained his spellpower significantly. If a fight was on the horizon, he needed to save some energy for that.

He almost ran into the great hall, barely stopping himself as he came to a halt. People nearest to him looked in his direction, some of them showing displeasure at this breach of etiquette. Composing himself, Martel wove through the crowd towards the exit.

His eyes fell on Maximilian. Perhaps he should not get his friend involved, but if some kind of battle on the streets of Morcaster was underway, he needed the mageknight by his side. Martel began moving in that direction while frantically glancing everywhere to watch for guards.

"Max, I need your help! Please, come with me!" He grabbed the young viscount by the shoulder to turn him around.

"Steady on, where is the fire?"

"I'll explain, just go!" Leaving towards the exit, Martel pulled on Maximilian's sleeve to drag him along. He heard the mageknight grumble while following, though not as quickly as Martel would have liked.

They made it outside, Martel still glancing everywhere; the guards were bound to catch up to him soon. "We need the horses," he told Maximilian. "We have to get out of here."

"What did you do, kiss the duke's wife?"

"He's going to start a riot in the Khivan quarter," Martel replied impatiently. "We have to get there and warn them!"

"Why would he do that?"

"Because he owns half the district, and he wants the Khivans gone so he can build on the land. Now can we leave?"

Maximilian stared at him for a moment before he looked around. Nearby, a carriage with four horses stood, waiting for its owners. "We are borrowing this," he declared, jumping up to push the driver down. As the latter shouted in loud protestations, falling to the ground, Martel climbed up to join his friend on the driver's seat. "Tell your master to use my carriage!" Maximilian called out as he set the horses into motion.

"I don't know who you are!" the driver yelled as the carriage thundered past him.

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After a neck-breaking ride across Morcaster, the carriage with its two passengers reached the Khivan quarter. Empty streets lay ahead of them, quiet and dark. In the cold gloom of a winter's night, nobody seemed to have course for being outside. Letting the horses slow their gait, Maximilian glanced at his companion. "Not a lot happening at the moment."

"I don't understand. The duke said something would happen tonight." Martel looked around in confusion. If a fight lay ahead of them, deeper into the district, they ought to have heard it by now.

The carriage rumbled on, now at a leisurely pace. "I am a little miffed you made us leave the celebration early," Maximilian admitted, "but stealing a carriage and racing across the city was fun. I suppose the two even out."

Martel did not pay him any attention. He kept going over the conversation with the duke in his mind. Had he misunderstood? Even worse, he had made an enemy of a powerful nobleman. He had

also destroyed his chance of obtaining the legal documents that might save Shadi and her father from eviction.

Suddenly, Maximilian grabbed his arm. Ahead, a golden shimmer loomed. As they came around a slight bend in the road, the reason came into view. Further down the street, flames rose into the air.

## Chapter 242: Fire Fight

### Fire Fight

Martel had been right about the duke's intentions, but wrong about the method. A fire would leave the Khivans homeless and forced to leave while clearing the ground for development.

So far, the flames had only touched one building, but since most of them were built from wood, it would quickly spread. Already, people poured onto the street, some sobbing or shouting for the fire patrol, others grabbing buckets and rushing to the fountain on the temple square.

A group of five or six people did neither of those things, instead running away from the fire, straight in the direction of the carriage and its passengers. In the flickering light of the flames, Martel could tell their clothes looked Asterian.

Without words exchanged, he and Maximilian jumped down from the driver's seat to approach the fleeing band. As they came closer, it became clear they were in a hurry to leave the district.

Maximilian drew his dagger. "Where are you running to?"

The men stopped, exchanging looks. They all carried small weapons similar to the nobleman, and in Martel's experienced eyes, they looked like a gang of thugs. "There is a fire," one of them replied. "Excuse us for getting to safety."

"You could help," Maximilian suggested with a grim expression. "Then again, if you started this fire, I suppose you have little interest seeing it extinguished." He raised his weapon with a challenging gesture while Martel took a few steps back, giving himself some distance to work with.

The thugs drew their own daggers and short swords. They fell upon Maximilian, and Martel saw a blue shimmer of magic as the mageknight raised his shield. One of them moved around to attack from the side, and Martel hurled a fire bolt at the man, who swiftly ducked.

"They got bloody magic!"

He launched himself at Martel while another thug came running as well to attack the novice. With Maximilian fending off four attackers, he could not hope for aid.

The first man stabbed at Martel, who raised his shield in time to take the blow. A blast of air pushed his assailant backwards to the ground. Pivoting, Martel shot another fire bolt at his second adversary, and this time it hit. The man dropped his blade to slap the flames on his stomach.

One opponent occupied, Martel turned back to the first thug, who had gotten on his feet again. He made another strike with his long dagger, but this time, Martel expected the movement.

Empowering his body, he swiftly dodged and shot up one hand to grab his enemy by the wrist, using superior strength to wrest the weapon away. He followed up with a swift kick to the groin, releasing his hold as the brigand crumbled to the ground.

A quick glance told Martel two things. First, Khivans had appeared from the surrounding buildings, watching the fight with mixed expressions. Second, Maximilian was under pressure. A mageknight's magic provided offensive and defensive capabilities, but both were meant to be used in conjunction with good armour and proper weaponry. His magical shield kept him safe, but also bound up all his spellcasting, preventing him from using his magic offensively. And the short reach of his dagger did not provide much opportunity to attack when he was threatened from nearly all sides.

But if Maximilian could only hold on while Martel dispatched his own attackers, he could turn his array of offensive spells against the remaining thugs as well, whittling them down one by one. Assuming Martel had enough spellpower left – he dearly missed the magic he had expended just to escape from the duke's study.

Meanwhile, Martel's second opponent had quelled the flames in his clothes and now returned to the fray. He swung his sword at Martel, who quickly stepped backwards several paces; no need to stay within close quarters. Another bolt of fire came straight at the man, who managed to evade this time. To Martel's horror, his magic streaked past and threaten to hit the Khivan onlookers until he managed to extinguish the flame in the air.

"Arsonists! They set the fire!" somebody shouted. Whether a local resident or one of the thugs seizing the opportunity, Martel could not tell, but it had the same effect. A handful of Khivans rushed into the fight, aiming their blows at anyone who looked Asterian, making no distinction between the brigands or the mages.

Maximilian, already pressed with nothing but a dagger and doublet to protect him, was swarmed from all sides. A general brawl erupted. Afraid to use more fire, both because he might hurt the Khivans and since he might convince them he was the arsonist, Martel restricted himself to using fists. He dearly missed his staff, but his magical shield helped him make it an even fight against superior numbers. Even so, he took some unpleasant punches, and he began to despair.

"Make way for the fire patrol!" A cart came racing down the street towards the blaze, forcing the brawlers to scatter lest they got trampled. The wagon held two city guards on the driver's seat and a number of great buckets in the back. Behind, a score of other legionaries came running, some of them armed with axes.

Taking advantage of the distraction, the thugs slinked away. "They're escaping! They are the real arsonists!" Martel shouted, and the Khivans seemed indecisive who to fight. "Go after them if you want to punish the guilty!"

Martel almost broke into a pursuit himself when Maximilian grabbed him by the shoulder. "I will get them! Go, use your magic to stop the fire!"

He watched the mageknight run off. He saw what Maximilian meant; Martel was an elemental mage. There had to be something he could do, which nobody else present could. The Khivans still appeared confused, but some followed Maximilian's example while others moved in the direction of the flames. As the score of legionaries, the remainder of the fire patrol, came running past their position, Martel joined them.

## Chapter 243: Touched by Fire

### Touched by Fire

As Martel reached the blaze, his eyes surveyed the scene. The fire had already spread to more houses, lying by the edge of the temple square. The legionaries had organised chains to carry buckets of water from the fountain while those with axes had begun demolishing nearby buildings to prevent further spread.

Martel looked across the square. Before he could do anything, he had to make sure Shadi was safe. Breaking into a run, he circumvented the human chain and rushed towards the watchmaker's workshop. Around him, people shouted in alarm, and more and more streamed onto the street, many staring in horror. Some ran forward to help; a few returned to their houses and began hauling their possessions outside.

Martel coughed. Smoke filled the air, adding an eerie blur to the frightful site of flames stretching towards the sky. He continued onwards, ignoring the strange looks sent his way. His heart beat at a frantic pace, both from exertion and fear.

Relief overwhelmed him as he saw Shadi outside her home, her father standing behind her. "Martel! What's happening?" she asked.

He reached them and buckled over, panting for breath. "There's a fire."

"We see that, stupid boy," Master Farhad exclaimed. "Go help!" He set into motion towards the water chain, and the youths followed.

As his Khivan companions joined the effort in dousing the flames, Martel considered what he could do. He could feel himself near magical exhaustion; the last few spells in the fight had come reluctantly, like tugging on a rope that someone pulled in the other direction. He retained enough energy for one more spell, but probably not two, so he had to make it count. He might pull water from the fountain and basically throw it at the fire, but that would only help a little more than the buckets already doing the same work. It was not enough.

He also faced the problem that the conflagration was spreading, not just to the sides, but also to buildings further behind. If he could summon rain, that might be the best use of his dwindling power, but he had to target all of the fire or any part that escaped his spell would simply continue to spread anew.

He needed a vantage point. Turning around, he looked at the small temple. Though devoted to the Khivan faith, it had a belltower all the same to announce the hours of the day across the district. Pulling himself together, Martel set his weary legs into motion yet again and ran across the square.

"Martel, where are you going?" Shadi shouted after him.

No time to explain. Martel jumped up the steps to enter the temple. A few people had gathered, either to pray for deliverance or because they trusted the stone walls of the building. Even with the small fire upon the altar, the interior was dark compared to the place outside. Rushing through the space, Martel surged until he found the priest. "The tower!" Martel grabbed him by the shoulders. "How do I get there?"

Fearful, the man pointed at a small door to one of the sides. Letting go, Martel hurried forward. He tore the door open and leapt up the spiral staircase until he reached a hatch. Pushing it open, he climbed the final part to stand atop the belltower. Looking down, he saw the square and the buildings ablaze to the north-west.

Rain. Martel had never succeeded in creating the smallest rain cloud. But he had never been so motivated before. Calling upon his magic, he tried to weave air and water together. Above him, the stars shone in a cloudless night, almost mocking his efforts. Nature lent him no aid; the sky was clear without the slightest hint of rain or cloud, and Martel had no skill to conjure either.

He tried to consider other options. He knew the city had great amounts of water stored in towers across the districts, but none close by. Even if one lay in the vicinity, Martel knew his magic could never reach through stonework to pull out enough water to quell the flames.

Martel only possessed sufficient skill with one element to have any hope of affecting the blaze. He had to use fire; a single spell, his final one, powerful enough to affect the entirety of the conflagration and put an end to it. But extinguishing the flames over such an area felt beyond his abilities still.

However, moving a flame required less effort than outright killing it. And if pulled into the air, the fire would eventually die out once his magic no longer grasped it, lacking material to consume. Hands against the stonework of the bell tower, Martel reached out with his magic. It easily connected with the intense flames burning happily through the wooden houses. Pouring his spellpower into the connection, Martel drew upon the fire.

Streaks of flame soared through the air. Across the blazing area, the fire abandoned its fuel to travel towards the youth touched by that very element.

Sweat poured down Martel's face, not born of heat. His body trembled with effort, but he had to maintain the connection. If he released the spell too early before the entire blaze travelled to him, it would resume spreading through the district.

The first flames reached him even as he still pulled on their remaining brethren to do the same. Engulfed in fire, Martel's innate resistance struggled to keep him safe. The burning tendrils, sustained only by his magic, eagerly sought to ignite the flammable fabrics he wore. Between maintaining the spell and easing the fire to keep it from burning him up, Martel's vision darkened.

Finally, he could do no more. He released the hold on his magic. Bereft of fuel, sorcerous or otherwise, the flames died out.

Martel gasped for breath. He felt drained like never before. Yet he did not vomit; perhaps he was getting more accustomed to the effects of utter exertion. Wiping sweat from his brow, he looked out to see the fires extinguished. Relief was his last thought before exhaustion claimed his consciousness; as the world grew black, he fell to the ground.

## Chapter 244: No Good Deed Unpunished

### No Good Deed Unpunished

Martel woke in a bed he did not recognise. He lay in an alcove, his head pounding and his mouth feeling absolutely dry.

"Good to see you awake."

Slowly, Martel turned his head towards the voice. Master Alastair smiled back at him. He finally recognised where he was. His teacher's private chamber. "What happened?"

"You drew on far more magic than you could control. You fell into what we consider a magical sleep," Master Alastair explained. "Your mind and body closing down until you have recovered."

"How long?" Martel croaked.

"It is third bell. They brought you here in the middle of the night. Perhaps eight hours or so?"

"The Khivans?"

"Some perished in the fire. But only a handful compared to the hundreds in danger. You saved many lives, Martel. I am proud of you."

That ought to feel good, but Martel was too worn out to really take note. "I'm thirsty."

"Of course. Your body needs nourishment." Master Alastair rose from his seat, grabbed a cup and plate, and walked over to his side. "Water and some food. I can get more if you need."

Martel drank greedily and took a slice of apple afterwards. He wondered briefly where his teacher had gotten fruit from this deep in winter.

"There is something you should know."

Busy chewing, the novice looked at Master Alastair.

"With all the witnesses, we could not prevent the story of your actions from spreading."

Martel frowned, unsure why his teacher looked so apprehensive.

"You are a novice who nonetheless tamed a dangerous fire. There can be only one explanation for that."

It finally sank in. "Everyone knows I am fire-touched."

The old battlemage nodded. "Mistress Juliana expects to hear word from the Imperial administration one of these days. You will become an acolyte very soon, so that is not an issue anymore, though I fear any choice of further studies is out of your hands now."

Martel leaned back. He had more pressing concerns on his mind. "Am I free to leave?"

"You're not a prisoner. Master Kelsos said you could move around on your own once you felt strong enough to do so."

Martel pulled away the blanket that covered him and slowly sat up. The pain in his head intensified, but nothing troubled him otherwise. "I'm good."

Master Alastair refilled his cup. "Your body is famished after healing from your exhaustion. Finish the food and drink some more, and I won't stand in your way."

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Martel returned to his chamber first, changing from festive clothes to his robe. He added a cloak and left, keeping an eye out for any teacher as he departed from the castle. While nobody had expressly forbidden him from leaving the Lyceum, he imagined that Masters Kelsos and Alastair had only intended for Martel to walk around the premises. But he needed to know.

The sun hung low on the horizon, making him narrow his eyes as the pain in his head intensified. Going southeast, he could not escape the solar glare and simply had to suffer it, though he sought refuge in the shadow of taller buildings where possible.

As he reached the Khivan quarter, the smoke could still be smelled in the air. He reached the watchmaker's workshop, but before he knocked, he decided to continue just a little farther. Before his eyes lay the devastation wrought by Duke Cheval's greed. A handful of homes burnt to cinders. Members of the city guard were still present, chopping down the remains of the buildings to clear the grounds and prevent any resurgence of the fire.

Few Khivans were about. Martel did not blame them. He wondered if they knew the truth about how the blaze had started; presumably those who witnessed or even participated in the fight with Martel, Maximilian, and the hired thugs would know this was not an accident.

Regardless, there was nothing further Martel could accomplish. He turned around and walked back to the watchmaker's workshop, knocking on the door soon after.

It took a while until Shadi appeared, cautiously opening the door. As she saw him, she slipped outside. "You're alright! I was so afraid when they carried you out of the temple. You didn't move." She stepped forward to hug him tightly.

"I don't remember what happened. Not after the fire was stopped."

"We all saw you. Atop the tower. They carried you down and placed you by the fountain, but nobody knew what to do until Maximilian showed up. He got you onto a cart and drove off with you," she explained, releasing him from her embrace.

Maximilian. Of course. He looked at her as she shivered, standing outside in her clothes meant for indoors. "Should we go inside?"

A strange expression filled her face. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Something wrong?"

"Martel, my dad and I, we're leaving."

He looked up at the house. "But your home is fine."

"It's not that." Shadi looked at him with mournful eyes. "Someone tried to burn down our district last night. There are riots and brawls on our streets. And they keep bleeding us dry with rent because we don't have the right to own land."

He began to understand where this led, yet he refused to accept it.

"We are packing up. Dad is selling his tools and what else he's got. We're going on the next ship to Sindhu, and from there back to Khiva."

"But your life is here." Martel found it hard to control his voice. "You belong here. Can't you stay?"

She tried to blink away her tears. "I can't leave my dad on his own, and he is absolutely determined to leave. It's just too hard on him."

"Does it have to be soon? If you just stay a few fivedays, we can spend some time, go places..."

She shook her head. "Dad won't stay a moment longer than necessary. And I don't think you should come back here."



He looked at her in shock. "Why not?"

"Because it's hard enough to say goodbye once. Don't put me through this twice."

Speechless, Martel could do nothing but stare at her. Finally, she framed his face with her hands, gave him a kiss, and slipped back inside before he could react.

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Martel wandered around the city distraught. A whirlwind of emotions flurried through his mind. Everything he had done to protect Shadi, to keep her in Morcaster, all in vain. Not only that; his secret was out. They would make him into a battlemage and send him to war.

He went to the harbour, finding a seat by the docks to look at the ships. If he set them on fire, none of them could carry Shadi away from here. Resisting the temptation, he walked onwards.

Time lost its meaning to him as he continued his idle journey. Only when he suddenly noticed a temple bell ringing six times did he realise that he had spent nearly half a day in the city. He once again felt hungry and weary; his headache, which had dulled for a while, returned with a vengeance. He set a course back towards the Lyceum.

Once back, he stayed in his chamber until his Khivan clock told him that supper would be served. As much as the needs of the body felt trivial on a day like this, he knew he could not wait until morning before eating again. With heavy steps, he dragged himself to the dining hall.

Silence fell as he entered. Everyone seemed to stare at him, either with fear or loathing. He did not understand why. No doubt they had heard about what had happened last night, but Martel saw no reason for this to inspire hostility. Previously, such as when he had duelled Cheval shortly after his arrival, his fellow students had lauded him and sought his company. Now they shunned him.

Martel was too young to understand that the former events had shown him to be their peer; the latter proved him their superior. And mages handled feeling inferior poorly.

He was too numb to care. He was no stranger to eating alone, and he had never experienced much fellowship with others during class. If he were to finish this year in solitude, so be it. Collecting his food, he found an empty table and ignored the looks sent his way.

He sensed rather than saw a shape move behind him and drop down on the bench next to him. He knew almost just from the weight and the accompanying grunt that his companion was Maximilian. Opposite him, he looked to see Eleanor take a seat, giving him a cautious smile. They ate their meal in silence.

Chapter 245: Wisdom or Bravery

Wisdom or Bravery

The next morning, Martel went to the apothecary for his usual chore. As far as he knew, his arrangement with Mistress Rana had not changed. As he entered, the alchemist herself rather than her apprentice met him. He slowly closed the door to the infirmary behind him, wondering what this signified.

"Martel. I have been told of changes in your status."

Unsure what she meant exactly, he stayed silent.

"As an acolyte, with one year of experience in addition, it is only reasonable that I pay you for your continued work. You are not an apprentice, so your payment will be one silver for every bell. You may collect your salary on Soldays. I will make sure it is waiting for you."

Martel stood, almost confused at hearing good news for a change. This would alleviate his most pressing money concerns and provide him with some coin for the future. "Thank you," he finally stammered.

She inclined her head. "You have earned it. Now, work awaits." She pointed to one of the tables that lay ready with ingredients to grind.

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Martel had yet to receive his new schedule, which meant that besides work in the apothecary, he had little to do. He drifted around the Lyceum, trying to ignore how others either stared at him with whispers or shied away. The only exception came as he went for lunch; crossing the entrance hall, Flora intercepted him. He raised his eyebrows at the rare sight of her inside the castle, but understood her meaning as she gave him a look and left. He quickly followed.

They met again at the tavern across the square that had hosted their gatherings previously. She gave a smile with a closed mouth as he sat down opposite her. "You look the same, yet I imagine much has changed."

"You could say that. What's the reason you're showing up here?"

"I have something for you. I promised immediate delivery. Do you remember the Fire Eater?"

Martel thought about the entertainers during the festivals. "Not sure who you mean."

"One of the Nine Lords. He runs the Khivan quarter."

"Ah."

Flora pulled out a pouch, opened it, and placed three golden crowns in front of Martel. "He is grateful for what you did. When I heard he asked around for a novice extremely prodigious with fire, I told him I would see his payment done."

It seemed like everyone wanted to give him money today. "I didn't do it to get paid."

"But you did do it, and since those are gold coins, I suggest you take them quickly before others take note and size you up for a mugging."

Martel grabbed the money and placed it deep inside a pocket.

"I am sorry your secret is out. I had hoped when the time came, you would remember my suggestion and join us permanently. We've enjoyed working with you, Marcus and I."

Martel still had a year left at school; he considered proposing that they could still work together during that time before he had to join the legions. But perhaps it was best that he distanced himself from the mercenaries. Between this reward and steady payment from Mistress Rana, he no longer needed to undertake dubious tasks for the criminal masters of Morcaster. "Me too. Maybe I'll see you and Marcus around."

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With his new-found wealth, Martel could clear his debts. There was one in particular he was both anxious to repay yet also felt apprehensive about, as he knew a difficult conversation would entail. But he did not wish to shirk from it. Aware of Eleanor's schedule, since she shared with Maximilian, Martel caught her leaving class. "Do you have a moment to talk?"

"Certainly." She glanced around the corridor. Other students passed them by, a few of them sending looks. "Let us go this way." Eleanor led him outside to the western courtyard, generally abandoned in the cold weather. At least for now the sun shone, though clouds were on the horizon.

They drifted through the enclosure, the frozen grass crunching under their feet. Reaching the statue of Atreus, Martel sat down on the pedestal, and she did the same. "I have what I owe you." He pulled out a gold coin and a few made of silver; everything she lent him and a little bit more.

"Martel, please. I do not require that. Consider it a gift."

He took her hand and placed the coins on her palm. "I know you feel that way, but it bothers me if I don't pay you back. Please, for my sake."

She closed her hand around the money, and he let go. "Very well."

Now came the hard part. He took a deep breath. "There's something else. I thought you should know that you were right. I have this need to help people, probably more about making myself feel good than anything else. It's gotten me into so much trouble, so many dangers. I should have listened to you."

"Martel," she breathed. "I spoke those words out of anger, and because I feared for you. I had no right to disparage everything you have done for others with no expectation of reward or recognition."

"I thought I could go up against Duke Cheval. I had no idea what I was getting into. I figured I could solve this, and now I ruined everything."

"Maximilian told me what happened. Everything he knew, at least. What you did might not have been wise, but it was brave. And without you, a dreadful fire would have consumed the district." She glanced at him as he sat next to her. "You saved lives."

"But I didn't stop him. He'll continue driving them out." Martel took a deep breath. "Shadi and her father left. Or they will at the next ship, anyway."

"I am sorry to hear that. I know how much she means to you."

"Another reason I wanted to talk to you." He felt his voice shaking a little, and he cleared his throat to regain control. "Can we be friends again? I have precious few left."

"Oh, Martel. We still are. I was angry, upset, and maybe most of all afraid. But even in these months when we did not speak, I still thought about you."

"Me too."

She leaned her shoulder against his. Around them, snow began to fall.

Chapter 246: Clothes Make the Mage

Clothes Make the Mage

Sitting at breakfast, Martel looked up to see Henry approaching him. He almost smiled until he saw the air acolyte avoiding his gaze, quickly dropping a note next to Martel before hurrying onwards.

Martel would have to get used to that, it seemed. He grabbed the note. For something to be delivered at this hour suggested urgency.

Martel,

Visit my chamber at your next opportunity.

Mistress Juliana

Another thing to be expected; it was time to learn what his future held. With no reason to delay, Martel finished his breakfast and set out towards the faculty wing.

He stood outside her door, knocking for a little while until he heard her voice from an unexpected direction. "Martel, you certainly took my request to heart. I left the message last night and did not expect it delivered already." Down the corridor, Mistress Juliana came in approach.

"I guess the clerk sorting post was afraid to delay."

"Indeed." She reached him and unlocked the door, entering with him in tow. "I assume Master Alastair has explained your current situation to you."

He nodded, sitting down as she gestured towards a chair. "I am to be a battlemage."

"Yes." Her reply came without any hint of emotion. "I received the directive from the Imperial administration yesterday and have been preparing your new schedule." She dug out a piece of parchment and handed it to him. "Training as a battlemage is perhaps the most arduous study at the Lyceum, and you must still do it in one year. So your fivedays are full. Two lessons in fire magic on Peldays and Glundays. Two lessons in combat magic on Maldays."

With Reynard. Martel kept his groan silent.

"Mandays will be devoted to Master Fenrick in the mornings as usual, though your theory is at an end. Instead, you will learn various practical skills. He began a new course on the Archean language some fivedays ago, which you will join. The class is with the same students as your combat magic, whom I believe you also had astronomy with."

Martel chewed on this information. If he understood this right, he would be with Maximilian and Eleanor. Small blessings.

"You will have to catch up, but I foresaw this already when I prepared for you to study weather magic, and Eleanor Fontaine has promised to tutor you in Archean until you are at the same level as the others. She is already skilled in the language, I am given to understand."

"When did she agree to this?"

"A fiveday ago. Does it matter?"

Before the fire. Before he had mended fences with her. Even then, she had been willing to help him.

"It does not." It only mattered to him.

"You also have a class with Master Alastair Manday afternoons. This is unusual, especially since you have plenty of classes already, but he suggested it. As a former battlemage, he believes he might be of aid to you, given the swiftness with which you must finish your training."

Martel began to feel emotional. True friends revealed themselves in times of need.

"Lastly, you still have to help Master Jerome on Soldays, but as an acolyte, you are no longer expected to help in the kitchens. Any questions?"

"Are you or Master Alastair in trouble? Because you helped me hide my affinity."

She waited a while before replying. "No. You are now an invaluable Imperial asset, whom the headmaster wanted to expel. He wants to avoid any further attention to the matter."

"There is something else. Do you know what happened the night of the fire? Why I was there, how it started?"

"Maximilian of Marche told me, though you are wise to be careful before sharing the events with anyone else. I told him as much."

"So you know that I have made an enemy of Duke Cheval." He stared at her, hoping she had some manner of advice while knowing he could not hope for much.

"As I said, you are considered invaluable to the Empire. He will not seek to harm you in any way that can be traced to him, as that would hurt his standing at court."

"That still leaves a lot of other ways."

She slowly nodded, exhaling loudly. "It does. I suggest you stay in the castle where you are safe. Finish your year and join the legions somewhere beyond his reach."

Martel had a feeling that going to war would not be much of an improvement in terms of personal safety. "Thanks."

"Also, this afternoon, stop by the quartermaster. Your acolyte robes should be ready."

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After his meeting, once first bell had ended, Martel went for his shift at the apothecary. This time, Nora was present as usual.

As soon as Martel entered, he could tell the difference. She barely looked at him as she greeted him, and she gave the directions for his work with quick gestures rather than words. This was similar to when he had believed she had aided Jasper in extorting him, making Martel freeze her out. Except this time, she was the one to hold back, and not because of any flawed assumption, but because she knew the truth.

Martel thought about saying something as he washed his hands. But he could think of no argument to present. The truth was simple; he was fire-touched, prone to setting buildings on fire if he got angry. The fact that this had been revealed during an actual fire in the city, even if Martel had quelled rather than ignited the flames, probably did not help his cause.

Too weary to try explaining, Martel began chopping herbs.

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Later, Martel did as Mistress Juliana had instructed and collected two sets of robes from the quartermaster. He returned to his chamber, removed his brown clothes, and put one of them on. Lacking a mirror or any kind of large reflective surface, he bent over his bowl of water to look down. His blurry face stared back at him, showing the dark red of the fabric that now enveloped his

body. In addition, though he had to look down at himself to see them, the robe had patterns in bright red and yellow, similar to how other acolytes also had embroidered clothes.

At least nobody would mistake him for a clerk ever again.

Martel knew how the other students looked at fire acolytes. Distrust, apprehension, perhaps even fear. That would be his lot now. So be it. Martel had hidden his power for so long; not just at the Lyceum, but all his life back in Engby, where his father never wanted anybody to know of Martel's magical talent. But no more. Over the last year, running with the Night Knives and others, Martel had begun to understand the power given to him. He would not hide it, nor hide from it any longer.

## Chapter 247: Back to School

### Back to School

Graduating from novice to acolyte meant new classes and courses along with a different schedule. Martel would be trained extensively in fire magic throughout his remaining year; later on, he would also be taught skills like Tyrian runes and hopefully enchantment. For now, he would begin learning the Archean alphabet and language, as Archen was the basis of the magic being taught in Aster as well. So Martel dressed himself in his red robes denoting his new status and went to his first lesson as an acolyte.

Master Fenrick had several classrooms at his disposal, as Martel had learned. One for teaching astronomy, another for magical theory. It turned out that teaching Archean was done in a third. Entering, Martel saw one wall had been painted with the strange letters of the Archean alphabet, unknown to him. For now, anyway. In comparison, he recognised the other students present. Unlike when he had studied astronomy with them, he did not have to find a solitary seat in the back. One stood empty next to Maximilian, which Martel took.

"Nordmark, look at you. All dressed up in red," the mageknight remarked with a smirk. "A pleasant change from that dull brown."

Martel replied with a wry look, not sure what to say. Looking elsewhere, he saw Cheval staring at him with unvarnished hatred. He wondered if the young nobleman's father had told his son of how Martel had interfered with his plans; the mageknight had plenty of other reasons for disliking Martel, after all.

Master Fenrick entered. He adjusted his spectacles as he looked at the newest student in the class. "Martel, I see you have joined us. Good. Any further delay to your status as acolyte would have made it difficult for you to catch up. I am told you have a tutor for that purpose?"

Martel glanced at Eleanor, who gave a quick smile back at him, and quietly thanked Mistress Juliana for making the arrangement. "I do, master."

"Very well. Pay attention. Today we will look at irregular verbs. I suggest you take copious notes."

Grabbing the quill on his desk and dipping it in ink, Martel prepared to write.

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Walking down the corridor later that day, Martel was lost in his own thoughts and did not notice someone walking on a collision course with him until it happened. They pushed against his shoulder

with their own. Torn back to his surroundings, Martel turned to see it had not been an accident; Jasper glared at him.

"Your little secret's out. Now everyone knows what an unhinged bastard you are!" The gloating in his voice was nearly palpable, and if there had been any doubt, his face mirrored the emotion.

"You'll get sent to the front, where some Khivan bullet will make short work of you!"

"If you know how volatile I am, why would you dare taunt me? Did our last encounter not put you in your place?" Martel stared at the earthmage's throat and let flames ignite around his hand, holding it up.

"You can't frighten me here," Jasper sneered, even as he took a step backwards. "Nobody will believe you are sparring, not this time!"

"I am a battlemage," Martel retorted. "Far more valuable than you. You think they would ever expel me? Especially not for fighting. That's the one thing they want me to do."

Various expressions crossed the earthmage's face, but they leaned towards fear. Jasper backed away a few more paces before he finally turned around and disappeared down the hallway.

"That's what I thought." Martel let the words echo even as others looked, exchanging whispers. He suddenly doubted himself; while he had no sympathy for Jasper, he reinforced what others believed about the fire-touched. That felt unwise; at the same time, Martel could not deny the satisfaction from sending Jasper into flight simply with his words. Others might not like him, but they would at least respect him from now on.

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For his afternoon class, Martel stepped into the Hall of Elements. He had not expected to be back here; acolytes did not take lessons in this place or from Master Alastair. But with everything changing, he did not mind this small piece of familiarity.

"Punctual as ever. Come, join me." His teacher stood at the centre on the ring of earth, beckoning for him to join, which Martel did. "Did Mistress Juliana explain my reason for continuing to train you? You will be my only acolyte student, if you did not know."

"She mentioned something like helping me learn enough in my remaining year."

"Something like that. A little more complicated," Master Alastair admitted. "You'll learn everything any battlemage needs to know about fire magic, I'm sure. Between your talent and your teacher, that is assured. But in my experience, the weakness of a mage is rarely being sufficiently skilled with one element, but rather their shortcomings with the others. For that reason, knowing what you face, I have two aims."

Martel listened intently. He sometimes forgot, especially given the kind side of himself that Master Alastair usually showed, but the man had served twenty years as a battlemage, after all.

"First, I want to hone your skills with the other elements to ensure you can rely on them in combat. While you will never have the same offensive capabilities with them that fire provides, it will still be useful."

He trusted his teacher's aforementioned experience on this. "And the other aim?"

"Building on that, I wish to continue training you in advanced elemental magic. You will not receive this from Mistress Moira, whose domain is exclusively fire. But again, there is great power in mastering more than one element. You told me once that you called down a lightning bolt?"

Martel nodded. No need to mention that it had exhausted him to the point where he threw up.

"A powerful spell for those who can wield it properly. We will consider that our goal for this year."

Master Alastair's words rang true; Martel remembered the feeling of power coursing through him as he summoned lightning from the sky. He also recalled how his teacher had wielded that same power from his fingertip; probably no other piece of spellwork had impressed Martel as much. "That sounds great."

"Let's begin. Now, as fire-touched, drawing water straight from the air is difficult." Even as he said this, the teacher drew droplets from thin air into the palm of his hand. "It resists us. So that's the first thing we'll work on."

Martel stretched his neck. He felt ready for the challenge.

## Chapter 248: New Routines

### New Routines

The next morning, after working an awkward shift in the apothecary, where Nora said little more than necessary, Martel made his way to the workshops. As he arrived, gathering with the few other students also reporting for work, he noticed that they all kept their distance. He also found that he did not care.

Master Jerome made his appearance soon after, quickly directing his new workers to various positions and tasks, with Martel the lone exception. "Finally an acolyte," he remarked with a look towards Martel's new robes. "Good thing I made your belt black. Since every colour goes well with black."

Martel quickly glanced down at his leather belt with the pin shaped as a lightning bolt in the buckle. It did suit his red garb well. "Always a step ahead, Master Jerome."

The artificer gave a quick laugh, and Martel was glad to see the big man's jovial behaviour had not changed; he did not care how random students at the Lyceum treated him, but Master Jerome was another matter.

"As an acolyte, you will be spared the more menial tasks. I got plenty of novices for that. For now, with all your experience from the apothecary, I imagine you'll do well preparing ingredients and making ink. And while fire acolytes don't need to learn enchantment, I'll talk with your teachers. If there's time in your schedule for it, maybe we can find something useful for you to learn."

Martel's ears pricked up at that. Using fire to create rather than destroy sounded enticing. "I look forward to it, master."

The artificer placed a heavy hand on his shoulder. "There's a good lad. Come along, your work is waiting."

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Passing through the entrance hall in the afternoon, Martel stopped to check for messages. He had a feeling he could no longer expect Henry to track him down or get his attention if anything waited for him, so it seemed best to take a more active role.

He approached the air acolyte's desk. "Any letters?"

"I'll check." Avoiding eye contact, Henry got up and walked to the cabinets by the wall, quickly perusing them until he pulled out a small note. Wordlessly, he handed it over to Martel and sat down again.

Continuing on his walk, Martel quickly read the brief message.

Master Martel,

Unusual developments in our parts of the city

which pertain to you. Please pay us a visit

when convenient.

Kerra

Martel almost scowled seeing the name. He had not entertained any dealings with that woman since their trip to the Undercroft, and he had no desire to do so now. She had never been straight with him from the moment they met, always acting with ulterior motives, often putting him in harm's way.

No, Martel would not fall into her snare yet again. Whatever vague events she referred to had nothing to do with him; he had not been to the copper lanes for months. She would have to find another pawn.

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Setting aside such thoughts about the copper lanes and its devious mistress, Martel spent the remainder of the lunch bell relaxing until it was time for his third and final task of this Solday. Unsure what to expect, Martel entered the library. Its caretaker sent him a glance with a gruff expression; it seemed any goodwill obtained by a shared interest in the subterranean architecture of Morcaster had expired. No matter, as Martel had no need of him. Holding his writing tools and notes from yesterday's class, he looked around in search of his tutor.

She arrived moments later, carrying her own stack of parchment. With a quick smile as their eyes met, Eleanor approached Martel. "You are here as well. Great."

"Can we study here?" Martel spoke quietly; even with his back turned, he could practically feel the librarian's eyes on him. "I think talking is frowned upon."

"Certainly, if we stay on the lower floor. Follow me." Eleanor walked past him to approach the librarian, who regarded them with little affection.

Of course, Martel realised, he was an acolyte now. The upper floor of the library was accessible to him.

"We should like entry to the above," Eleanor explained. With a huff, the man got up and placed his hand on the rune carved into the door by his desk. It glowed briefly and allowed him to open the door. The pair of acolytes quickly passed through to reach a spiral staircase, which they followed up to the next floor.

Ever since he learned of the forbidden section of the library, Martel had been envious of those allowed to go there. He had imagined all manner of tomes and volumes of arcane lore, detailing amazing spells. He had never really given much thought as to how it might look. As he finally stood upon the upper floor, he realised that it looked pretty much like the lower. Long rows of bookshelves filled as intended. No doubt containing vast amounts of precious knowledge, though Martel could not readily see what set these apart from those accessible to novices.

"Come with me. There is a table over here we can use." Eleanor walked over to her declared destination, slapping down her pile of parchment. As Martel joined her, she reached out and grabbed a heavy book from a shelf. "A dictionary of the Archean language. That should come in useful."

Martel had not heard of this type of book before, but he could assume its purpose. "You brought notes as well?"

She nodded. "Everything I have written down so far in this class. I suppose it is unnecessary, since I was taught Archean as a child."

Martel looked at her, confused. "If you already know the language, why do you take notes?"

"Habits die hard. And given you are about to enjoy the fruits of my diligence, I do not expect to hear any complaints out of you."

He raised his hands to a surrendering pose. "Perish the thought."

"Good. Let us begin from the start, with learning the letters..."

## Chapter 249: First Day of Fire

### First Day of Fire

On Pelday, Martel had his first ever lesson devoted to fire magic. He wondered if it would be anything like his introductory courses in the other elemental arts; presumably more demanding, given his aptitude for fire had already been determined. He did require some help finding his way to his classroom, as he had never been there before.

Unlike the dedicated spaces for water and earth, it lay above ground. A short and rotund tower on the north side of the Lyceum played host to the classes in fire magic. Martel had seen it from the outside, across the yard while up in the Tower of Air; now he knew its purpose.

The Circle of Fire lived up to its name, having round walls. The space itself resembled the Hall of Elements in length and height, except the floor was entirely stonework; no water or earth was present. In addition, the walls had slivers through them, allowing air to flow in from outside the castle, which also made the room cold.

As it took him a little extra time to reach the classroom, it seemed that Martel entered last. Three other students in the same red robes were present. Two of them boys; the third, he recognised as the girl he had duelled against during the solstice celebration last summer, at the home of Legate Fontaine. Given how she glared at him, she remembered the incident as well.

Looking away, Martel turned his attention towards the adult in the room. He had never met Mistress Moira before and did not know what to expect. No matter what, he would never have guessed at the sight before him. The Mistress of Fire looked to be eighty years or older. Her face was filled with

furrows, her wild hair completely white and matching her expression. She barely reached Martel's chest and looked so frail that a breeze might snap her like a twig.

"Be faster in the future, boy," she remarked with a glance at him. "Every moment counts."

"Yes, mistress," Martel mumbled, suddenly feeling unsure of himself. He had met all sorts of teachers at the Lyceum by now, but he did not know how to interpret her mannerisms towards him.

"Class, this is Martel." Mistress Moira turned towards her other students. "He is fire-touched. That means, while it took you all months to learn to summon your own flame, he was basically born with the ability. For that reason, even though you've all studied for a year and he's just become an acolyte, you'll train together."

Martel felt alarm rising as he listened to her. If there had been any ambiguity as to how his fellow students viewed him, her words cleared that up. They all stared at him with deep dislike.

"I suspect in the coming months he will have caught up to all of you. So unless you wish to be embarrassed by him, you better start your exercises right now and keep at it until I say otherwise."

The other students dispersed throughout the room and began summoning flames into the air, hurling them through the slits in the walls.

Mistress Moira turned her attention back on Martel. "If you believe that your particular talent will earn you any respite, you should immediately forget such foolishness. I know exactly what you're capable of, and if you fail to meet my expectations, I'll make sure you regret it. Your time is not your own, boy."

"It's not?" he asked, though faced with her belligerent expression, he immediately regretted the question.

"Of course not! I'll have you stay here every evening, hour after hour, if you disappoint me." It did not seem an idle threat, though Martel had not heard about such punishment before. "Now attack me with your fire, the best you can," she commanded.

Recognising that she meant to measure him, Martel flung a bolt of fire at his teacher, adding spellpower to make it burn hotter.

It struck her torso; she did not move the slightest in response. "At least I don't have to teach you how to ignite a flame," she sighed. "Alright, see what the others are doing? You do the same."

Martel turned to see his fellow students, creating fire bolts and throwing them at the slits in the stonework. He quickly found his own opening to target and began aiming, Mistress Moira watching him like a hawk.

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As the bell rang, Martel felt beat. Master Alastair had never really pushed him beyond what felt like his limits. It had been more about trying different kinds of spells, finding out what flowed best for him. And while training up his spellpower under Master Fenrick had certainly left him drained, he had been allowed to go at his own pace.

Nothing of the sort under Mistress Moira. She had hounded him every moment, except when turning her head to yell at the other students. He had kept back at first, conserving his magic to

ensure that he could last the full bell, which she had quickly noticed and scolded him for. As a result, he had expended most of his spellpower before the lesson had ended.

And he had another later that day.

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As time came for supper, Martel was exhausted. In both senses of the word. His magic was completely drained. Just the thought of igniting the tiniest flame at the edge of his finger made his stomach turn.

Since it was Pelday, he had planned to attend the meeting of the sparring group in the Chamber of Earth. He had not expected to be worn out after classes, but maybe with some quick rest, he would feel invigorated enough to do a single sparring match. Considering what lay ahead, practising when he was already tired seemed especially beneficial. Once in war, the enemy would not wait until he felt well rested and prepared.

Yes, no excuses. Martel laid down in his bed for a short nap; last bell would wake him up, and he would go to the gathering. Just closing his eyes until then.

He slept until morning.

## Chapter 250: Once More into the Breach

### Once More into the Breach

Thanks to his extended period of sleep, Martel felt physically rested come next morning; unfortunately, his mind was not similarly at ease. As gruelling as two classes with Mistress Moira had been, at least she was trying to teach him. He did not expect the same from Reynard given past experiences, and he dreaded the prospect of once more spending two bells in the company of the Master of War every Malday.

Besides the teacher's callous treatment of Martel, he had not forgotten about his novice examination. He had no proof, but he strongly suspected that Reynard had tried to influence the outcome by using gold to destroy Martel's spells. Now that same man was to train him in the art of war, equipping him with the skills to survive on the battlefield?

Martel felt like a dead man walking as he stepped outside to reach the arena. There was light snowfall again this morning; the future legionaries trained outdoors specifically for that reason, to become accustomed to combat under the influence of the elements. At least moving about would get Martel warm.

His fellow fire acolytes were all present as he arrived, like yesterday. Perhaps the influence of Mistress Moira, impressing upon them to be ready immediately after the bell rang. Martel knew none of their names; all of them, himself included, had been too busy yesterday during class to speak, and too exhausted afterwards. Besides, considering the glares they all gave him, he did not expect much camaraderie.

Reynard strode onto the circle of sand, looking as self-important as ever. He held two staves in each hand. "Attention, students. You will notice our number has increased. Making it even, which I suppose is one benefit at least." He threw the weapons on the ground, motioning for all of them to

pick one up. "Pair up and practise. No shields yet, you know the drill. Three of you do, anyway. Northern boy, for this part, you only practice empowerment," Reynard added towards Martel. He frowned seeing the acolyte inspect his staff. "Something the matter, boy?"

"Just examining my weapon," Martel replied. "You never know what you might find." He made a show of running his fingers across the tip, similar to where he suspected Reynard had embedded a piece of gold in his weapon during Martel's novice examination.

The Master of War gave a growl. "I said, pair up!"

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As much as Martel disliked revisiting lessons with Reynard, the two hours could have been worse. Unlike his previous strategy of ignoring Martel, the Master of War kept a sharp eye to constantly criticise Martel's form, fighting with the staff. Yet thanks to his experiences in the fighting ring of The Broken Crown, Martel dominated his opponent, a dour-looking boy with curly hair, nearly his own height. It made Reynard's criticisms ring hollow when every moment, Martel landed a blow while never taking any himself.

Taking heart from his performance, Martel arrived in the afternoon for the second lesson of the day. Besides the other fire acolytes, he was glad to see the mageknights with whom he also shared the class on the Archean language. Sure, Cheval glowered at him, but Martel paid no heed to him. He only cared about seeing Maximilian and Eleanor, the former greeting him with a hearty gesture.

"Nordmark!"

"I didn't know we'd share this class," Martel admitted, pleasantly surprised.

"Hah, I thought you did know, else I would have gladly mentioned it. Finally, an excuse again to smack you around," Maximilian declared.

"I wouldn't have thought they'd pair battlemages with mageknights for practice," the fire acolyte remarked. "Though I guess it can be good practice to fight someone with very different magic."

"Do not let Maximilian mislead you," Eleanor chimed in. "It is much more than that. For this class, we train fighting together, as we will one day on the battlefield."

"Feast your eyes, Nordmark." Maximilian extended his hand towards the other mageknights. "With luck, or lack of same, one of these fine specimens will serve as your protector!"

Martel recalled Master Alastair's stories, fighting as a battlemage with Mistress Juliana by his side to protect him. Martel had not given it any thought before now, but obviously, the same would happen to him. He looked at the mageknights present, wondering who it might be. Since his life would depend on it, he had a keen interest in finding out. "How will that be determined?"

"Some clerk in the Imperial administration throws all the names in a jar and pulls them out until they are all paired up," Maximilian explained with a grin.

From what Martel had heard, the outcome was not as random as his friend suggested. Both the duke of Cheval and Flora of the Night Knives had suggested that influence and money could decide a mage's posting, within reason, at any rate. Naturally, Martel's fate as a battlemage was sealed; everyone had been clear on that. But given how much Maximilian's father had invested towards his

son joining the praetorians, Martel figured that his friend would never be among those becoming a battlemage's protector.

He looked at Eleanor; he could not recall if she had ever shared her ambitions for the future. In any case, he imagined that like Maximilian, she had loftier goals than sitting in the mud next to a battlemage. From what little Martel knew, advancement for mageknights lay primarily as officers of a cohort, leading legionaries into battle.

"Time to group up!" Reynard had arrived.

Martel looked around to see everyone else had already fetched a weapon from the school's armoury, while he had none. Apparently, the procedure was different compared to this morning when the teacher had brought the staves. "Master," Martel spoke up, reluctant to even use the title, "I don't have a weapon."

"You should have fetched one before the lesson began," Reynard told him brusquely. "Do not interrupt me again. As I said, group up! Attackers, on this side and wait your turn. You two, you will be the first to defend."

With various degrees of enthusiasm, the students moved around the arena as ordered. One pair of protector and battlemage took position in the middle with three mageknights making ready to assault, the rest watching from the stands.