

## Firebrand 471

### Chapter 471: Shooting Straight

#### Shooting Straight

While joining forces with the Fire Eater was the right move, it also meant Martel had to resume doing nothing while waiting for information to reach him. He had little knowledge of how it worked, gathering intelligence, but he assumed it could be days or longer.

But at least he could spend the time in a worthwhile manner, focusing on his scholarly pursuits. The idea that he was at war with a Ninth Lord did not trouble him as much as it perhaps should; for all their power, they had plenty of weaknesses as well. He had already seen two of them fall; with the help of the Fire Eater, Martel would make it three. And the knowledge of a well-laid plan put him at ease as well. Thus, despite his situation, Martel had no trouble turning his mind towards lore and learning.

His first target was the arrow on his desk, or rather the rune upon it. It was a simple symbol, consisting of only a few lines. It had been skilfully cut into the shaft of the arrow despite the confined space; Martel was not certain he could replicate it on another arrow. Nor did he need to. He just had to learn how to cast the rune.

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Martel spent his hours in between class and apothecary work doing just that. He stared himself blind looking at the small symbol on the arrow, drawing it on parchment again and again until it looked right. Next came invoking his power. He reached out to establish a connection back and forth with the dormant sign he had written before speaking a single word. "Visir." A faint glow appeared, but it was difficult to tell whether it worked or not. The purpose of the rune was to guide something to its target, which did not really work with a piece of parchment.

Repeating the gesture with the arrow, Martel found it surprisingly difficult. He could establish a connection, but letting magic flow through it did not come easy, like walking against the wind. Presumably the obstacle occurred because he had not drawn the symbol himself.

Still, Martel continued invoking the power of the rune until he was practically sweating from the effort. That in itself was a strange sensation; it was not the quick drain of power like casting a spell, but rather the slow weariness that also came from enchanting.

Regardless, Martel continued without pause until the bell rang, summoning him to his next lesson.

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He continued his efforts in the late afternoon until it felt like he had broken through the resistance. The symbol on the arrow glowed as it should, and Martel felt reasonably satisfied with his own drawing of the symbol. But whether he had actually succeeded could only be known if he put it to the test.

Leaving his room with the arrow, Martel made his way towards the arena. He stopped briefly at the entrance hall to check for messages, mostly out of habit, and found one waiting for him.

The square of Saint Alexandra.

Tomorrow after dark. Harold

Martel stared at the words in surprise. The signature was the code word chosen by him and Navid, which meant that the Khivans had found his first target. That was much faster than he had anticipated, but he would not complain. Regardless, that was for tomorrow; putting the message inside a pocket, Martel continued to the gymnasium.

As he had expected, a handful of mageknights practised archery after class in anticipation of the harvest games. They had dragged out a bale of hay and draped it in a piece of cloth with painted black concentric circles to serve as a target. They ignored Martel as the fire acolyte approached until he cleared his throat loudly. As they finally turned their heads towards him, he extended his hand towards one of their bows. "May I borrow that?"

"Have you ever shot a bow before, fire boy?"

"Not even once."

The mageknights exchanged looks. "Be my guest." The nearest archer handed over his bow. "Need arrows as well?"

Receiving the weapon, Martel looked down on the arrow in his hand with its shining rune. "I'm fine."

Nocking the arrow, Martel raised the bow. It was nearly as heavy as his staff, except he used two hands to wield that. It was even worse to pull back the bowstring. Martel's hands began to tremble, and he had to use empowering magic just to hold the bow steady.

"Better summon your shields," one of the mageknight laughed. "No telling what he's aiming at!"

Martel ignored them. He felt the magic of the rune and hoped that it was enough. Staring at the target, he aimed for the centre ring and released the bowstring. The arrow soared through the air and struck the painted target perfectly.

The laughter of the mageknights died down as Martel gave the bow back. "Easier than I thought." He left them to their discussion of how he had done the shoot as he retrieved his arrow and walked out of the arena.

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In the evening, Martel went from his old dormitory tower to the other. After ascending the stairs, he knocked on Eleanor's door.

"Martel, what brings you here?"

"Since you're competing in the archery contest, I thought this might be useful to you." He had both hands behind his back, but now he extended one to show her the arrow. "A rune of guidance."

As she accepted it, she looked up at him with a wry smile. "I appreciate the sentiment, but I think it will take more than one arrow for me to do well."

He revealed the parchment in his other hand, showing the rune along with its activation word written below. "You better learn how it works, in that case, so you can make more."

Grabbing the parchment, her face became illuminated with genuine excitement. "Is this...? Where did you get this? Was it in any of the books we read?"

"I knew someone I could ask," Martel replied modestly. "You'll have to figure out yourself how to get the rune to fit on the actual arrow. That looks like it will take more finesse than I can muster."

She laughed and gave him a quick hug. "This is great!" She hesitated as she spoke again, "do you mind if I...?"

"No, of course. Go ahead, the sooner you learn, the better. Only a couple of days until the contest."

"You are brilliant, Martel, thank you again!"

He smiled as he left her to begin studying, making his way down the stairs and back to his own room. This errand handled, his mind turned to other matters. From his pocket, he withdrew the scrap of parchment with the details for his meeting tomorrow night. With a small burst of magic, he set it on fire.

## Chapter 472: Taking the Wind out of their Sails

### Taking the Wind out of their Sails

Martel spent his Munday morning and afternoon as scheduled, practising his lightning with Master Alastair and helping Mistress Rana experiment with new potions in her laboratory. If his mind had not been preoccupied with tonight's venture, he would have been far more inquisitive about the alchemist's attempts at improving potions or substituting their reagents; on this occasion, he simply followed her instructions and said little else. By the end of the bell, she expressed faint appreciation for his help and quiet attitude.

Once night fell, Martel could finally proceed. He grabbed his cloak and left through the infirmary gate, making his way to the market district.

Once he reached the square with a statue of Saint Alexandra, Martel glanced around while trying to look inconspicuous. The note had not told him anything further than this location, leaving him in the dark about the next step.

"Come along before you draw any more attention," a voice growled next to him. Turning his head swiftly, Martel saw a Khivan, likewise with his hood up. As the latter walked away, Martel followed.

"You're my contact, then."

"Clever fellow. Here's your disguise, as promised." The Khivan handed over a sack once they were inside an alley. "Hurry up and change." He moved to stand in between Martel and the exit onto the bigger street, obscuring the view of anyone walking by.

Martel needed no encouragement in that regard, given how cold it was. He handed over his cloak for the Khivan to hold and began disrobing. "What's the target?"

"Ship carrying stone for the construction. One mast, flying Aquilan colours. Moored on the pier by The Filthy Tankard. You won't have trouble finding it."

"I can't believe anyone wants to drink in a place named like that." Martel pulled on the dirty, almost ragged tunic and trousers that served as the typical clothing of a dock worker. "You sure this is worth it? Harbour is shallow. A good stonemage should be able to raise that cargo straight back up."

The Khivan grinned, showing his white teeth in the dark alley. "Yeah, but it'll cost Vitus a new ship. And any delay to the construction is good in our book."

"Alright. What's the mood like?" Martel took back his cloak while the Khivan stuffed his robe into the sack.

"Already close to a house of cards, honestly. He's only been chief for a year, good Vitus, so his hand on the helm is still a bit shaky. Good move with The Broken Crown, by the way. Made them real nervous."

"Thanks." Martel clasped the cape around him and accepted the sack with his clothes. He had to physically stop himself from shivering; his new clothes were not only cold from exposure, but were also made of thinner fabric than his robe.

"Another push or so, and we should have him where we want him. But we'll let you know when it's time for the final blow." The Khivan bowed his head in an almost strangely formal gesture. "May the Flame illuminate your path."

"I imagine it will."

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The docks of Morcaster saw traffic at all hours, except perhaps in the winter. Sailors on shore leave, seeking to fulfil all their appetites after many days at sea, roamed the piers to and from their ships; mostly in the latter direction, as many of them did not return for a day or two after disembarking.

This held especially true for vessels that arrived from distant places like Sindhu or the Western Isles; not only was the journey longer, but they were required to remain in quarantine for two fivedays upon arrival. Staying onboard with the city and its delights so tantalising close proved a great temptation to many, and the guards patrolled heavily to dissuade any attempts at going ashore before time.

Martel found himself a seat on the ground, back against a wall. It was cold, but he was near invisible with his dark cloak around him; even if anybody noticed him, they did not dignify him with a second look. The only thing more abundant in the harbour than sailors were dockworkers, and if they hung around the area after nightfall, it usually meant they were inebriated on the cheap ale their wages could afford.

It was one such place serving the aforementioned beverages that Martel used as a backrest, a tavern named The Filthy Tankard. Ahead of him, a ship lay anchored with an Aquilan flag denoting it as a merchant vessel. It carried other colours upon its mast as well that Martel did not know the meaning of. Nor did it matter to him.

The sail was furled together, the ship being moored and all, and it was made from strong canvas soaked by years at sea. It strained Martel considerably to take hold of the fabric with his magic and increase the heat; the distance did not help either. But he succeeded. To the passers-by, it came out of nowhere; suddenly, the sail burst into flames.

Cries went up to alert everyone in the vicinity. Crewmembers asleep below deck came running up to join the sailor on guard; soldiers on patrol came running, as did other bystanders, either to help or to watch the spectacle.

The fire quickly spread, moving along the rigging. The sailors and soldiers began organising chains of water; there was plenty of it at hand, at least.

With a loud creaking sound, the sail became unfastened from the mast and fell to the deck in a crash, spreading sparks everywhere. The sailors jumped for their lives, either onto the pier or directly into the water.

All their efforts proved in vain; the fire spread with almost preternatural haste, engulfing the entire vessel. The crew could do nothing but stare as the ship was devoured. The only good thing was that the water prevented the flames from spreading; luckily, when the mast fell, it did so towards the open harbour rather than adjacent ships or the pier itself.

His work done, Martel got on his feet and pushed his way through the assembled crowd, taking the winding alleys back to the Lyceum.

## Chapter 473: Heartfelt Wager

### Heartfelt Wager

It was the first day of the harvest festival, which left Martel with a decision to make. It would be most sensible for him to remain at the school until his quarrel with Vitus was at an end; however, today was also when the archery contest would take place, and he felt obligated to watch Eleanor compete. Weighing the risks, Martel decided on the latter, though he also took some steps to mitigate the danger. He had a seat with Maximilian at the stands for the nobility, which should be much safer; standing in the crowds would obviously be foolhardy, allowing anyone to get close to him unnoticed.

In addition, Martel dressed himself as nobility. Anyone searching for him would be looking for a wizard, first and foremost; wearing garb like this, he would not stand out among the other noble spectators on the stands. Silently, he thanked Maximilian and Eleanor for providing him with the appropriate clothing last year when attending the feasts at their homes; he could not remember how many times these garments had proven useful for him since.

Lastly, Martel did not join the other students walking to the festival square along the highly crowded main roads. Instead, he left through the infirmary gate and took a crooked path. It meant he had to leave much earlier, but it provided a few advantages. Besides disappointing anyone watching the main gate, it allowed him to keep his distance to others, should anyone wish to try their luck with a golden blade, and it gave him an opportunity to observe if someone followed him.

Seeing no sign of that being the case, Martel reached the site of the celebration just as the priests finished their rituals blessing the harvest. He received various angry looks and remarks as he pushed his way down the benches to reach Maximilian.

"I almost had my doubts," the viscount growled. "What kept you?"

"Just felt like avoiding the crowds walking here," Martel replied. Out on the open grounds, the overseers were making final preparations. As last year, each archer had to shoot down three metal plates floating in the air – first one to do so advanced to the next round. "When is Eleanor shooting?"

"Who knows? We shall have to wait and see. Though I fear for her chances. Lots of good archers in the field this year, I am told."

Martel glanced at him. "Care to wager on that?"

Maximilian returned the look with an intrigued expression; Martel might as well have asked whether a dog would like a bone. "What terms are we talking?"

"I'll wager that Eleanor wins. What kind of odds will you give me?"

The mageknight raised an eyebrow. "Eleanor against the rest of the field? One to five."

Martel knew that was low, but given what he knew about Eleanor's chances, he would not complain. "Deal. I wager ten silvers."

"Top!" Maximilian laughed. "Martel, do know how many archers are competing? I almost feel guilty about taking your coin."

Martel just smiled and watched as the first contestants lined up.

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Both Martel and Maximilian applauded as Eleanor won her first round. They did so as well for the second, with Maximilian appearing suitably impressed. By her third victory, he was scowling at Martel. "What is going on?"

"Look, no shame if you can't pay your bet."

"Of course I can! But I have watched Fontaine shoot arrows for two years, once every five days, and she is nowhere near this good!"

Martel wondered when he should put his friend out of his misery. He was not actually sure if Maximilian could pay the lost wager, but he figured that if he simply avoided mentioning it again, the mageknight would forget about it sooner or later. It was one of the advantages of his poor memory and general inability to take note of details.

"That smirk makes me want to punch you," Maximilian declared, crossing his arms as they watched the final archers line up for the last round.

Feeling like he was goading a bull, Martel decided to enlighten his friend. "You remember last year when you bought those arrows enchanted with the rune?"

"Sure, you asked me where to find the fellow."

He did remember some things, it seemed. "Well, I did find him, and I figured out how the rune worked. Handed it over to Eleanor. Looks like she learned how to work it as well."

"I suppose that is better than Fontaine suddenly being a far better marksman than me," he grumbled. "You could have told me that was your intent, though. I could have gone with you and paid for the rune. She is my intended, after all."

The reminder put Martel in an eerie mood; almost as if a premonition of what were about to happen, Martel watched as an old mageknight struck down all his floating targets faster than anybody else, including Eleanor.

"You lost!" Maximilian exclaimed almost with glee before he cleared his throat. "Shame about Eleanor, though. It would have been nice for her to win. Come on, we should go to console her. She must be upset by her loss."

"You go ahead," Martel mumbled. He had lost any desire to be social; besides, he had been sitting still for an hour. It seemed folly to stay on the grounds any longer, and even worse to head down into the crowds of people. The contest was over; nothing further to watch. "I'll pay you later."

"See that you do!" The young nobleman waved a finger around in the air even as he walked away. "Maximilian of Marche does not forget a debt!"

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Martel returned to the castle, following the same strenuous route back. At the Lyceum, he met nobody other than the sisters and their patients in the infirmary – already, the first victims of brawls had arrived, but otherwise, the great building was nearly empty. Just about every student was out in the city, celebrating. On his own, Martel went to his chamber and practised enchanting.

## Chapter 474: Barbarian Instinct

### Barbarian Instinct

The next day did not contain any contest, which was the sole exception for the fiveday of the festival. Instead, it was the great spectacle where the Legio Urbis would perform a battle for the citizens to enjoy. Like yesterday, Martel debated with himself whether he should attend. He knew that he should be careful, but he could take the same precautions as yesterday. Furthermore, he felt guilty for leaving abruptly after the archery contest had ended without a single word of commiseration to Eleanor. She must have thought him callous. He could not miss her father's big event.

Thus, once more dressed in the same feathers as the birds he would join, Martel walked the long route to the festival square in the temple district. As a further precaution, he did not choose the same roads as yesterday, and he kept looking over his shoulder until he reached the stands. It was a testament to strange times that for once, he felt more at ease among the nobility than the common people. But the chances that any of the silk-clad nobles around him were secretly assassins working for Vitus seemed slim at best.

Sitting down next to Maximilian, Martel leaned forward to look at Eleanor on the other side. "Sorry you lost yesterday."

"Final round is better than I expected to do, honestly," she replied in a light-hearted manner.

"That reminds me, you owe me, Nordmark. We shall have to find an establishment worthy of our patronage... or just go to the Bird, I guess," Maximilian suggested.

"I'll think about it," Martel quickly replied. Going to The Golden Goose, so near the harbour, was obviously out of the question. Nor could he really justify going elsewhere. While he imagined he would be safe with two mageknights by his side, a fight might still break out. It would only be fair to warn his friends that at present, Martel's company might provoke hostilities, but then he would also have to explain why.

"Why does he owe you money?" Eleanor asked.

"Our northern friend was rather optimistic on your behalf! Bet me ten silvers you would win yesterday," Maximilian declared with a satisfied smile. "Easiest coin I have ever made."

She shot him a look. "You bet against me?"

"Well, the odds – it was clearly the right wager to make."

"I am touched by your confidence."

Martel saw no reason to interject anything; he kept his eyes on the field where the warriors of the First Legion had begun to appear.

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Across the festival square, planks of wood had been nailed together to create what could be considered a primitive aqueduct. Through this, water flowed swiftly, despite it being level, suggesting the involvement of watermages. This artificial river divided the open space in half. On one side, various people in ordinary garb could be seen in groups with the occasional band of legionaries. On the other side, hundreds of warriors dressed in hides and other barbaric clothing could be seen. Without warning, the primitives let loose cries of war and jumped across the stream of water to assault the soldiers and commoners on the other side.

The effigy of a gruesome battle erupted as the barbarians killed or dragged the others back across the river.

It was not particularly subtle, and Martel understood, as he imagined everyone else did; these were Tyrian raiders, crossing the Frosten river to assault Asterian settlements. "Is this a historical battle like last year?"

Maximilian shrugged. "That could be."

"Not a specific one, no," Eleanor chimed in. "Consider it a general version of the struggle along the northern border. You must have heard stories like this?"

"I suppose, but Engby is quite far south from the Frosten river. It's never happened to anybody I met."

"Proof of the vigilance of our northern legions," the viscount declared. "Anyway, I remember now. We had a war with the barbarians some hundred years ago, did we not? Obviously, this is in reference to that."

"Maybe," Martel considered with doubt in his voice. As he recalled, that campaign had gone disastrously for the Asterians. "I'm just surprised the enemy is not the Khivans."

"We had that the first few years of the war, and not too long ago either," Eleanor explained. "But it gets repetitive, I suppose. People expect something new each year."

It struck Martel how war was a spectacle to these people, even his friends. Despite all the losses, all the wounded and maimed veterans roaming Morcaster, it still remained a performance in the minds of many; a distraction from the toil of ordinary days. He watched as reinforcements of legionaries arrived, driving the Tyrians back across the river, but he could not partake in the elated outbursts and cries of victory resounding from those around him. It all seemed hollow.

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Martel allowed his friends to slip ahead of him, falling behind until he could go in another direction altogether. He felt guilty about simply disappearing, but he could not stay out any longer, nor let them be dragged into his feud with Vitus. Instead, he returned to the Lyceum through the winding paths of the temple district.



Once back, he found a message waiting for him. It had been pushed under his door, as the clerks manning the desks in the entrance hall were at the festival, presumably.

Tomorrow, bridge district.

At second bell. By the gate.

Use the clothes from last.

Harold

Strangely early, compared to Martel's last outing. The location also made him wonder what the target could be, since this was not anywhere near the harbour. Fortunately, the harvest festival meant that classes were cancelled, so he did not have to come up with a reason to be excused. He would have to explain his absence to Maximilian, who expected him as company for watching the joust, but that would not be hard.

Once more finding himself nearly alone at the castle, Martel went to his room and practised his lightning spell in front of an open window.

## Chapter 475: Trapping the Trapper

### Trapping the Trapper

In the morning, Martel feigned illness to Maximilian. He endured many protestations from the mageknight before he managed to extricate himself, careful to avoid any encounter with Eleanor; she could easily get the truth out of him if she tried.

Back in his chamber, he grabbed his sack with his disguise, stuffing his cloak in there as well. Should anyone spot him, he was simply making his way to the infirmary to have his very genuine symptoms investigated and perhaps acquire a fortifying tincture from the apothecary. He coughed a few times, just to practise.

As it turned out, nobody spared him a second glance or cared about his destination. Even the sisters of the ward barely took notice of him as he left through the gate. Once outside, he put on his cloak and hurried eastwards towards the bridge district.

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Although it was the middle of the harvest festival, traffic remained heavy through the eastern gate. Some people were leaving early, others arrived late, and plenty of merchants trafficked their goods on the vessels that brought pilgrims to the city as well. For that reason, Smallport was even busier than usual, and carts constantly left the small town to enter Morcaster proper.

A particular wagon carried a consignment of expensive fabric, though the barrels had entered the harbour as fish, thereby avoiding a heavy toll. Should the cart reach its destination, it would yield considerable profits to the owner. As for the three men in the cart – one holding the reins, two in the back with the barrels – they looked entirely as ordinary warehouse workers. But the knives hanging by their belts had golden blades, and underneath their tunics and trousers, they wore bracelets made from the same precious metal. They were not only well protected against magical attacks of any kind; they could easily turn the tables on a wizard mistaking them for an easy target.

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Sitting on an overturned barrel, Martel looked half asleep. If not for the bitter wind, he probably would be fully asleep, but it helped his disguise. Wearing the same rags as the other night, nobody cared about what looked like a drunkard sleeping off last night's debauchery, conveniently near the bridge gate.

His eyes more or less closed, Martel did not look at the carts rumbling past him on the road, once the guards at the gate were satisfied with the toll papers. Nor did he have to. The small Khivan – same fellow as last time – had explained matters to Martel.

Late yesterday, a valuable shipment had arrived at Smallport from upstream, intended for Vitus' faction. Unfortunately, the Khivans could not determine it any further; their people were a rare sight in Smallport, and inserting spies into the small river harbour had proven difficult. But given what Vitus and his people had suffered lately of magical mishaps, it stood to reason that they would guard such a valuable consignment with henchmen armed with gold; perhaps they even hoped that Martel would strike, allowing them a chance to eliminate him.

For that reason, Martel did not have to watch the carts with his eyes; indeed, it probably would not help him even if he did. Instead, he allowed his magical sense to sweep out; it could not discern between fish or fabric, but it could tell him of any wagon drivers dressed in gold from top to toe. Halfway through third bell, Martel felt the signature presence of numerous cold pockets and knew he had found the cart with Vitus' men and goods.

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Martel followed the cart, keeping a good distance. It moved slowly through the traffic, constricted by many people on foot celebrating the festival. He did not have to keep it within eyesight all the time either, but could allow it to slip ahead and use his magic to find it again; it would not do to let the two fellows in the back of the wagon notice him stalking them.

At length, his prey turned south-west towards the harbour, as could be expected. Sack slung over his shoulder, Martel kept his head down and his back bent. The closer they came to the destination, the more of Vitus' men could be expected. He avoided eye contact and trudged forward, making himself as unworthy of attention as possible. This morning, upon meeting his contact, Martel had even spent a while practising this walk until the Khivan pronounced himself satisfied.

Finally, Martel noticed an increase of people standing about on the street as the cart moved down an alley. Guards keeping outsiders at bay. This had to be the destination for the cart; the warehouse where Vitus stored such precious goods before they were sold. The Khivans knew he had such a place, since he could hardly store them in a cart on the street overnight, but they had not been able to discern its location. Now, Martel knew where to look for it. Satisfied, the wizard plodded away to inform his Khivan friends.

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In the afternoon, the mageknights began their joust on the festival square. While other students of the Lyceum cheered and shouted in exuberance at the entertainment, Martel was far away. Still in his disguise, he had whiled the hours away in a tavern until his Khivan acquaintance returned to inform him that they were ready to proceed. It had not taken them long to work out the next steps. Following along, Martel went back to the harbour district, still playing the role of a weary day-labourer.

They entered an insula that oversaw the alley watched by Vitus' people. No doors led from the great stone building onto the backstreet, but Martel had no need either. The Khivan unlocked the door to an empty apartment, which conveniently had a window facing that direction.

Martel's companion pointed out which of the buildings specifically served as a warehouse for Vitus' crew. Gathering his spellpower, feeling the magic flow through his body, Martel summoned a lightning bolt between his hands and flung it at the roof of the construction.

## Chapter 476: Belt and Breeches

### Belt and Breeches

"Nordmark, are you in good health?" Maximilian watched him across the table.

Eating his porridge with his usual fervour, or lack thereof, Martel arrested his spoon mid-air and returned the look. "Just because I'm eating my food slower than you, it doesn't mean anything is wrong with me. On the contrary, it's your eating habits that should be called into question."

"Overlooking this insult for a moment, I am obviously referring to the fact that you were unavailable yesterday. I sincerely hope that will not repeat itself today when I take the field."

Right, Martel had forgotten about pretending to be ill. "Definitely not. I'll be there to watch you take a beating."

"With such encouragement from my friends, why do I even bother with enemies?"

"Just trying to balance your unbridled optimism. You and Eleanor fighting together? Assuming she's also participating."

"No, they spread it out according to age. I feel quite certain I explained this to you last year."

Martel gave his friend a sceptical look. "The other day, you couldn't remember the name of your own cousin when you pointed out all your family members, but you recall this conversation?"

Maximilian made some throat noises in protest. "A most distant cousin, and I have dozens of them! The harvest games are actually important."

"Well, I shall be there to cheer you on."

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Martel took his regular seat by the festival square, dressed like any other noble, except perhaps his clothing was made from coarser fabric. But nobody bothered him or hindered his way; he was a familiar sight, even without Maximilian. The mageknight stood on the square in the company of his peers, all of them older than him. Another band likewise diverse in years stood opposite. The overseer of the games gave a signal, and the skirmish erupted.

The crowds cheered and jeered dependent on affiliation; this was especially true on the benches, where many of the noble houses had a family member participating in the contest. More than once, the conflict on the square almost became mirrored on the stands, with cooler heads forced to intervene before it came to blows.

Although Martel had his own allegiances, he kept quiet rather than invite any sort of attention. He watched both Maximilian and Eleanor advance, happy on their behalf. Similar to the archery

contest, it would require numerous rounds before a group advanced to the final battle, where they might be crowned champion of the games.

Waiting for the next group of mageknights to get ready, Martel idly glanced around when his gaze caught something. At various places, usually at the end of the benches, servants to the nobles stood clustered. This allowed them to attend the needs of their masters while watching the contest.

But one of them caught Martel's suspicion. He had not seen the fellow before or at least did not recognise him, though obviously, it could be a failing of his memory, or the man had simply not given service on previous days. He wore an insignia that Martel did not know, but with all the minor nobility arriving in Morcaster for the festival, that was not strange either. Lastly, he stood a little apart rather than participating in the eager discussions like the other servants, though he might just be less sociable in nature.

All of it could be explained away, but put together, it made Martel uncomfortable. Making a quick decision, he got up and walked away.

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He was good. As Martel walked towards the school, he barely caught a glimpse of his pursuer. If he had not already been suspicious, he would never have guessed that he was being followed. But since Martel had noticed, it was simple enough to plan accordingly.

Turning a sharp corner, Martel stepped into the shadows of the alley afforded by the tall buildings. It did not take long before the supposed servant made the same corner, finding himself face to face with a wizard.

Immediately, Martel blasted the man with air to make him fall flat on his back. He quickly let his magical sense check for gold; nothing came back. So not an assassin, but simply someone following him to notice his habits and weaknesses.

Martel could let the man go, but he decided to take advantage of the situation and add a parting message. "Tell your chief and all who serve him that he's done. I will burn everything he owns to the ground until he is left with nothing but ashes." To really drive it through, Martel summoned fire to dance across his hands, going up and down his arms.

The henchman crawled backwards with eyes full of fear before he pushed himself off the ground and ran as fast as his belt and breeches allowed.

In the distance, the roar of the crowds could faintly be heard. The contest was reaching its conclusion, and Martel would miss it. Accepting this, he continued on his path, going back to the Lyceum.

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When he arrived, another message had been pushed under his door.

It's ready. They meet  
tomorrow at third  
bell. Be in good time  
at Corvinus' square.

Harold

It seemed Martel's dramatics had been unnecessary; the thugs at the harbour had already been pushed enough to allow the final flourish. Losing a tavern, a ship, and a warehouse without the slightest retaliation had taken its toll. Burning the note, Martel prepared himself for the last push.

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An unassuming house in the harbour district played host to the ruler of its criminal faction. Nothing about the building suggested wealth or the comforts that a person of means might enjoy. That was its main advantage, being inconspicuous. It lay next to a large insula that covered it in shadows and further made it an unremarkable location.

Inside, the chief ate his supper alone in the study when the door suddenly opened. "They brought the Khivan, master," the guard announced.

"Send him in."

Two other guards appeared, almost carrying a short man between them by the shoulders. The fellow had a bag over his head, and the sheath in his belt was bereft of its knife. One of them pulled the bag away to reveal the same Khivan who had met with Martel, providing him information.

Slicing up a tomato, Vitus let his eyes examine his guest. He was himself a man in his late thirties with unfeeling eyes and cropped hair, clean-shaven. He used his knife slowly, almost methodically on the tomato in his hand as he stared at the Khivan. "How much do you want for betraying your master?"

"Twenty crowns, master," the visitor replied, licking his lips. "Enough to buy me passage from here and start anew."

"And you can guarantee he'll show?"

"Master, I'll lead the wizard to your people myself. He won't suspect a thing." An awkward grin settled on the Khivan's sweaty face.

"If you lie, I will scour that pathetic district you call home. I will kill, slowly, everyone in your family, leaving you as the last."

The Khivan swallowed. "I understand, master."

Vitus exhaled. "Fine. Twenty crowns." He slid a slice of his tomato into his mouth. "You'll remain here until tomorrow as our guest."

"Yes, master. When – when will I be paid?"

The master of the harbour gave the Khivan a cold look. "When it's done. But if it goes wrong, you better pray the wizard kills you first."

The Khivan bowed his head, licking his lips again. "Of course, master."

Once he was gone, Vitus turned to the remaining guard. "Make sure he dies. Once this mage is dealt with, we burn down the entire enclave. A fitting end for the Fire Eater."

Chapter 477: Counting the Catch

Counting the Catch

Early in the morning, half a score of Vitus' best fighters entered an insula in the harbour district. Several of them had golden blades, and the others had weapons with modifications; one fellow carried a club with a string of golden coins tied around. Half of them went inside an empty chamber while the others invaded the opposite apartment, quickly silencing any complaints from the occupants. Their trap set, they waited.

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As third bell approached, Martel walked towards the harbour district. He avoided any main roads, as he was not wearing a disguise. For this particular task, he wanted to look like a wizard. His Khivan liaison met him at the appointed place, looking nervous. The harbour was the one place where his kind might walk unaccosted, since people of all sorts frequent at the docks, but even then, they were not particularly welcome. "Let's hurry," the short man suggested. "Sooner I'm back in the enclave, the better."

Martel followed him through the crooked alleys of the district until they stood before an insula. After quickly crossing the street, glancing in every direction, they ascended up the stairs until they reached the top floor.

The Khivan nodded down the hallway. "Just down there. Now if you excuse me, I take my leave. May the Flame illuminate your path," he added with the sudden touch of formality that seemed to accompany this particular phrase.

"Thanks," Martel mumbled, not sure what else to say. With no reason to waste time, Martel walked down the corridor.

He reached a small ladder built into the wall, which led to a hatch. Moving through, Martel found himself on the roof. It was flat, allowing the inhabitants of the building to collect rainwater, wash and dry their clothing, and otherwise make use of the space.

Martel's only interest lay across the small alley. Walking over to the edge and looking down, Martel looked upon the hideout belonging to Vitus. The crime lord's thugs had helpfully revealed the location to the Khivan by bringing him there.

It was quite a distance from the insula to the hideout across the gap, but it helped that the latter was much lower. Steeling himself, Martel stepped back to give himself a running start. With a deep breath, he broke into an empowered run, summoning his shield as well to help absorb the shock from the landing.

If any of the thugs standing guard in the alley had looked up at the right time, they would have seen a wizard soaring through the air.

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On the lower floor of his current home, Vitus sat at the edge of a table with most of his lieutenants down each side. "As we speak, our lads are taking care of the damn wizard. We can get back to business as usual."

"You're really counting your catch before the net's been hauled back in the boat," complained one of them. "We haven't caught whiff of him when he wantonly destroyed our property, and he's clearly powerful, given the destruction he's caused. I'd like to see his corpse before I trust he's dead."

"I hear he's still just an acolyte! We can't even defend ourselves against a boy!"

"We shouldn't have moved against Lady Pearl! The other Nine Lords will crush us for this!"

"Quiet!" bellowed Vitus. "The Nine Lords agreed I was owed restitution. I took it as I saw fit, and half of them at least will support me on this, so quit bickering about it. As for business –"

He was interrupted as a door flew open to allow a wizard entry. The nearest guard reacted first, but his dagger was scarcely from its sheath before a blast of wind threw him back.

"My next spell will be a lightning bolt." Martel held up his hand and let sparks jump between the fingertips. "Unless you wish to feel the skin melt from your face, I suggest you all remain put." The threat had the intended effect, as none stirred from their seat.

Vitus stared at him with unvarnished hatred. "How did you get here?"

"Your little gang's leakier than a sunken ship. Lots of people still hold grudges from how you took over last year. And all the coin you spent to take control of Smallport and now the bridge gate, and paying the Night Knives for turning on Lady Pearl, rather than paying your own people..." Martel gave a shrug. "But none of that matters now. I'm here to discuss an end to our feud."

"What do you want?"

"Simple. I'll leave you lot alone, and you leave me alone. My only condition is that you are removed entirely. I do not care in what manner." Martel kept his eyes on Vitus, making it clear whom he referred to.

The chief laughed in disbelief. "I'm not really inclined to accept those terms. Think I'd rather take my chances with you here, surrounded by my men."

"You misunderstand. I'm not negotiating with you." Martel let his gaze sweep over the handful of lieutenants in the room. "I'm negotiating with them. Every one of them got an opportunity now to make peace and also take your position, the way you took it last year. Just depends on who moves first."

Vitus glanced around the table. "You wouldn't dare –" He leapt to his feet, his chair falling back behind him. His dagger was in his hand, and he held it out in a threatening manner at his erstwhile subordinates. They in turn calmly got up as well, drawing their own weapons.

Martel felt no need to see what happened next; he left the room along with its noise and commotion. His friends waited for him to join them and watch the conclusion of the games, the great melee. Should any of the guards on the alley outside dare to stand in his way, he felt confident he could handle them. After all, most of Vitus' henchmen, all those armed with gold, were in an entirely different location.

## Chapter 478: A New Pact

### A New Pact

The harvest festival had come to an end, along with its days of leisure. As the next day was Solday, however, Martel could ease into his return to regular duties. He practised enchantment in the morning in lieu of working his shift in the workshops, and he helped Mistress Rana in the afternoon with her experiments. Other than that, his time was his own.

At least, so he thought until a message arrived for him. For a moment, he felt discomfort at the thought of a missive from 'Harold' – perhaps telling him that the whole ordeal concerning Vitus was not yet over – when he recognised the thin script, like a spider's web.

Master Martel,

I should desire the luxury

of your company tonight.

Our regular haunt should suffice.

During seventh bell, if it pleases.

Your Jester of all trades

Martel frowned a bit, reading these words. Strange to say, but so much had happened over the last five days, he could think of several reasons why the Keeper desired to meet. It could be the death of Lady Pearl, the demise of Vitus, or what had to be the rather frayed state of the Pact.

The Nine Lords had engaged in all but open war against each other. This could only continue, Martel surmised; already, the others had moved in to seize Lady Pearl's territory, such as the gate. Now, the harbour district would be vulnerable from its second change in leadership in a year, and this time, it was a much less orderly transfer of power; the other gangs were bound to capitalise on that, given the importance of the docks to anyone bringing goods in and out of the city.

It made Martel feel a little unwell at the thought of Kerra taking advantage of all his hard work. As her territory lay closest to the piers, she was well-suited to do so.

Regardless, none of it was Martel's problem, but it might be wise to find out what the Keeper wished to say. Information was its own wealth, especially in the criminal underworld, as he had come to understand, and those in poverty did not fare well.

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The Keeper waited for Martel in the tavern that had hosted their previous meetings. It was always strange to see him in subdued clothing that contrasted with his exuberant personality, especially since he had worn garments suitable for his character the first time Martel had set eyes on him.

"Master wizard, always a pleasure to have your frown looking at me from across my own brow."

Martel sat down opposite him. He had already used his magic to investigate the other patrons for gold weapons. "What do you want?"

"Is it all that schooling which drains the good nature from you mages and leaves you unable to appreciate even simple pleasures like pleasant conversation?"

"No, that honour goes solely to your presence."

"Very well. I have been told that the harbour district is under new leadership, and you played a considerable hand in this."

"Yes."

The Keeper almost looked taken aback. "No denial? Nor an explanation or dare I say, an excuse?"

"No."



"You're really not giving me much to work with here, my good fellow. You understand that bringing about the downfall of a Ninth Lord means you have lost the protection of the Pact?"

"The same Pact which did nothing to prevent Vitus from attempting to assassinate me?" Strictly speaking, Martel had no direct proof that the Night Knives had acted on Vitus' orders. More likely, it had been their own initiative and tacitly approved by Vitus – which to Martel was the same thing, considering in either case, they had wanted him dead.

"If you had brought this to me, or the Friar, we would have taken action on your behalf. You did not have to retaliate on your own."

"Lot of good that would do me if they had succeeded. Face it," Martel said, his voice changing from overbearing to cold. "Your Pact is worthless. It did not protect me, it did nothing for Tibert, and I can't imagine Lady Pearl is particularly impressed either."

For once, any trace of a smile, smirk, or the slightest good humour was gone from the Keeper's face. "It has kept them from engaging in open warfare for many years."

Martel stretched his neck. "No it hasn't. It just forced them to move it deeper into the shadows and be more clever about it."

"Anything that diminishes bloodshed is worthwhile."

Martel regarded the rogue. "Anything that helps you live another day, you mean."

"Well, I simply considered it polite to inform you in person that you can no longer rely on the Pact for protection. Clearly, that means little to you, but all the same, consider yourself informed."

"I appreciate the gesture. Really though, I would prefer if you tell others, including the reason behind." Martel placed his elbows on the table between them, leaning forward. "You see, this is why I handled this matter myself rather than come running to you or the Friar. The Pact didn't keep me safe. But let all of them know what one battlemage did to bring down Vitus. How I hounded his every step, burning down everything he owned. Don't ever let them forget about the fury of a fire-touched wizard."

The Keeper sucked on his teeth. "As you wish."

Martel had not learned anything other than what he could have guessed, but he considered his purpose with the meeting fulfilled. "Thanks for the talk." He got on his feet and left the tavern, nothing further to say.

Outside on the street, he took a deep breath and exhaled before resuming his journey home. Let this be the end of his constant entanglements with the criminal elements of Morcaster. They had taught him many a lesson since his first meeting with Kerra in The Copper Drum more than a year ago; lessons hard-earned and knowledge hard-won, which he did not care to repeat. He owed nothing to any of them, cared for none of them, and needed nothing from them.

He would spend his last couple of months in the city in the company of his friends and the pursuit of magic; not only spells, but alchemy and enchantment as well. He would be a mage, first and last.

## Chapter 479: The Last Argument of Viscounts

### The Last Argument of Viscounts

Everything seemed to settle back into the old routine in the fivedays after the harvest festival. Martel stayed at school for the most part, pursuing his education. On the occasion that he ventured into the city, doing purchases for Mistress Rana or going out with his friends, nobody gave him trouble or reason to feel suspicious.

As for his lessons with Moira, they eventually moved out of the Circle of Fire and into the western courtyard. The tenth month of the year had begun, and every acolyte kept their hands inside their sleeves; unfortunately, wearing gloves interfered with spellcasting, and they had to suffer the cold.

Carrying four staves in her arms, Moira gave a contemptuous look at her students trying to keep their hands warm. She distributed the magical implements, forcing them all to grab the cold wood with their bare fingers.

"See those banners?" Moira pointed at four pieces of cloth, each hanging out of its own window on an upper floor.

'Banner' seemed a fanciful description; they all had the same plain background colour, and only the letter on each piece of cloth differentiated them. Martel quickly realised that the letters were the initials for each of their names. He looked towards the flag with 'M' for Martel.

"Your task is to set fire to your particular banner. I don't care which spell you use, but you're not allowed to move closer. One foot past this fellow, and you failed." She patted the elbow on the statue of Atreus. The acolytes looked at each other, the banners, and Moira. "Get to it!" she barked at them, making Edward flinch.

Making sure he was further back than the statue, Martel looked at his flag. He estimated some fifty paces from his position to the building; the distance would be even greater, since the banner hung several floors up. He could think of two solutions. A fire bolt with enough spellpower to ignite its target. The regular spell that he could cast at will would not be enough; simple magical fire did not actually burn in the sense that it could set something ablaze.

The difficulty was whether his spell would last long enough to reach its target. He did not understand the laws behind it, but a spell flying through the air would eventually dissolve if it never hit anything. It seemed that the more spellpower spent, the longer the spell might last; for that reason, Martel's lightning bolts had easily crossed an alley to strike a building on the other side. But he was not certain he could hit the banner accurately, even if he used enough spellpower to ensure his spell would last the distance; and if he tried, the necessary effort would leave him so weary afterwards, he might only have one attempt.

The other option was to reach out with his magic and connect to the cloth, using this to increase the heat until the fabric combusted. But Martel had never done so across such a distance, and he was not certain that he could. He realised this was probably the exercise; training the range of the battlemages, one way or the other.

Weighing his options, Martel went for the latter. It might be harder, but it did not tire him out the way casting advanced spells would. It seemed the better choice; if it failed completely, he could always try a direct spell afterwards. Staring straight at the banner, Martel let his magic reach out and try to connect.

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At supper, both Maximilian and Eleanor joined him. This had become more frequent of late, though Martel did not know of any specific reason. Usually, his friends spent their meals with the other mageknights, which was understandable, considering they had all their classes together. But he did not mind the change, even if he was also fine with eating alone. Eleanor only spoke when she had something worthwhile to say, and if Martel was not in the mood for Maximilian's conversation, he could just let him ramble on; the mageknight rarely needed encouragement to keep talking.

"That reminds me, Martel, you have no plans next Pelday, I assume?"

Hearing his name as a warning that he needed to pay attention, Martel caught the end of the sentence. "Pelday? Yeah, I mean, no, I don't have plans. Why?"

Maximilian beamed. "It is the annual celebration of the emperor's coronation!"

A weary look crossed Martel's face. "Max, no."

"How can you refuse me before I have proposed anything?" came the offended response.

"Because it's obvious. You want me to accompany you, which is a bad idea, as I don't belong with nobles."

"Present company excluded, I assume," Eleanor interjected with half a smile.

"Nordmark, no need to think less of yourself! You are a wizard, which is a mark of nobility in its own right," Maximilian argued, missing Martel's point.

"Nothing good will come of it. Remember last year, how it ended? Being forced to fight each other for the amusement of some —" Martel caught himself before he said something offensively about a member of the Imperial family.

"Exactly, it was splendid! But I hear your concern," Maximilian declared. "Which is why you only have to come on the first night."

"But what for? What difference does my presence make?"

"Look, on the first night, we all present ourselves to the emperor. I just want you in my father's retinue, so everyone can see. For your troubles, you'll get to drink the best wine and enjoy the finest celebration in the Empire. And if you insist, you can spend the remaining evenings back at the Lyceum."

"Again, I'm just one mage out of many. Why does your father or anyone else care?"

"Martel, listen. Politics is about popularity. The more people following you, the more power you have. And a battlemage counts as a lot of people."

Eleanor nodded before giving a shrug. "The support of military wizards is considered valuable, it is true."

"But I'm going to the legions, no matter what. Standing behind your father doesn't change where I'll be going, or what I'll be doing."

Maximilian waved a hand about dismissively. "That is irrelevant. Think of it like cards in your hand. They all have different ranks and strengths. A battlemage is a good card to have, no matter what."

Martel shot him a look. "All I'm getting is that our country is being run like a gambling den."

"Probably truer than you wish," Eleanor conceded with a smile.

"In any case, back to the question at hand. Can I inform my father that you have graciously accepted to attend the celebration in his retinue?"

Whatever Martel's misgivings, he could not turn down his friend without a better excuse than vague unease. "I guess the food will be good, at least."

"If that is the argument that convinces you, I will take it."

## Chapter 480: An Elemental Education

### An Elemental Education

Martel arrived at the apothecary for his morning shift to find large bundles of plants waiting for him. Had this been last month, it would not have been surprising. All big events in the city, whether benign or malign in nature, inevitably led to people getting hurt one way or the other; this in turn depleted the infirmary's supplies of apothecary remedies, requiring long hours to replenish them. As a simple helper rather than formal apprentice, Martel had just done his usual work during the harvest festival, but he knew both Mistress Rana and Nora ran themselves ragged during such times.

Looking at the bundles, it felt like a return to that, though to Martel's knowledge, nothing of major consequence was taking place in Morcaster. He recognised strangleroot, used in many recipes for its ability to reduce fever, along with lungwort and coltsfoot, which helped with coughing. "That looks like busy work."

Nora had scarcely acknowledged his arrival other than a quick glance over her shoulder. She was already busy working her way through the herbs. "Plenty more when this is done. Start drying those roots, will you?"

Martel nodded – a bit useless unless Nora had eyes in the back of her head – and grabbed the nearest plant, pulling water from it to dry it out. "Is Mistress Rana going to help you at some point? Else you'll be going at this for days."

"She's not at the Lyceum. She's out scouring for plants that are harder to get."

"This late in the year? Can't be much that's blooming."

Nora just gave a shrug. "She didn't bother explaining. It's sometimes a coin toss whether she lets me know what's going on."

"I'm sure she'll let you know when it's necessary. You're her apprentice, after all."

"I suppose. Maybe that's how it works in Sindhu."

"Could be." Setting the mostly dry herb aside, Martel picked up another.

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"Show me one more time, and I'll be satisfied," Master Alastair promised with an expectant smile.

Martel nodded, happy to comply, even if it took quite some effort and energy each time. Practising regularly, he had mastered the spell. Rather than stretch out both hands to slowly summon lightning, Martel simply extended his right hand; within moments, sparks crackled before a bolt of lightning flashed out, escaping the Hall of Elements through one of the narrow slits used to pull air

into the room. There was a slight chance that somewhere on the streets of Morcaster, a roasted bird would drop from the sky.

"Excellent. How do you feel?"

Martel found himself a little short of breath, but otherwise in good shape. "It certainly tires me more than casting similar spells, but I don't feel exhausted or anything like that." He had summoned the lightning twice for Master Alastair now, and he still felt able to cast more spells if needed. It was a far cry from his first attempts that had left him weak as a newborn afterwards.

"Very good. I think that's the last I can teach you. I know of no other spells that are worth teaching you."

"Really? We still have some time before I must leave," Martel considered.

"I would rather you spend the last few months focusing on the lessons of Mistress Moira," Master Alastair suggested, and Martel did his best to keep a blank expression at hearing her name. "I know she'll be teaching you how to improve the range of your spells."

"We just begun yesterday, in fact."

"I see. Well, that'll prove invaluable. You'll want your spells to beat the range of Khivan guns or Tyrian arrows. I suspect that's also something that'll be tested during your final examination."

Martel frowned. "You don't know what it'll be?"

He shook his head. "Mistress Moira might know, but I usually only teach novices, and they generally keep the examinations for mageknights and battlemages a secret. They also change them over the years. When it was me, decades ago, we were tested in small groups with mageknights, but I hear now battlemages are examined on their own."

"Alright. I'll be sure to practise the range of my magic."

"Good. So, this means my time as your teacher of elemental magic has come to an end." The old battlemage's expression became slightly sad.

"That's strange to think of. You've been my teacher from the first day." Martel suddenly felt the weight of his debt of gratitude to Master Alastair. He had helped him unlock his magical abilities, but more than that, he had continued to train Martel of his own volition after he became a fire acolyte; without the spells taught to him by the Master of Elements, Martel might not have survived his ordeals these last two years in Morcaster.

"You have grown swiftly in magical prowess, my boy. Perhaps starting late was not the disadvantage we first assumed. In any case, you can no longer be considered my student, for I suspect you shall surpass me swiftly enough. But I will always be your teacher, lad."

Martel had never heard words like this before, and he did not know how to respond in words, so he gave the old wizard a hug. Even at scarcely eighteen years, he was taller than his teacher, who laughed a little and patted his back as he pulled back. "Thank you, Master Alastair. For everything."

"My pleasure, lad. And a privilege. Now, besides your focus on fire magic, I suggest you enjoy your last days in Morcaster. You can't know where the Imperial administration sends you, but an army camp won't have much entertainment, and your friends will most likely be sent elsewhere."

"I will," Martel promised. He already knew that Maximilian would stay in the city and become a praetorian; as for Eleanor, he did not know which legion might have the good fortune of receiving her, but it seemed unlikely that they would be assigned to the same one.

"And come by the Lyceum the first time you're on leave, if your path takes you to Morcaster."

Martel blinked, feeling more emotional than he had expected; when he came to the Hall of Elements this afternoon, he had not realised it would be his last time. "I will."