

Firebrand 401

Chapter 401: A Focus for the Fire

A Focus for the Fire

When Moira appeared in the Circle of Fire, all the acolytes could sense this lesson would be different. It was rather obvious as she carried four staves in her arms, and unlike those used for weapon practice, which were rough and simple, these were exquisitely carved. Each had a top with particular markings and carvings, allowing room for something to be inserted. As Moira handed out one staff to each student, Martel got a chance to take a closer look at what rested atop. It was a ruby.

"I don't suppose you knuckleheads remember what Master Fenrick taught you about gems."

Martel suspected that they all did, and he saw no reason to speak up.

Harriet had no such reservations. "Different gems and precious stones amplify different kinds of magic. Rubies are good for fire." She wore a smug expression.

"I knew one of you couldn't resist the chance to show off, explaining what every dumb novice knows," Moira snorted. "I half expected it to be the scarecrow here." She nodded towards Martel. "But I'm not surprised it was you. Mouth as big as yours, you must be putting it to use an awful lot."

Harriet turned red, either from embarrassment or anger; probably both. The other acolytes snickered, except for Martel, who just felt tired of it all.

"Once you trot off to war, you'll each get one of these. The staff of a battlemage. As said, channelling your magic into the ruby will amplify any fire spells you cast. The wood has been enchanted and laid with silver, which should make it easy for your magic to travel through it. It also makes it into a good weapon, as solid as steel."

Martel vaguely remembered a lesson in Master Fenrick's classroom last year, showing a silver wand with a sapphire meant for water magic. He had been envious, longing for the day when such an artefact would be his, along with the magic he would wield through it. Now he would get his first taste, though neither the artefact nor his magic was as he had imagined. He placed one hand on the carved haft that was intended to work as the handle, and he felt what Moira had described. Lines of silver touched his palm and fingers, acting like roads through the wilderness for his spells, carrying them to their destination at the top. Though how it actually worked, channelling magic through the ruby, he could not quite imagine.

"It'll take you a while to get used to it, using the gem as a focus for your spells, which means you should stop talking and start practising. Spread out, as I expect your spells will fly all over the place, and give it a try," Moira commanded.

Moving away from the others, Martel let his magical sense wash through the staff. He felt how eagerly it moved along the silver lines to the top, where the ruby lay as a source of heat. Yet he knew, if he touched it with his fingertip, the gem would likely be cool. The warmth within was of a different nature, or rather, it lay dormant.

He tried summoning a flame, and the tip of his staff became wreathed in fire. He instinctively felt he had done this wrong; the ruby was not part of it, had not lent its own strength to his simple spell.

He could not help but glance at Moira, who looked at him with a condescending smile, but she offered no words, neither as scorn nor aid.

Probably she knew what to do, but Martel saw no reason to approach her. Asking Master Alastair for help was one thing; as for the Mistress of Fire, he would rather have his teeth pulled out.

The problem seemed obvious enough. He still cast his spell like he usually would, rather than use the ruby as a focus. The answer was more complicated; how did he do that? Hitherto, casting a spell was a journey with two points. Martel's own body as the origin of the magic, and whatever destination he chose, whether also himself or somewhere distant. For this, he had to somehow introduce a third point; a step between origin and destination, shaping the journey without ending it.

The silver in the staff had to serve a purpose for this. A conduit for his magic. A way to connect his body with the ruby, allowing the latter to be an extension of the former.

Preparing to summon simple magelight again, Martel did it differently. Rather than think of the gem as the end point for the spell, he thought of the magic as travelling from his hand up to the top with the ruby embedded. Slowly, light began to shine from the tip of his staff, stronger than he had intended. Unlike before, it did not wrap around the gem, but seemed to originate from within. Looking at it, Martel smiled.

"Nicely done. Now you just have to learn to cast a spell that'll do more than make your enemies squint their eyes, not to mention, you also have to hit them with it." Moira's voice and cackling laughter appeared in his ear, making him flinch, before she turned away to yell at the other students.

Doing his best to ignore her, Martel prepared another spell.

When both his classes were done, Martel returned to his room for rest. It had been a strange sensation, practising with the ruby; like gaining a new limb that he had to learn how to control. And using the gem as the focus, the origin of his spellcasting, was only the first step; he needed to do it as swiftly and as accurately as launching a fire bolt from his hand, or any added power from the ruby would not matter much.

His thoughts strayed from classes to the letter he had received from home. It had been a few days; Martel had put it in the drawer with the others and tried not to think about it. He knew that he ought to write back; he just did not know what to write. He felt angry that he had been kept in the dark and decisions had been made on his behalf. It was also an easy way to shift blame for his current situation, away from himself and onto others. If he had never gone to Morcaster, he would never have exposed himself as fire-touched, and he would not face a future in the legions.

But he could not regret the decision that had revealed the truth about him. Who knew how terrible the fire would have spread across the Khivan quarter if Martel had not been present? Shadi might have died in the flames. Of course, he would not have known her or particularly cared if he had stayed in Engby as Master Ogion's apprentice; it would simply have been news of dreadful fire in faraway Morcaster, meaning nothing more to him than that.

It was a question without answer; Martel would never know if his life could have taken a different path, and whether it would have been better. Accepting this, he decided to write back and have it done with.

Dear mum,

I assume you know that Father Julius wrote to me on your behalf, explaining things. I wish you and dad would have told me. I don't know if things would have been different, but at least I would have known. Everything that happened would have been my own decision.

But I am not upset. This has been for the best. I have learned so much at the Lyceum that I wouldn't elsewhere. I have been able to help so many people, and I will continue to do so. Besides magic, my knowledge of alchemy will be of great use. So everything worked out.

If you are worried about the thought of me joining the legions, you should not be. The war has already dragged on for so many years. Everyone down here is saying that it can't continue much longer. And this is Morcaster where these decisions are made, so they would know. I might not even make it to camp before the whole thing is over, and I am ordered to go back again. Maybe I will even join a legion posted up north. We might march right past Engby, and I can come visit. Else I will do it when I am given leave.

So don't think more about it. Instead, tell me how everyone is when you write to me next. I assume John is still healthy and not in need of more medication, but if so, don't hesitate to write. Mistress Rana, the alchemist who is teaching me the trade, pays me for my work, so I can help if you need it. I might even be able to make the elixir myself. Wouldn't that be grand?

By the time this letter arrives, solstice will have come and gone again. I hope you all have had a wonderful celebration, and I am sorry to miss another one. But there will be a great faire here in Morcaster like last year, I imagine, full of entertainment. I hope you can come and experience it one year as well.

Love,

Martel

He put his quill away, careful not to disturb the parchment as the ink dried.

Chapter 402: Making Strides

Making Strides

Several fivedays followed where Martel focused on his schoolwork, free from the interruptions and entanglements of the wider city. Nobody sent him messages, requesting or demanding anything from him; for a while, he was like any student at the school. The only exception would be the few occasions when he went to teach Sparrow, or he visited Julia, also paying her rent for the month. Nothing out of the ordinary happened on those occasions either; no assaults upon his life, nobody surveying him or the like. It seemed that the peace of the Pact held.

One Solday morning, he entered the workshops to continue his labours in enchantment. The day before, he believed to have made progress; now came the moment of truth. Placing his hands against the stone, it felt cool to the touch, but Martel knew to look deeper. His magical senses washed over the rock and felt a kernel of heat within. That could only come from the spell he had infused into the stone yesterday; the fact that it still remained meant that he had succeeded in enchanting the stone.

Practically speaking, it made no difference, as the spell was so weakened, it had no real effect; but for Martel, it was a milestone, almost literally speaking. For the first time, he had cast a spell into an

object, allowing the spell to continue even after he released it. No doubt he had a long way to go before he could make the fire pots that would be the end goal of his enchantment, but an important step had been taken.

Martel's eyes ran over the text on the table in front of him. It was an account of the Asterian invasion of Tyria, some ninety years ago. Interesting in its own right, though also filled with terrifying tales of berserkers, skálds, and witches turning their magic against the legionaries. Unfortunately, probably not anything that would be useful to them; all the magic mentioned was of an aggressive nature, rather than anything like healing.

"Martel, look at this." Eleanor placed her book on the table and turned it around that he could see. "This might be something."

One page was filled by a large illustration of what was clearly a Tyrian symbol. Below, its name was given as the rune of unbinding. "What does it say about it?"

"It's the story of a trader, who lived some years with the Tyrians. He mentions that this symbol was used to cure someone of their affliction and return them to their original state." She spoke with a normal tone of voice, though Martel noticed a touch of excitement.

He did not wish to throw water on her fire; at the same time, 'affliction' could mean many different things. "It might be something, yes." Having found nothing better, Martel decided against discouraging her. He had still not made any arrangements towards looking for a skáld among the underworld of Morcaster; not knowing how to contact the Friar made it easy to postpone the decision, giving in to his reluctance at becoming involved with any of the Nine Lords again. Until Martel could present a better solution for discovering a cure, he would support his friend in hers.

Resolutely, Eleanor picked up a feather pen and began copying the rune onto a piece of parchment.

As the long summer night took over the city, Martel strolled towards the copper lanes. Although solstice was not for another fiveday, people had already begun to arrive in anticipation of trade, entertainment, and general festivities. Even Martel sometimes had trouble making his way through the crowds, though if people noticed a wizard approaching, they usually shied away and made room for him. He always felt a little uncomfortable surrounded by others, especially after his experiences with the criminal elements of Morcaster, but he kept his head cool, a shield spell ready, and avoided the worst of the traffic on the main streets and squares

Reaching the copper lanes, he approached his destination for the night. Sparrow had made good progress with her magic since Martel first began teaching her. She could hold a spell for thirty breaths now, and she could make the effect appear more than ten yards away from herself. She still struggled with the particular spell he was trying to teach her, the earthen armour, but Martel figured she would grasp it eventually. Earth being her affinity, there was no reason she would not.

Walking more casually, allowing himself to relax, Martel almost enjoyed the copper lanes. Although the district was marked by poverty, with crooked wooden houses rather than stone buildings, Martel felt more at ease. Fewer people were about, giving him plenty of room on the streets.

And while the lanes probably had more people ready to do violence for the sake of a few coins, Martel doubted any of them would be foolish enough to challenge a mage. It might seem strange, but he almost felt safer in the copper lanes than anywhere else in Morcaster, except for the Lyceum itself.

As if to mock his thoughts, an unusual sight came into view. Ahead of him, some hundred paces, two people walked wearing the distinct cloaks of the inquisitors. Their backs turned, they had not noticed Martel, and he had no particular reason to be worried; still, he took a turn down an alley rather than risk any confrontation.

The sight of them felt strange; not only their presence, but how they had appeared. Walking leisurely, almost strolling down the street. Obviously, they had not been keeping a building under surveillance, or a suspect, given how they walked in the open. Nor did they seem to move with a purpose, on their way to interrogate or arrest someone. He did not believe they were simply out for the purpose of amusement; the headquarters lay in the other end of the city, and he could not imagine inquisitors making the journey to the copper lanes for that reason. Even if they had some vices that only this particular district could fulfil, surely they would not wear their uniforms for such a purpose.

Looking up, an answer came to Martel. The full moon shone down upon him, though it would soon sink behind the horizon. They were probably out patrolling for the maleficar, knowing he chose this time of the month to strike.

Martel doubted they stood any chance of finding the dark sorcerer, no matter how much they patrolled. Morcaster was too big for them to effectively cover the city, and surely, he would simply notice and avoid them if their paths should cross. But perhaps their presence might deter him from his evil deeds, saving someone's life. If so, Martel could not complain.

It did make him reconsider his plan to visit Sparrow tonight. The last thing the girl needed was an inquisitor stumbling upon them while she practised her magic. He would have to wait a few nights until the full moon had passed. Turning around, Martel began walking home.

Chapter 403: Counters

Counters

"Not really getting it through your thick skulls, are you?" Moira's disdainful gaze swept over her students. "Getting a few flames up and around the ruby won't be enough. I expect each of you to be able to release a proper fire spell from your staff, but Stars help me, that's looking like a lofty ambition! By the time you've managed to hit a single Khivan, they'll have riddled you with holes!"

Martel did his best to ignore her. She was not offering any actual advice; her sole method of teaching seemed based on bullying her students until they somehow learned, though it probably happened in spite of rather than because of her.

At least he could go to Master Alastair for advice; he wondered if the other fire acolytes ever did that. It might also be helpful to be able to practise with the gem-tipped staves at other hours, rather than the bells they had in the Circle of Fire. Moira had allowed Martel to keep his gold-edged dagger, so perhaps she would be amenable to this; the situation was not quite the same, as the blade had already belonged to Martel, whereas the staves would be the property of the Lyceum.

In any case, he did not feel up for asking. She seemed in a particularly foul mood today; certainly not prone towards granting favours. Sighing, but keeping the utterance to himself, Martel tried once more to focus a spell through the ruby.

Despite two bells of practising fire magic, Martel still went to the Chamber of Earth in the evening. He had not been to the unofficial gathering for months, in part because it seemed superfluous, in part because he was usually too tired after his lessons in the Circle of Fire. But he had been practising his counterspell in duels with Master Alastair for a while now, and he wanted to try it against an opponent closer to his own power. Thus, he had preserved his spellpower as best he could during the day, leaving him enough for one match.

"Nordmark! You should have told me you were coming tonight." Maximilian walked over, lowering his voice as he spoke again. "I could have arranged a good fight for you with even better odds."

"Not my intention tonight," Martel responded. "Not looking for coin, just a little practice against the right opponent."

"Well, thankfully I am a quick hand at setting up a wager or two. But what is the good master looking for? We have a fine selection of mageknights with different weapons. The good master can even have two at once." Maximilian grinned.

"While you would make a good purveyor of flesh, my interest lies in the elemental tonight."

The mageknight turned his eyes over the small crowd of acolytes. Normally, some might already have started fighting, but Martel's appearance had immediately caused whispers: everybody was waiting to see what the battlemage would do. "In that case, Henry is a decent choice with air."

The white-clad mage shook his head; apparently, he had no interest in trying his luck.

"I'll do it." A young woman in the embroidered blue robe of a frostmage stepped forward.

Martel recalled he had duelled her once before, using his fire to melt her ice. Back then, it had been a deliberate move, where he had waited and anticipated her spell; not a bad comparison to see how much better he could do this with his mastery of the counterspell. "Excellent."

The two acolytes took position opposite each other, but everyone else spread out along the sides. Neither took a weapon. This dual would be decided by elemental spells, not empowerment.

Martel knew not to underestimate his opponent. While no elemental acolytes trained as much for combat as those with fire, he knew that frostmages did receive some martial education, if they were meant to join the northern legions. The fact that he had seen this particular water acolyte during these sparring sessions more than once suggested she was considered for such a career.

"Fight!"

A ray of frost shot out from her finger. Martel reacted with his counterspell, and a shield of flames shot up in front of him, absorbing what would otherwise have been a direct hit. Meanwhile, his own hand unleashed a fire bolt that did strike true. She winced in pain, but it did not break her rhythm. Both of them moved around, circling the other mage as they each unleashed another spell.

The same result as before; Martel's counterspell took effect, and only his adversary received a hit. The counterspell worked, but it was also draining his spellpower; Martel could not keep this tactic

up. At the same time, the frostmage limped after being struck on her leg; another strike should bring her to her knees and the duel to an end.

Both acolytes cast their third offensive spell. Martel expected the same as before, underestimating his opponent; instead of a glittering spike of ice, earth rose from the ground and flew against him with enough force to knock him to the ground.

Reacting on instinct, Martel counterspelled. A gust of wind blew against the earthen bolt, dissolving it in the air. Quickly following up, Martel unleashed his own fire bolt, making another successful attack.

"Enough!" The frostmage raised her open hands in a gesture of defeat.

Martel took deep breaths, feeling the sweat on his brow. He would not have had spellpower for a fourth counter. As the other acolytes cheered, the frostmage limped over to him. "That's Master Alastair's counterspell, isn't it? I saw him demonstrate it once, but I didn't know he taught it to anyone. He told us we wouldn't have need of it."

"You probably won't," Martel assented. The Tyrians fought with water and earth, just like her.

"You found good use for it tonight. I thought you could only protect against my water spells, that maybe you battlemages have a fire shield of some sort. I didn't expect the wind stopping my earth."

"I'm glad you tried that. It was the perfect opportunity to try the spell. And if I didn't have it, all your spells would have hit me. You're very good."

"Not as good as you, fire-touched." She gave half a smile. "But I'll get there. And then I expect a rematch."

Martel bowed his head. "That's only fair."

Chapter 404: Near-sighted

Near-sighted

The next day held combat lessons. While Martel disliked any time spent with Reynard, the teacher's disinterest in his students made for less trying hours. It even afforded Martel an opportunity to spend some moments with his friends when they had the second lesson together.

"You were out quick last night! I would at least have expected you to accept the accolades of the crowd," Maximilian remarked.

"Honestly, even though I won, I felt wiped out."

"No wonder, seeing as you were slinging more spells than rats fleeing a sinking ship."

"I take it by your good mood that you found someone to take your wager on my fight?"

The mirth drained from the mageknights face. "Sadly not. They've grown wise to your ways, master battlemage. It would take something extraordinary for any to bet against you. Say, you against three opponents? Or that thing you did with the blindfold, truly inspired!"

Martel scoffed. "You'll have to find your entertainment elsewhere." He glanced at Maximilian above his hand, covered by a glove. "You still have your signet ring, right? You didn't gamble it away a second time."

"How dare you suggest such a thing," came the response counted with mock indignation. "But speaking of entertainment, next fiveday is solstice. All your dances better not be accounted for, Nordmark."

"Don't worry, I've got no plans. And this year, I actually got silver in my purse."

"Music to my ears," Maximilian said, "and soon, ale down my throat!"

Come evening, Martel left again. He would stay out of the copper lanes for now, but he did have another obligation in the city that required regular attendance. While Julia was particularly wary if not outright scared of the inquisitors, they could not be patrolling the harbour in force if they were doing the same in the slums. Besides, while doing alchemy might be the sort of thing they took notice of, Martel did it in the privacy of Julia's room; he could not imagine they could discover his potion-brewing and thereby her.

Buying the herbs he needed, Martel thanked the Stars that the sleeping draught did not require any sort of rare reagents. It was the only potion he knew to make that he also had any use for, or rather, that Julia could use. While he was glad to learn of the many elixirs against different diseases, he was also happy that he had no cause to need them yet.

Approaching the harbour, Martel found it even more congested than the market district. Ships were arriving for solstice, disgorging people and goods. Never happy in a crowd, Martel went down an alley to take a slower, but less trafficked route to Julia.

Walking in the shadow of the tall buildings on either side, he relaxed a little, feeling the noise and pressure of the throng subside. He walked casually, not in a particular hurry; the sun would set late, and the weather seemed like it would hold until he got back to the Lyceum.

Even so, something alerted his senses. Perhaps a sound difficult to discern, or just the feeling of another's presence – whatever it was, Martel did not feel alone in the alley. He let his magic extend behind him, and it told him of a heat source in the form of a human. It could simply be another person likewise preferring this route, but Martel preferred to avoid assumptions. At the same time, trying to confront the possible pursuer might allow them to get away, leaving Martel none the wiser.

He chose a path that led back to the main street. Once he reached it, he hurried to slip inside the bustling crowd, finding a vantage point behind a cart of goods that kept him hidden, but allowed vision of the alleyway.

Moments later, a man emerged. As he reached where the streets intersected, he stopped and clearly looked around. He squinted and stood with an open mouth, as if near sighted and perhaps not too bright. He looked somewhere in his forties, perhaps; not bald or balding, but possibly a receding hairline leaving plenty of forehead. Finally, he seemed to reach a decision and went down one direction.

Martel stayed hidden until his pursuer had disappeared before he turned around, walking the opposite way. The man's clothes had been ordinary, and Martel could only speculate as to his identity, except for one thing; he recalled a description of those few character traits given by Julia as to the inquisitor who hounded her.

Traversing the final miles to Julia's building, Martel made sure to keep a watchful eye. He stuck to the small alleys that allowed him to notice any other surveillants, and he chose a longer, less direct route.

Soon after, he knocked on her door, and she let him in. "I brought a few ingredients, in case you would like another sleeping draught."

"I would." She gave an inkling of a smile, usually the extent of her facial expressions.

Martel hesitated, unsure whether to bring this up; the girl already seemed frightened, even though she had lived the last many months in peace in this particular room. Still, if he wanted her to trust him, it was best to be honest. "You told me once of an inquisitor who pursues you. Bad eyesight, big forehead."

Her entire body stiffened. "Is he here? Did he follow you?"

"Nobody followed me. He tried to, but I lost him."

"Are you sure?" she asked sharply. "He took my parents – now he's coming for me!"

"I was very careful. My magic tells me if someone is after me. Besides, he wasn't even dressed as an inquisitor. It could just have been someone else I met by accident." Even if the man had been trailing Martel, it could be for a number of reasons. He had made quite a few enemies, after all, and some of them might be on the lookout for an opportunity to hurt Martel, Pact or not.

"You should leave." Julia stared at him with her big, serious eyes.

"I'm sure it'll be fine," he tried to reassure her. "It probably wasn't the same man that you're afraid of, and he didn't follow me here anyway."

"You should leave."

"What about the sleeping potion?"

"Please. Leave."

"Alright. I will." He turned towards the door. "Keep the things. I'll be back in some days, or next fiveday. We can make the potion then."

"Fine."

Back outside in the hallway, Martel heard her bolt the door behind him. Her fear seemed exaggerated; the inquisitors had no particular reason to be chasing Julia, simply because they had taken her parents. Given that they had their hands full, Martel doubted that they would continue to pursue her, year after year.

But he also understood she was spooked like a fawn in the fields, and reason would not convince her. He would give her some time and return another day, as he had promised. Once she saw that nothing had happened, and the nightmare chasing her did not come true, she would be fine again.

Chapter 405: A Precious Stone

A Precious Stone

Arriving at the apothecary for his morning chore, Martel found that Nora had laid out his work for him, as she often did. He set to it quietly, letting his mind wander while his hand went through the motions of drying, cutting, grinding, and what else was needed.

Soon after, Mistress Rana appeared with a scrap of parchment. "For tomorrow's recipe." She handed it over and disappeared again.

Martel mumbled his thanks and glanced at the list of ingredients. He recognised several from the other new elixirs he had learned over the last month or two, which suggested this was another cure for a particular disease.

"Things are going well?" Nora asked with a light voice, her eyes still fixed on her work. "You are learning new recipes at a quick pace."

"I guess so, yes. I can do a cure for every malady known to man pretty soon."

She responded with polite laughter. While matters were cordial between them, they had never really found a way back to the easy rapport that existed in the early days before she learned that he was fire-touched. And earlier than that, the whole affair with Jasper extorting them both had also caused a rift, even if the misunderstanding was eventually cleared up.

"You're making a lot of salves?" Martel asked, mostly just to say something. "Judging by the kind of work you have me doing this fiveday."

She nodded. "Need to stock up for the solstice. So many travellers, so many people getting drunk – it's an endless stream of people in need of aid. Be glad you're not one of the sisters working in the infirmary."

"One month was more than enough, thanks. It was interesting enough to learn a bit about treating wounds and small injuries, but after the tenth mageknight needing salve on their back where they can't reach, I had my fill."

She laughed again, perhaps more genuinely this time.

"Any solstice plans?" he asked.

"Spending it at the faire with my family, most likely. You?"

"Probably getting into trouble with Maximilian."

Her laughter came for the third time. Suddenly weary of making conversation, Martel fell quiet, returning his attention to his work.

Martel stared at the gem atop the staff he held in his hand. He could get the first step done; cast a spell using the ruby as the focus point, adding its power to his magic. That had been surprisingly easy, in fact. As if to make up for that, the second step continued to elude him, lesson after lesson. He could not manifest the spell anywhere else than around the gem. Moira's condescension did not help either.

Doing his best to ignore her, Martel took a few deep breaths. He had gone through this struggle with most of what he had learned. Many lessons of frustration, inching towards progress, before finally breaking through. It would happen with this as well, as long as he kept at it.

He stared at the wall in front of him with its slit that served as his target. He needed the spell to manifest from the ruby and hit the wall, rather than just awkwardly hover around his staff.

Usually, when flinging a fire bolt at an opponent, Martel did not think about it at all. He cast the spell, and it flew in the direction he wanted. But every time he tried to use the staff, he could only create the fire around the ruby. It required a second thought, a second act of magic, for him to move the summoned flame towards his target. Which, if nothing else, required too much time and effort to be worthwhile.

He could keep practising the same methods over and over, and it might eventually succeed for him. But perhaps he could make a shortcut by applying what he had learned by studying different kinds of magic. It struck him that maybe this was not so different from how Tyrian runes worked. He had figured that out by understanding that magic was not simply something that originated from himself, but rather something present around him, which he could connect to.

He looked at the opening in the wall again. Instead of trying to summon a fire bolt to cross the distance, he imagined that a connection already existed between him and the bricks with the thin opening. More than that, he allowed his magic to sense the small area. The air between him and his destination, flowing through the slit from the outside. Empty to the naked eye, but filled with magical potential.

Martel began casting his spell. He imagined and felt how his power snaked from his hand up the staff until it reached the ruby nestled at the top. Still, he kept it under control, bound rather than releasing it just yet. He let his magic bridge the distance to the wall, almost as if it floated on the air that whistled through. Once he felt it established, he released the spell.

A burst of fire appeared, clinging against the bricks. Martel smiled to himself. Not exactly the same as casting a fire bolt and striking his target, but it was a step forward. He had used the staff to release magic in a physically separate place. He realised how this mirrored his first experiences with learning magic. Summoning a flame around his hand had come naturally to him since childhood; creating one away from his body had been more difficult at first, but now he did it without any extra effort.

"You can wipe that smile away, boy," came Moira's voice. "If you want to be worthy of the staff, I expect to see you throwing spells as easily as you can without. Summoning a flame here and there won't suffice."

Martel did not reply. He figured this was her twisted way of teaching; constant belittlements, meant to always push them to improve. Or making others suffer was the only way her shrivelled heart felt joy. It was one or the other. Regardless, she was right, for once. If he were to use the ruby to augment his spells, he needed more practice. More control. Taking slow breaths, Martel prepared himself to try again.

Chapter 406: Overcoming a Pest

Overcoming a Pest

Martel exchanged a brief nod with Master Jerome and continued through the workshops to the small laboratory, where he practised enchanting. The artificer did not interfere much, content with letting Martel work at his own pace after the acolyte revealed that Master Alistair was providing him with counsel.

In the small room, the big, round stone sat on the floor, waiting for him. Martel touched the surface, almost by reflex; it was entirely cold. Martel's last enchantment had been days ago, and his spells did not last this long.

He had made progress, though. Just getting the spell to hold its effects –actually enchanting the stone – had been a big step forward. His new challenge was to improve on this. If he were to have the kind of precise control that enchanting fire pots required, he needed much more practice.

As far as he could tell, the secret was to go as slowly as possible when infusing his magic into the material without actually losing the thread, so to say. When casting the spell, something as simple as conjuring heat, he had to let it seep into the receptacle, drop by drop. While he did not understand why it worked in this manner, the principle made some amount of sense; the slower he wove his magic into the stone, the longer it retained the spell.

Of course, Martel's end goal was not to create heating stones for the bath of the Lyceum, but making the fire pots that he could use in a battle; however, the better he could enchant this rock, the stronger his control when trying to do the same to the volatile oil. Preparing himself, Martel placed both hands on the stone and began, as slowly and cautiously as he could, to weave the essence of fire into the solid material.

Martel entered the Hall of Elements for his next lesson, bowing his head to his teacher.

"How goes enchantment, boy?"

"I'm making strides, I would say. My last attempt, the spell lasted for two days before it faded away entirely."

Master Alistair gave a nod. "Good. I imagine soon, you will see your progress – how long you can make the spell last – will diminish. It takes many years of practice to master long-lasting enchanting. But that is not your purpose either, so when you feel that your improvement has stalled, that will be the right time to once more try the fire pots. Your control of the process should be sufficient at that point to grant you success."

"Very well, master." This had already been explained to Martel, but repetition did not hurt, he supposed.

"Now onto our own lesson."

"I practised against another mage," Martel quickly said, hoping he might convince his teacher that they could move on. "She was a frostmage, and quite good. But I countered all her spells and made her submit."

"Not bad," his teacher replied with a knowing smile that implied he would not be convinced. "But even without the counterspell, I would expect a battlemage to defeat a frostmage of equal experience. Now get ready!"

After nearly a bell of Master Alastair flinging spells at him, Martel was wiped out. He lacked the spellpower to counter them all, which meant that his teacher went easy on him for most of their duel; even so, Martel did not cherish the experience of fighting against an experienced battlemage.

His bouts in the Chamber of Earth and even fights such as against Flora had made Martel feel superior to other mages. Master Alastair provided a powerful reminder that fighting other acolytes or wizards without combat training was not the same as what a hardened veteran could do.

Finally, the bell rang throughout the castle, and Martel could stop and catch his breath. Master Alastair ceased his spellcasting and smiled. "Alright, I think I'll declare myself satisfied."

"Satisfied that the lesson is over, or that I'm good enough with the counterspell?" Martel asked, hope sneaking into his voice.

His teacher laughed. "The latter. Next fiveday, we move on." As a quick demonstration, he raised his hand in front of him; for a brief moment, lightning crackled, jumping from one fingertip to the other.

Greeting Nora briefly, Martel passed through the apothecary to reach the staircase in the back; a few moments later, he entered Mistress Rana's laboratory. "Good afternoon," he said politely.

"You're here. Good. Another elixir for a disease today. This particular malady is what's commonly referred to as pestilence. You may recognise it as swollen boils upon the body, especially around the neck, armpits, and groin."

Martel wrote down everything she told him, trying not to imagine how unpleasant it sounded, especially the last part.

"That is in addition to the usual symptoms, of course. Chills, fever, fatigue, and muscle pain. Lastly, the extremities may suffer from gangrene. The latter fact, along with the swollen spots, should make this disease easy to determine."

Martel added the last to his notes, trying not to let his distaste show. While he greatly enjoyed having the knowledge to cure these diseases, he did not actually look forward to encountering anybody suffering from them. Diagnosing their illness sounded like the worst part of being an alchemist.

"Alright. The cure is relatively simple to make, even for an inexperienced apprentice such as yourself. Most of the ingredients are simple to obtain, as you can tell. The only exception would be that the amaranth must be harvested under the correct conditions, but that's getting ahead of ourselves."

"When will I learn about that?" Martel asked eagerly. His knowledge of alchemy was only as useful as the ingredients he could obtain. He remembered vaguely seeing her with a bronze sickle, and Master Fenrick once mentioning how the metal of the tool might even influence the potency of a herb.

"Getting ahead of ourselves," Mistress Rana repeated sternly. "Now get to it!"

Dutifully, he gathered the ingredients and began brewing. After some hours, he could present his teacher with a curative elixir, should anyone suffer from the common pestilence.

Chapter 407: The Promise of Spectacle

The Promise of Spectacle

Martel returned to the workshops the next day, entering the small laboratory where his stone waited for him. Placing his hands against it, it felt cool as always; he had yet to enchant it sufficiently that it actually produced heat that would be noticeable. Only his sense of magic, attuned to warmth above all else, could detect the layer of fire suffused into the rock.

Nothing to do but give it another try and hopefully improve a little compared to yesterday. With the entirety of both his hands, from palm to fingertips, pressed against the stone, Martel began casting a spell. The simplest he knew, summoning a flame, but deep inside the rock. In a way, it reminded him of learning how to focus through the ruby, his current task in the Circle of Fire. The main difference was the resistance met by his magic. The staff, with its lines of silver that converged around the gem, practically pushed his magic forward. The stone, made of uniform material and representing an element that did not blend well with fire, seemed as unwilling as possible to accept his spell.

Shaking these thoughts aside, as the distraction almost made him release his spell on accident, Martel focused on his enchantment once more. Moment after moment passed, as magic flowed like a single drop sliding down a leaf, dripping into the stone.

A message waited for Martel in the entrance hall, of the short and snippy kind that often spelled trouble. He did not recognise the handwriting, nor did it bear any signature.

Master Martel,

You are cordially invited

to the solstice celebration

at The Golden Goose on

tomorrow night, this Pelday.

As an honoured guest, food

and drink will be provided

at seventh bell, along with

unprecedented entertainment.

A little strange. While Martel had frequented the tavern plenty of times and would consider himself in good standing with most of its staff, he had never had dealings with the owner, nor did he see a reason why they would reach out to invite him specifically. It could be that the patronage of a mage lent the establishment a certain prestige, but probably not if the wizard in question was a battlemage. Especially not one also fire-touched. If anything, rumours about Martel might convince people to stay away.

He remembered the last time he received an invitation to a tavern for solstice. That had been Kerra, expecting an ambush from Tibert and planning her own defences. Martel almost suspected this was the situation again; the question remained if that was reason for discouragement or encouragement to attend.

Going to the upper floors of the library for his recurring study meeting with Eleanor, Martel was surprised to see Maximilian there as well. While she already sat at a table, reading and making notes, the other mageknight wandered around looking restless until he saw the fire acolyte enter.

"Nordmark, there you are."

"Different to see you here, Max. You've come to help?"

"Do not be silly. Everyone knows that reading contorts your face. You keep this up, you shall look deformed at the age of twenty," the young viscount sniffed.

"I did wonder if you had ever even set foot on this floor before."

"Yes, yes, enough of that. Did you also receive one of these?" Maximilian held up a missive between two of his fingers.

"An invitation to the Goose? Yes, I did."

"So did both of us," Eleanor inserted.

"Very well, that settles it. We shall all go tomorrow," Maximilian declared.

Martel agreed; if he had the two mageknights by his side, he was not concerned about what awaited at the tavern. Either they would have a jovial night or a rousing fight; either way, it would be a good celebration. "Sounds good to me." He pulled out a chair and took a seat by the table opposite Eleanor, ready to continue the search for something that might cure her sister.

"That is not all," Maximilian continued, making Martel look up at him. "With solstice on the horizon, my family will host our usual celebration. You remember last year, where you helped me with a little performance. My father expects better this year, especially as I now have an actual battlemage counted among my friends." Maximilian spoke in a matter-of-factly voice, as if all of this was agreed upon, but Martel thought he noticed a touch of apprehension. This meant a lot to the mageknight.

As for his part, Martel was happy to oblige. He no longer needed to hide his gifts; nothing was at stake for him, and he saw no reason to excuse himself. While last year had been an unpleasant affair, it had mostly been because Martel was inexperienced and unsure what to expect. Not so this year. "Of course. Tell your father not to worry. We'll give his guests a spectacle they won't forget, and I'll make sure you look brilliant."

An expression of relief flickered across Maximilian's face. "I expected nothing less of the Lyceum's premier battlemage. First round tomorrow night is on me," he promised before making his way towards the door.

"Food and drink would be provided, the invitation said," Martel pointed out, which only earned him a shrug from the mageknight leaving them.

"See you at training," Eleanor called out.

The two remaining acolytes exchanged looks, laughing a little.

"How goes the search?" he asked.

"I am nearly done with the book I showed you last, and the rune of unbinding. I did not learn much more, but at least I have an actual drawing of what it looks like. That will let me ask Master Fenrick what he knows about it."

"That seems a good idea." Getting the advice of an actual northern bard would be even better, but Martel had still done nothing to locate one. He could not continue to postpone it; eventually, it would be too late. Chiding himself for his inaction, Martel declared silently that he would get it done soon. For now, another book about Asterian encounters with Tyrians awaited him.

Chapter 408: A Golden Solstice

A Golden Solstice

The following day promised to be busy with two lessons in the Circle of Fire and Martel's plans with Maximilian and Eleanor in the evening; in spite of this, he decided to add more. He had not been to see Sparrow in a while; his last visit had been prevented by the inquisitors swarming the copper lanes. That had been around the full moon, where nothing had happened, at least not to Martel's knowledge. Regardless, there was no reason for the zealots to be on the prowl for the maleficar now, and Martel did not wish to postpone further; besides teaching Sparrow, he also needed to check on Julia after their last conversation that left her spooked. Finally, he needed to find the time to go in search of the Friar and ask his help in locating a skáld for Eleanor's sister.

Thus, as soon as his classes ended, Martel went into the city. He went a longer route, through the merchant quarter, knowing that the market and harbour district would be packed on the first day of solstice. He walked at a quick pace, as he needed to finish his instructions with Sparrow before doubling back to meet his friends at The Golden Goose

Yet as he reached the copper lanes, to his surprise, he soon ran into a pair of inquisitors. Seeing them walking down the street, he immediately turned around and walked back the way he came. As he reached the nearest alley, he slipped in and hurried away, just in case they had seen him and chosen to pursue. While he had done nothing wrong, he had no desire to answer questions or otherwise have to deal with the mage hunters.

Yet their presence baffled him. This many days after the full moon, the maleficar could not be expected to be active. And if he had struck again somewhere in the copper lanes, surely Martel would have heard rumours of this. There could be another reason, of course; thinking back, Martel remembered the story of a false alchemist preying on the poor of the copper lanes until the inquisitors brought him down. Perhaps it was something like that. Regardless, it meant that for the second time, Martel could not risk meeting with Sparrow.

His initial journey cut short, Martel had plenty of time to reach The Golden Goose. He pushed his way through the crowds filling each square of the market district, amidst the entertainers and peddlers that had come from all over the Empire and beyond. Other than buying something to satiate his most immediate hunger – while the invitation to the tavern had promised food, Martel would not stake his life on it – the young mage ignored the vendors hawking their goods and baying for his attention. A brusque dismissal from a wizard usually sent them scurrying away, and he reached his destination well before the bell rang.

Waiting for his friends, Martel made himself as comfortable as he could on the street outside. People still moved about in great numbers, but he found an overturned barrel for collecting rainwater to serve as a seat. It also gave him a vantage point of the entrance to The Golden Goose, which likewise saw patrons arrive and leave in a steady flow.

"There is our boy! All done with your secret business?" Maximilian's voice cut through the clamour.

Martel jumped up to stand, smiling at the approaching pair of mageknights. "Nothing on my mind but an evening of entertainment with my closest compatriots." Whatever form said entertainment might take.

"Let us not wait around," Eleanor suggested. "I'm already famished."

The trio crossed the street to enter the tavern. Immediately, Martel noticed the change since his last visit, one or two months ago. To the side, a small stage had been built a while back, allowing a podium for a musician. Now, it had been greatly expanded, providing a scenery for theatre play. Even before he heard the voice, he knew who had invited them.

"There you are! Ian said he saw you sitting outside. We wondered when you might find the courage to enter." The familiar scent of herbs smoked in a pipe reached them along with his voice as Regnar the hedge mage appeared with a broad grin.

"Regnar!" Martel reciprocated the expression and gave the old rascal a hug.

"This fellow!" Maximilian exclaimed.

"Good to see your merry band again," Eleanor declared.

"Aye, we're back, and our troubles last time at the Four Flagon Tavern have not dissuaded us from another attempt. After some negotiations with the owner, he's agreed to let us make a permanent theatre in his establishment," Regnar explained. "Once more, we are to pack away our carts and make this our home for good."

"Those are excellent news," Martel responded, though his demeanour immediately became concerned. "But are you certain about this? Last time, you got mixed up in trouble and used as a pawn. Before that, you got arrested for your play, and the time before that, there was the whole business with the berserker."

"Alright, alright, no need to paint a picture. Yes, we have had a string of bad luck and, I will admit, have made some unfortunate decisions. But we have been most careful this time," the hedge mage claimed. "We haven't angered anybody in a long time, we made sure that we are not getting in the middle of anybody's feuds, and we're being careful with everything we say or do. More or less."

"See that you do," Martel admonished him. "In half a year, I'll graduate school, and I won't be around to help you out of trouble."

"Alright, alright," Regnar reiterated. "Sol's eye, I'm being chastised by someone young enough to be my grandchild. Go take your seats. The others are busy preparing the performance, else they'd come out and greet you as well. But you can meet them after the play and let them know what you thought."

The three wizards did so, parting ways with the hedge mage, who returned behind the stage to prepare for his own part. Soon after, a play began that entertained the crowd, helped along with

ample servings of food and drink, and Martel spent a wonderful night in the company of his dearest friends.

Chapter 409: A Stone to Hinder

A Stone to Hinder

The hour grew late before Martel and the mageknights returned from the first night of the solstice. After the play, the troupe entertained them with songs and dances; Martel's many favours in the past had earned him considerable goodwill from each of the actors, and they were eager to show their gratitude.

The next day was almost depressively mundane in comparison, consisting of combat lessons. The only bright point during the day was the second class, where Martel could meet up with Maximilian and Eleanor again, sharing their fondest moments of the night before, whether it was watching the play, carousing with the actors, or singing and dancing together.

As evening came, Martel had no plans, even though the solstice celebration was continuing at full force in the city. Tomorrow eve would be the feast at the House of Marche, and two days after that, he would be a guest at Lord Fontaine's home; while Eleanor had not invited him yet, Martel had heard about it from Maximilian, and he expected an invitation would come any day now. Along with yestereve, that felt like more than enough celebration owed to Sol.

Instead, Martel went into the city to discharge another of his duties. If teaching Sparrow in the copper lanes was out of the question, he still had his other obligations; namely, he needed to check on Julia. Considering that she was shyer of people than a wild rabbit, this festival could not be easy on her. There would be people on the streets at all hours, and she was already intimidated because Martel, perhaps unwisely, had told her about the man stalking him.

He could probably not do much to ameliorate her fears, but he could do something simple like filling her water jar, sparing Julia the trip outside to the fountain.

Moving down the main street, Martel became aware of commotion. Approaching, it seemed to be an overturned cart with a merchant wringing his hands next to it; a patrol of city guards kept watch. Looking at the contents, Martel realised why. Furs lay stacked on top of each other. Pelts from beaver, fox, wolf, and probably other animals. Expensive to say the least; each would cost several gold crowns. They had to come from afar, probably even further than Nordmark; Martel knew that the Tyrians traded much in the furs, as their forests teemed with such animals.

"Don't even think about touching – forgive me, master mage." The merchant, whose expression changed from angry to apologetic immediately, bowed his head to Martel.

"Bad wheel?" he asked. It looked like one of the wheels had broken, making the cart fall to the side.

"If only, good master. Not all mages in this city are honourable wizards such as yourself. Look what they did!" The merchant pointed at the ground, paved with cobblestones.

Martel had to move around the cart to see, but he immediately understood. The stones of the road had been disturbed, one of them pushed up. Done at the right time, especially with a little force, it could easily break the wheel.

"The guards say this happens every day! The ground itself shakes, and as some poor merchant's cart topples, thieves hurry forward to grab what they can. They stole four pelts from me! How am I to

make up this loss? I could barely afford them in the first place." He resumed wringing his hands again. "I've already waited an hour for the cart maker to come make repairs, which no doubt will also cost..."

Martel did not stay to hear the end of the trader's complaints; he had already turned around, making a speedy journey towards the slums.

Aware of the inquisitors' presence in the copper lanes, and also understanding the reason behind, Martel knew to make his way through the district using stealth. He avoided the main roads as much as possible, only crossing them after ensuring no blue uniforms were in sight; otherwise, he stuck to the alleys and made his way to Weasel's hideout.

Some of the children greeted him as usual; for his part, Martel responded in a tight-lipped manner. "Get Weasel and Sparrow for me."

Soon after, the two children appeared. Weasel closed the door behind him, to the chagrin of the others, leaving him and Sparrow alone with the wizard.

"Martel, look what I can do!" Sparrow reached out her hand.

Before she could cast a spell, Martel raised his own hand in warning. "No. Nothing of the sort while inquisitors roam this district. I didn't come to have a lesson, but to speak with you both." He looked towards Weasel. "I just came from the harbour district, where someone used magic – earth magic – to overturn a cart and rob it of several furs. I don't have to guess who was behind it."

Weasel gave him a challenging look. "So what? We do what we must to survive. You have no right to judge us, living in your castle with three meals a day!"

"I have always known how you made your living," Martel responded with rising anger. "It's how we first met. But using magic at the harbour to steal – are you mad?"

"I had to," Sparrow said, her lower lip trembling.

"We don't care what you think!" Weasel shot back. "If Sparrow's abilities give us an edge, I'll take it! If you don't like it, turn around and leave!"

"I expected as much," Martel retorted through gritted teeth. "But there is a vast difference between stealing apples from a cart or socks from a peddler, and using magic to steal luxurious goods in the middle of the street! The guards might chase you for a brief run for the former offence before they get tired. The second one? Why do you think inquisitors are swarming this district? Do you have any idea what they will do to you – to Sparrow if they catch you?"

"Don't tell us how to do our business," the little chief sneered. "We've evaded guards our whole life. Those bumbling fools will never find us."

"They figured out that you operate from the copper lanes, given how they're patrolling this district. And still you keep trying your luck!"

"We know what we're doing. It's only been a few hours, and we've already stashed the goods and made it back here," Weasel said.

"Sooner or later, you'll fail. You have to get lucky every single time – they just have to be lucky once," Martel warned him.

"Just sod off! How we make our coin is our business."

"You say 'our', but what does your little flock get out of this? You're stealing expensive goods, Weasel, yet your people still live in a derelict house, wearing rags. They take all the risk, and you reap the benefit, is that how it is?" Martel stared at the boy, trying to contain his anger rather than lash out with magic at a ten-year-old.

"Shut up! I spend that money keeping us safe, getting what we need! Just leave us alone!"

"Martel," Sparrow interjected, "aren't you going to teach me anymore?"

Martel turned his eyes from the boy to the girl. He had half a mind to reject her plea. But despite his fury, he remembered how Master Alastair had been angry with him on more than one occasion; it had not kept the old wizard from continuing to train Martel, accepting that he made his own choices. "I'll still teach you," he finally promised. "And how you use your magic is up to you. But stop making yourself a target for the inquisitors, and lay low when they are this hot on your heels."

"Who says I'll allow you to come here again?" Weasel stared at him defiantly. "This is my place, my gang, my rules."

Martel's patience was at an end, but he still restrained himself. Rather than fire, he sent a burst of air to push Weasel several steps backwards; a reminder of who had the power. "Do not come between a wizard and his apprentice. You will not interfere or prevent Sparrow from learning."

"You should be careful," the boy said in a menacing manner. "I also know where you live."

Martel's eyes glowed red. His hands felt unnaturally hot. "Do not threaten me."

With a final sneer, Weasel tore the door open to disappear inside the house, slamming it shut behind him.

Outside in the alley, Sparrow began to cry. Martel's anger dissipated, and he felt guilty. He knelt down to be closer at eye level with her, using his now cool hands to wipe away her tears. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you or make you upset. I'll come back another day, and you can show me your progress. All right?"

Sniffing, she nodded.

"But no magic while the inquisitors are around. It's just too dangerous."

No longer crying, she repeated her gesture.

By the time Martel returned to the Lyceum, most of the day was spent. He had forgotten his initial plan to visit Julia, and it was too late now. She would have to get through the next days of the festival without him.

Back in his chamber and getting ready for bed, Martel remembered Weasel's threat. Usually, he always felt safe within the walls of the Lyceum. The ancient wards on the walls were set to repel any intruders or those with evil intent. Yet on more than one occasion, Weasel had been able to sneak inside the castle. Martel had no idea how. He doubted that the young boy would dare to make a move against him, but it might be unwise to underestimate the urchin. Walking over to his door, Martel placed his hand against the wooden planks. "*Vara*." The rune of warning appeared, glowing briefly.

Chapter 410: A Performance to Remember

A Performance to Remember

Martel dug out his expensive clothes, given to him last year by Maximilian. He felt a little odd putting them on; he was used to wearing a robe rather than a doublet, and not just in terms of comfort. His red, embroidered garments marked him as a wizard; people recognised his power and afforded him respect accordingly. In comparison, his luxurious garb only signalled wealth, which he did not have nor did he particularly wish to be associated with. But at least he would eat and drink well tonight, and he was happy to do Maximilian a favour in exchange.

As fifth bell rang, Martel joined his friend outside the Lyceum, where a carriage with the emblem of Marche already stood. "There you are, Martel. Let us get moving."

They both stepped inside, and the driver set the carriage into motion. Like Martel, Maximilian was dressed as exquisitely as money could buy.

"Are you ready for tonight?" asked the young viscount. "Tonight is important to my father, more so than usual."

"Of course. It's very simple magic. Just do as we agreed, and it'll be fine," Martel reassured him.

Maximilian grunted, but gave no other reply. His fingers drummed against his own knee. His usual exuberant mood seemed restrained by nerves, which Martel found a little amusing. It appeared that the mageknight felt more at ease walking into combat than attending a celebration hosted by his own family.

Martel assumed it was pressure exerted by his father that weighed Maximilian down. Another reason the fire acolyte was happy to be a commoner. The schemes and entanglements of the nobility seemed exhausting, and both of his friends were under such demands by their fathers. Maximilian to join the praetorians, and Eleanor to become an officer, both that they might rise in the ranks and gain influence for their houses.

It made Martel appreciate his own father all the more, who had never placed such burdens on Martel. The only times he had acted harshly were when Martel, either accidentally or through childish emotions, had used magic. A hefty slap across the face had taught Martel he should not do so again, though it had happened a few more times, as he had lacked control of his gift and could not always suppress it. It had always seemed unfair to Martel, being punished for something beyond his control, which only made him angry, exacerbating the problem.

It occurred to Martel that despite his other virtues, perhaps his father had also been flawed; in different ways than the fathers of Maximilian and Eleanor, but possibly with a similar outcome.

The carriage came to a halt. Lost in his own thoughts, Martel had not realised that they had arrived until he looked out and saw the estate of Marche, along with a multitude of other guests.

Once inside, they had to separate as Maximilian went to his father's side, greeting guests and exchanging pleasantries. Martel did not mind; he had little interest in talking to strangers, and he felt comfortable enough on his own. He hunted down something to eat and drink, retreating with his bounty to a niche between pillars in the grand hall. He admired the ornamental architecture and art on display, though having seen it before, it did not overwhelm him as it once had. He also kept an

eye out for Eleanor, the only other person he would be inclined to speak with, but it was difficult to spot her in the sea of guests, all of them dressed extravagantly with countless glittering jewels.

A herald entered the centre of the hall, requesting attention and silence before announcing that tonight's entertainment was about to begin. Realising that was his cue, Martel quickly finished his cup, placed it on the floor, and made his way through the crowd. Warned by the herald of dangerous magic, the guests pushed back to create an empty space, where Martel and Maximilian entered. The former had picked up a sword and also carried a shield with the axe of Marche upon it.

Standing still, nothing betraying his efforts, Martel created a circle of fire to surround Maximilian. The flames were cold and harmless, but as all guests stood a good distance away, none of them could tell.

Inside the fire, Maximilian demonstrated a number of flourishes with great speed, proving his skill as a swordsman. The crowd responded with polite mumbles as endorsement, but as the mageknight suddenly stepped through the flames to leave the circle, their whispers grew excited.

Dismissing his first spell, Martel instead summoned bright flames to surround each of his hands, making them large and visible. He followed up by slapping his hands together and releasing a ray of flames straight at Maximilian, who held his physical shield up in defence. The spectators gasped seeing the bridge of fire from the battlemage to the mageknight, as the latter stepped forward, still shielding his face from the ray.

Sweating, not from heat but exertion, Martel increased the intensity of his spell until it set the wooden shield on fire. This accomplished, he released the spell entirely, and the bridge of flames disappeared, leaving only those devouring Maximilian's protection. The mageknight began sprinting forward, throwing his shield aside. Martel raised a wall of flames in front of him, though like his first magic, he kept them cold. With a mighty leap, Maximilian jumped through the fire and struck an imposing blow with his blunted blade.

Using the last of his spellpower, Martel summoned his shield, and it stopped Maximilian's weapon an inch from his neck; to outsiders unfamiliar with magic, it looked as if the mageknight had halted the entire momentum of his powerful swing, sparing the battlemage rather than slicing his neck open.

Martel dismissed any remaining magic. Maximilian pulled back his sword and turned around to bow at the audience, who responded with cheers and applause.

"Absolutely brilliant," the mageknight whispered. "I wager that is the best they have ever seen in my father's house."

"I got some advice from our friends at The Golden Goose," Martel admitted with a satisfied smile. Seeing their host approach them in the centre of the otherwise empty circle, he stepped away, uninterested in any further attention.

As for Count Marche, he slapped one hand on his son's shoulder. "As always, the House of Marche are delighted to have you as guests! Tonight is even more auspicious than usual, as I have an announcement to make." He paused, allowing people to stick their heads together with curious murmurs to follow. "I am proud to announce the engagement of my son, Maximilian of Marche, to the daughter of the honourable Legate Fontaine, Lady Eleanor Fontaine!"

From the crowd, the legate appeared with his daughter by his arm, joining the count and his son. All of them smiled, bowing their heads as the guests clapped and shouted in approval.

As perhaps the only one, Martel remained quiet. He felt bothered, though he could not say why. Perhaps it was the reminder that their lives were moving along different trails. Maximilian would stay in Morcaster, Eleanor would join a legion to advance as an officer, and he would be sent wherever the Empire wanted him to bleed. Seeing her with a shy smile and a blush in her cheeks, either from emotions or cosmetics, Martel looked away, wondering when he might be able to leave the celebration.