

## Firebrand 581

### Chapter 581: Familiar Streets

#### Familiar Streets

Martel slept on a cot that night. When he woke, the room was cold as no servant had come to start a fire in the hearth, but this did not bother him, and the breakfast was as delicious as yesterday. He began to understand why rich people made such a fuss about servants; the amount of labour and skill involved in creating such a tray every morning, presumably for every member of the household and their guests, had to be considerable.

He found Eleanor in the library, and she looked up from her book. "How was the Lyceum yesterday? You were gone all day."

"Same as when we left it, really. It's only been a year, after all. But I enjoyed seeing our old teachers."

"I'll have to make the same visit myself. What do you intend to do today?"

"I think I'll just walk around the city. Save further reunions for tomorrow." While Martel had savoured being back at the Lyceum, he still felt worn from talking all day.

"Very well. By the way, my parents told me to invite you for our solstice celebration, tomorrow night."

An expression crossed Martel's face. "Maybe I shouldn't. I imagine Cheval will be there?"

"Yes, but I do not see why that should keep you. He has already sent you to the Tenth. What else can he do?"

Nothing worse than the Khivans, probably. "Still, I'm just not comfortable in this crowd. They look at me, they see a Tyrian peasant who happens to have magic. After the summer we've had, I'm not in the mood to ignore remarks and overlook provocations."

"Nor should you." Eleanor placed her book on a table and got up to approach him. "If anybody speaks an ill word to you, reply at your leisure. None of these silkworms have ever seen battle – they have no right to look down on you."

Martel gave a wry smile. "And when my temper runs away with me, and I start a fight?"

"My father will be happy, probably. He practically instigated one the first time you were here." Seeing the uncertainty on his face, she added, "You and I are tied together, Martel. My father wants you to prove yourself in front of all his guests, validating my choice to be your protector."

He had not considered that, though it reminded him of the saint's feast back in Esmouth. The way they treated him affected how they treated her.

"And my mother will be delighted that her celebration is the talk of the town," Eleanor added with a smile.

"I only care what you want, really."

"I want my battlemage to crush anybody who dares disparage him."

"Well, alright."

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As Martel left the house, he went straight south this time. Once he had crossed the noble quarter, he reached the bridge district. It had more of the hustle and bustle he expected; while winter storms made the main harbour quiet during the season, barges and small vessels still traversed the Alonde River, causing plenty of traffic between Smallport and the city itself.

When Martel first had come to Morcaster, the sheer number of people had made him dizzy; now, he found it familiar to be once more surrounded by people of all sorts, along with beasts of burden and carts, crossing the streets in every direction. At the same time, his old dislike of people coming too close had returned. Thankfully, other travellers knew to shy away from a battlemage with a haughty expression on his face.

Martel made his way to The River Pearl. From the outside, the place looked much the same. It still offered the same services, by the looks of it; perhaps it still had the same staff, although he did not recognise the guard standing outside. Certainly, it would be under new ownership, given the previous one was dead. While Martel had mixed feelings, most of them negative, towards Lady Pearl, he had spent many hours inside her establishment. All of them in the company of Ruby, whose body he had left behind deep underground. Feelings of guilt emerged at the thought of having not only failed to protect her, but also abandoned her body after the fight, denying her even basic funerary rites. Almost abruptly, he tore himself away and continued.

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Still walking south, Martel reached the end of the bridge district where it met the Khivan enclave. The residents stared at him, usually with suspicion or outright hostility in their looks. He did not blame them. He was not only Asterian, but a mage. And he was not only a mage, but a soldier in the legions that currently fought their relatives in the old country.

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Already from afar, he saw it. Towering over the old, wooden houses, a colossal insula rose in the middle of the district. It could house probably hundreds. As Martel walked towards it on familiar streets, he stopped just shy of the main square in the enclave. He looked to his right where once, a watchmaker's workshop had lain. Nothing remained but debris. It looked as if work had begun clearing space for the next insula.

Bitterness met regret as Martel looked from the remnants of Shadi's home to the enormous building just down the street. A stark, physical reminder that Cheval had won. His schemes had reached fruition, Martel had failed to stop him or keep Shadi in her home, and by gaining the duke's enmity, Martel had earned a place in the Tenth.

Revisiting all of these memories, Martel felt his fury rise. Not the short-tempered anger that made him act without thinking, but the slow-burning wrath that made him want to dedicate all his powers towards destroying this man.

Martel exhaled, knowing it was a fool's errand. He could never contend with the resources at the duke's disposal, and there was a risk that his actions might fall back on Eleanor. Martel walked

onwards, but before leaving the enclave, he crossed the square to enter the small Khivan temple. The few worshippers inside looked at him with various emotions, none of them positive. The priest of the shrine walked towards him, but he seemed afraid to speak. While Martel recognised him, it did not seem he recognised the wizard. Wordlessly, Martel dug out some gold coins and placed them in the hand of the priest before he left.

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Martel continued to the harbour, almost as a matter of routine. He had often gone this way in the company of Shadi, and it felt right to tread the same path today. But he had already seen the docks since his return, and he realised that he did not actually have any interest in revisiting the place.

Hungry, he looked around for a tavern that might serve him something to eat, which he found with ease. Yet as he stepped inside and considered what to buy, an odd sensation struck him. The smell of food, especially the different kinds of charred or spiced meat, made him feel uncomfortable, almost nauseated.

It took a lot for Martel to become ill, as he enjoyed the good health generally given to those with magical talent, and this felt more like when he had been seasick during the journey, though he could not understand what might provoke such a reaction in him. His appetite lost, Martel left and set a course straight back to the home of House Fontaine.

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As he stepped inside, the majordomo greeted him. "Lady Fontaine request that you join her in the wintergarden at your convenience, but preferably before supper."

"Oh, sure." Martel removed his cap and gloves. "I'll just get rid of these, and I'll go see her."

"Please, allow me, sir." The servant took Martel's items of clothing; seeing the mage look in different directions, he added, "The wintergarden is through there, sir."

Martel went the described way, and if nothing else, the scent of flowers in bloom helped him reach his destination. This deep in winter, it was almost strange to see so much green as he stepped into a room with great glass windows, noticeably warmer than the rest of the house. Martel suspected some kind of enchantment lay upon this place, which, along with the large amount of glass, probably made this the most expensive room in the house, perhaps save the library.

The lady of the residence sat on a couch, looking up at him with a smile as he arrived. "Sir Martel, thank you for joining me. Please, be seated."

"Certainly." Martel sat down in the other end of the couch.

"Has my daughter conveyed our invitation for tomorrow night?"

"She has. She claims you are aware that you are inviting a fire-touched battlemage to your celebration."

The lady laughed. "We are."

"In that case, I accept."

"Good. I asked you here for another reason, though. It concerns Eleanor."

Martel wondered how close this conversation would lean against the one he had already been through with the master of the house, but he said nothing and waited for her to continue.

"You are aware that I have experienced the grief of losing a child. While my youngest daughter has been returned to us through some miracle, I spent years looking at her lifeless body, assuming she would never wake. I may not have truly lost a child, but I am intimately familiar with the pain this causes."

"I can't imagine how that would feel."

"Only a parent could. And this experience has changed my outlook. I do not care about ambition, rank, or status where my children are concerned. Only that they are safe. While my husband has been most consternated by Eleanor's decision to join you, I could not care less. Except that this so clearly demonstrates her loyalty to you, and given her sense of duty, I have no doubt about the lengths to which she will go in order to protect you." The noblewoman turned her eyes towards Martel, who noticed how similar they looked to her daughter's. "My question to you, Sir Martel, is whether she can expect such loyalty from you."

"Undoubtedly!" The question felt absurd to Martel. Who or what else would he be loyal to?

"This is unequivocal? Forgive me for pressuring you, but if I am to experience the pain of losing a child again, I shall quite certainly go mad. It would ease my mind to know her companion has the same dedication to her safety as the reverse."

Martel realised that Lady Fontaine had no idea what Martel and Eleanor went through, or she would realise how superfluous a question it was. She did not know how it felt to leave the fragile safety of the camp to enter enemy territory with only one other person by his side, one person he could trust. How it felt when they fought together, placing their lives in each other's hands. How it felt after every fight, when the sounds ended and the smoke cleared, and Martel frantically looked around until his eyes found her and confirmed she was not wounded.

He frowned, trying to think of how he could put all this into words that would convince the lady. "I would rather watch the Empire burn to cinders than see Eleanor be harmed in any way. In fact, I'd start the fire myself if it came to it."

"Given your profession and predilection, I take it those are not empty words. Very well, Sir Martel, I appreciate the conviction of your answer and that you would indulge me. I shall see you at supper." She rose from her seat and left the wintergarden, leaving Martel alone in the bloom.

## Chapter 582: Familiar Arguments

### Familiar Arguments

Although spending the last days in the city, Martel had noticed the flurry of activities across the home of House Fontaine. Preparations for the summer solstice took time, and Martel ended up simply leaving during the morning as well, though he went nowhere in particular; he just wanted to avoid being in the way. In the afternoon, he returned to use the baths and otherwise prepare himself for the feast.

He looked through his small collection of expensive clothing, all of them gifts from Maximilian or Eleanor. Considering location, he chose a set of clothes of the latter variety; he remembered going to the tailor with her, and how she had chosen the green tree on his doublet as an emblem for him.

Once attired, he walked over to the small vanity mirror standing on the dresser in the room. Martel had not used it before, as he usually did not see the point in staring at his own reflection; he looked the way he looked. But he was a little curious how the clothes suited him; they hung more loosely around his body than he remembered.

Looking at his own visage, he found it a little surprising. His eyes looked sunken, as if he had not slept in a long while. His cheeks were almost hollow. One of the servants had shaved his face, so at least he looked groomed in that regard, but he began to understand why some at the Lyceum had not recognised him at first glance.

A knock on the door. "Enter." He looked over to see Eleanor. She wore a dress of green and red; the first time he had seen her wearing something other than a tunic or armour in more than a year.

She held up a jar in her hand. "Sit down." She nodded at the chair in the room. While he did as ordered, she moved to stand behind him and pour some of the contents from the jar into his hair. He remembered the first time she had done this, likewise just before a celebration. Her hands had swiftly and deftly distributed the oil, something he had never experienced before.

Now she did this again, but her movements seemed far slower, taking her time to work in the balm. He did have longer hair this time around. He closed his eyes, and the world disappeared except for her touch, and the ticking sound of his Khivan clock, reminding him that inevitably, the moment would end.

Which it did. "There we are." She wiped her hands on a piece of cloth and placed it on the dresser next to the jar. "Come along. The guests have already begun to arrive."

Martel got up and followed her out of the room and down the corridor. As they approached the great staircase leading from the upper floor to the entrance hall, Eleanor took him by the arm. Side by side, the two companions descended to join the celebration.

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Once they had joined the other guests in the great hall, they separated so Eleanor could mingle with the guests, representing her family. Martel retreated to the side, not particularly interested in conversation. Ideally, he would spend a few dull hours before taking his leave, and that would be the extent of his evening.

He entertained himself a while by trying to recognise or guess the insignias of the many noble houses represented in the hall. Some he knew from his time at the Lyceum; he noticed the symbol of a hawk belonging to the family of Alain, whom he had been on friendly footing with. The mageknight himself did not appear to be present though; he was probably in the camp of a legion somewhere.

A loud noise behind Martel made him flinch, and he turned on his heel with flames igniting around his hands. A servant, looking terrified, picked up the tray he had dropped and practically ran off.

Around the mage, the nearest guests regarded him with bemused or overbearing looks; a few did not hide their contemptuous smiles. Letting his magic disappear, Martel tried not to notice them.

"Martel, is everything alright?" Eleanor appeared, almost as out of nowhere.

Apparently, more people had noticed him than just those nearby. "I'm fine. I was just surprised." Seeing her concerned look, he continued, "I know this seems strange, but I could have sworn it sounded like..." Martel could not make himself say that he thought he had heard a Khivan musket being fired. A tray clanking on the floor sounded nothing like it, yet he had felt convinced.

She lowered her voice. "I know what you mean. It bothered me as well."

"You didn't draw weapons, though."

She looked down at her dress. "I might have if I had one available."

Martel laughed a little, feeling better thanks to her presence, which made him forget his embarrassment.

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"A scarecrow being scared. How fitting." The sneering voice naturally belonged to none other than the young Cheval, son of the duke.

His emotions already out of balance, Martel could feel his anger immediately rising. But it remained within his control; he could ignore the nobleman. He could turn and walk away.

"I would ask you to be cordial towards an honoured guest and the strongest battlemage in all the legions," Eleanor spoke sharply with a look no gentler than her tone.

"I forgot – you chose to be the peasant's protector! Well, we have all seen how he deals with an unarmed servant. No wonder they flee in terror at the sight of him." A couple of sycophants flanking the young nobleman laughed.

Martel could still walk away. But this trip was a return to memories, and many of them included him humiliating Cheval. Why break with tradition? "Bold words for a mageknight who never draws his weapon." Both the young nobleman and his henchmen wore the uniform of the Praetorian Guard. "I guess making you guard empty hallways, they finally found a use for you."

"We protect the emperor," Cheval spoke with overbearing disdain. He looked at Eleanor. "While you protect a Tyrian half-blood."

Martel did not care about the insult aimed at him, but he would not let the implication towards Eleanor pass by in silence. "She has faced and killed more enemies than you can count, though admittedly, not a difficult task. You once lost a duel to a novice with less than a month's training."

"My son, I see you have found your friends from school. The daughter of our host, and the illustrious battlemage he brags about." Affable yet cold, the duke of Cheval managed to make his words sound like an insult even if none could be found.

It took Martel a moment to understand that the duke meant Legate Fontaine; strange to think that the patrician would tell others of Martel, until he realised the legate did so for Eleanor's benefit, improving her reputation indirectly.

Regardless, the moment had changed. Before, it had been a band of youths bickering. But the duke was the most powerful man in the room; wherever he went, attention followed him. And unlike his son, he was dangerous. Now was the last chance to walk away.

But it was also Martel's only opportunity to repay the duke a small fraction of all the pain he had caused. It seemed like everyone expected a confrontation, and Martel saw no reason to disappoint. Not when he knew beyond doubt that his powers far outstripped those of any praetorian knight.

"We were all surprised," the duke continued, "when Legate Fontaine's daughter chose such a remote and insignificant posting. After all, we have all heard him speak so highly of her skills." The nobleman looked directly at Eleanor even while he spoke as if she were not present.

This was what tonight was about, Martel understood. The legate was trying to salvage Eleanor's reputation, but because Eleanor was tied to him, the duke's enemy, Cheval was happy to undermine all that work. The moment to walk away had passed.

"I could have chosen a career in the Praetorian Guard, of course, my lord duke," Eleanor replied, "but since the Empire is embroiled in a decade-long war, I thought I would make an actual contribution towards seeing its end."

"Have you been to war?" Martel asked, leaving out any titles despite this being the first time he addressed the duke. Instead, he kept his eyes on the man. From what he knew of court intrigue, Cheval led the faction in favour of expansion and the current unpopular war, leaving him vulnerable. "After all, you sit on the High Council. You must be aware of the endless resources being spent on this conflict. The countless number of Asterians being killed or returning to Morcaster as mutilated shadows of their former selves. What do you sacrifice while the men and women of the Empire bleed, day after day!" It was not a question Martel wanted answered; he knew there was none. Nothing to justify all the suffering and death he had witnessed.

The duke laughed, triggering the same response from those around, albeit theirs was of the nervous kind. "I thought this was a firemage, not a firebrand! I shall inform the High Council that a blue-eyed resident of Nordmark is eager to advise us on our decisions." Laughter increased, no longer sounding anxious; the duke's smooth remarks, probably aided by his references to Martel's origins, had turned the mood in his favour.

"This battlemage has killed more enemies in your war than every other person in this room put together," Eleanor declared, and Martel could tell that despite her composed demeanour, she was likewise angry. "Including your son and every other praetorian."

"You should be careful, Lady Eleanor. It sounds as if you are suggesting that your companion could best not only my son, but both of his companions."

The bait was so obvious that any animal would be ashamed to fall for it. Martel had no such qualms, and he gladly jumped with both legs into the trap. While he did not know the names of the mageknights flanking Cheval, they both wore the surcoat of the Praetorian Guard, meaning they like him would have little to no combat experience. "She may be suggesting it. I am happy to declare it." Martel gazed straight at the duke.

"That sounds like a challenge!" exclaimed the host of the evening. Martel got the sense he had been hovering in the background, waiting for this moment to happen and stepped in. "It looks as if our entertainment for the night has been secured. Sir Martel, are you willing to provide us with a spectacle against these three fine knights of the Praetorian Guard?"

"Absolutely."

"I accept," sneered the younger Cheval.

"Excellent!" The legate looked around at his guests. "My daughter's companion, the brave battlemage of the Tenth Legion will put himself against three praetorian mageknights! May I suggest you all stand to the side? We best give them all the room possible."

Everyone began to disperse, leaving the centre of the hall empty. Before he walked away, the duke patted his son on the shoulder and leaned in to whisper, "Make it look accidental."

For her part, Eleanor squeezed Martel's arm. "Try not to maim them." She gave a shrug. "If you can avoid it."

Martel smiled at her with the expression of a predator before he walked out to stand in the middle of the room, facing three mageknights of the emperor's personal guard.

## Chapter 583: Familiar Outcome

### Familiar Outcome

Five paces separating them, Martel stared at the three mageknights. Each of them had drawn their daggers; weapons with richly decorated hilts that probably gave the blade poor balance, but still deadly with a single blow in the hand of a mageknight. In comparison, Martel had no weapon in all, not even a broom handle – save his magic. It would suffice.

Feeling the eyes of the entire crowd upon him, Martel looked forward to this. The collective nobility of Morcaster would see a Tyrian-blooded upstart from Nordmark demolish three scions of their own kind.

Legate Fontaine took a step forward from the crowd and glanced at either side, confirming they stood ready. "Begin!"

All three mageknights rushed forward to close the gap. Predictable. If just one of them had any sense, they would have thrown their dagger against Martel. Either it would have wounded him, or he would have been forced to summon his shield. Regardless, it would have kept him from being offensive. But they fought according to their training, and the idea of throwing their only weapon away would never have entered their minds. So they all did as they had been taught and used their magic to reach their opponent.

Martel raised the wind and put spellpower into the attack, ensuring all three of them were blown backwards onto the floor. As they struggled to get back up, he unleashed a ray of fire on his first opponent to make her double over in pain. She dropped her weapon and fell back down. He moved the ray to the next target with the exact same result.

The spell was not deadly, not against two uninjured opponents, but the pain alone convinced them to forfeit. Martel was not impressed.

He had left Cheval for last, choosing humiliation over agony for the young nobleman. As Martel dealt with his two minions, Cheval had time to get back up and come within striking distance.

Expecting this, Martel summoned his shield, and those nearby could see Cheval's dagger impotently strike Martel's chest without damaging a single thread on his doublet. With another powerful blast of wind, Martel knocked the mageknight once more unto his back, and he stepped forward to place his foot on Cheval's hand, forcing him to relinquish his dagger.

"That must be enough!" exclaimed Legate Fontaine. He walked into the middle with raised hands to signal an end to combat. Satisfied, Martel took a step back. This had been over in less than a minute, which amused him considering how long the argument took building up to this duel.

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The two other praetorians got on their feet and limped away. Cheval likewise stood back up, and through the thunderous applause from the crowd, he hissed, "I pray to Sol I will be present to witness your slow, agonising death."

Martel barely afforded him a glance. "When you die, I won't take notice."

The clapping continued, and Martel ought to feel good; he had accomplished what he intended, proving his superior skills in magic while defending Eleanor's choice to become his protector and humiliating three members of the nobility in addition.

But as he saw the faces staring at him, he felt like he had done in the pits of the Broken Crown, doing prize fights for the crowds. Just a spectacle, no different than animals being thrown in the ring to fight each other for their amusement. To these people, he would never be anything more than a Tyrian peasant, useful only for a night's entertainment. Their approval meant nothing to him. He would never trouble himself with this again.

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While feeling suddenly morose despite his victory, Martel returned to Eleanor. But before them could say anything, another voice bellowed over the noise to greet him. "Nordmark! I almost missed your performance!"

Martel whipped his head around to see Maximilian with arms extended, holding a goblet in either hand. "Max!" He quickly embraced the mageknight, who carefully balanced the cups he was holding.

"I would have come on time if I had known to expect such a spectacle," Maximilian grinned, handing over one cup of wine to Martel as the latter pulled back. "Though I did catch the main event, watching you handle those buffoons. And my late arrival may just have been your luck, or you would have faced a proper praetorian knight rather than those three inferior specimens."

"Luck certainly favours me." Realising how parched he was, Martel took a healthy sip of his wine. Maximilian looked himself, wearing his family's colours, and he seemed and sounded like himself as well. Seeing his friend did much to raise Martel's spirits, for which he felt grateful.

Maximilian directed a bow at Eleanor. "And my betrothed! Fortune favours me as well to bless me with such company tonight."

"It is good to see you, Maximilian," she replied, and the reserved smile she usually wore on an evening like this became genuine. "How is life in the Praetorian Guard?"

"As dull as I feared. There is little point living in the Imperial palace if all your time is spent standing guard outside a room. I had hoped to become attached to the prince, as he actually leaves the palace from time to time, but no such luck yet. It cost me a favour to have this night off duty, but I'm happy to pay such a price for your sake. How long are you in Morcaster?"

"Little less than a month," she replied.

"I will do my best to secure a few more evenings of freedom that we may take advantage of this ostentatious occasion. While this celebration is all well and good, I should like a proper night out, much like the days of our long-lost youth as carefree students of the Lyceum."

Martel gave him a look. "Max, that was last year."

"As I said, long-lost. Now, you must regale me with tales of your exploits! Tell me of your daring adventures!"

Martel's smile faltered, and he let Eleanor take the lead in the ensuing conversation.

## Chapter 584: Critters of the City

### Critters of the City

The hour was late when Martel, worn out after a long celebration, could finally stumble into bed. Despite this, he woke so early the sun had yet to rise. A look at his Khivan clock told him breakfast was at least an hour away. Unwilling to lie sleepless in bed for that long, he got up, washed and dressed himself, and left his room. He made his way to the kitchens, where familiar sounds and smells told him of work underway to feed the household.

As he entered, the kitchen servants all froze and stared at him. "Oh, sorry for interrupting. I know breakfast won't be ready any time soon, but I figured I'd leave the house early. Do you have anything to spare I can just grab? Some bread, cheese, cold meats?"

"We have the porridge that we ate for our breakfast," said the woman who Martel assumed was the cook. "If that'll do for a warm meal. It's simple fare, good master, for simple folk."

"I'm sure it's vastly better than what I eat each morning in camp," Martel assured her. "I'd be more than happy with that."

The woman filled a bowl with porridge and placed it on the table in the middle of the room along with a spoon. Smiling in gratitude, Martel sat down. He used a bit of magic to heat up the porridge from being tepid and began to eat.

A kitchen girl of some twelve years, holding a knife and a potato in her hands, stared at him. "Are you the wizard who fought all those knights yesterday?"

"Alyssa! Do not bother the guest."

"It's fine," Martel told her. "I fought three of them, if that's what you mean."

"But you're sitting here, eating in the kitchens like we do. So aren't you noble like them?"

Martel shook his head, busy shovelling food into his mouth.

"Why are you allowed that? Once, I ran into a nobleman, and even though it didn't hurt him none, I still got slapped for it."

"Alyssa! Focus on your potatoes!"

Martel finished up his meal and looked at the girl. "Some are commoners, some are nobles. I'm a mage, and that puts me somewhere in between, I guess."

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Afterwards, Martel collected his warm clothing, and left the house. He set a course towards the centre of the city, though he walked past the Lyceum this time and continued to the market district. Even in winter, stalls and vendors filled the squares and streets between. Many of them hawked their goods at Martel, though he ignored them for now; he had another errand in mind before making any purchases. Thus, he walked onwards until he reached The Golden Goose.

Inside, the place was quiet. The staff sat at the different tables, eating their breakfast. That included the resident acting troupe, and when they recognised Martel, they waved eagerly and greeted him. Martel smiled in response as his gaze fell on each of them, from the young boy, Ian, to the storytellers and actors before finally reaching Regnar. The hedge mage got on his feet and threw out his arms. "Martel, champion of our theatre!" After they embraced, he gestured towards the table. "Please, join us!"

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"I have eaten already, and I only came to briefly speak with you." He looked towards the others. "But I promise I shall return another time, and we can all enjoy ourselves together."

"Consider me curious," Regnar admitted with an expression that matched his words. He looked at the others. "If you'll pardon us, the mages have great and secret things to discuss," he declared dramatically. Together, the two mages sat down at another table. "Good to see you, lad. What's on your mind?"

"I just wanted the lay of the land in Morcaster. Specifically the underworld. Anything I should worry about?"

Regnar scratched the back of his head. "Surprisingly, things have been rather quiet since you left. Or perhaps the two are connected," he added with a sly smile. "The new master of the harbour keeps to herself, mostly just trying to keep order within her own ranks. I guess she learned from her predecessors." He gave Martel a pointed look.

The young wizard shrugged. Vitus was the one who had picked a fight with him.

"There's also a new fellow in the bridge district, though not with the same heft that Lady Pearl had. Ironside's got free use of the bridge gates, leaving him happy."

"What about the copper lanes?"

"Kerra has that locked down tight as ever. Why?"

Martel shook his head. "No particular reason. I don't intend to tangle with any of them. I just wanted to be sure I wasn't walking into a spider's web."

Regnar's sly smile returned. "And here I thought the Firebrand was planning his next move."

"The who?"

"That's you, isn't it? The details of the story fit. Fire-touched battlemage in the house of Legate Fontaine? That's the girly you are friends with. I know how to put two and two together."

"How did you hear about that? It only happened last evening!"

"Exactly. Rumour has had all night to spread. Plenty of time. Why do you seem upset?"

"It's just a ridiculous nickname, that's all. It doesn't even make sense. A firebrand has nothing to do with actual fire."

Regnar shrugged. "Who cares? As long as it sounds good."

In Martel's opinion, it did not.

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Martel took his leave from The Golden Goose and returned to the marketplace. With plenty of coin in his pocket, he made a spree of purchases. Lots of food, but also woollen socks and caps, along with scarves; lastly, he bought various medicinal herbs. His bag full and slung over his shoulder, Martel left the market district and went to the copper lanes.

Everything looked the same, neither better nor worse. Few people were on the streets, given the season, though the old houses of the district provided little relief from the cold. Taking the same route he had traversed dozens of times, Martel went to the home of Weasel and his gang.

The backdoor burst open as the children saw him coming down the alley. Despite the cold, several of them rushed outside, walking on the snow in bare feet. Martel hurried to walk inside, more for their sake than his own, compelling them to follow him back in. The clamour of their questions surrounded him, especially concerning the contents of his bag. Laughing, he satisfied their curiosity by emptying everything onto the crooked table in the room.

The children shrieked in joy, but they maintained discipline. The eldest of them sorted out the different items by type and began distributing according to need.

From the upper floor, Weasel appeared. Their eyes briefly met before Martel continued to look around, making observations of everything in the room. It troubled him to notice that the children did not appear to have grown much, even though a year had passed since he last saw them.

The little chief came down the stairs and approached Martel. "You're different."

"How so?" Around them, the children began eating; some of them brushed away the melting snow from their feet before they put the new socks on.

"You look over your shoulder now. You watch the shadows. One might almost take you for a child of the copper lanes." Wiesel looked up at the mage with an expression he could not read.

"Where is Sparrow?" Martel had seen no sign of his erstwhile apprentice.

"She's out doing a job. Won't be back tonight. I'll tell her you stopped by."

Martel looked at the other children, gauging their response. None of them seemed perturbed, suggesting Weasel was telling the truth. His eyes fell on the large rock he had once enchanted for the children. "How about I provide you with a little heat? And this one will last longer than winter, probably years. I've gotten better." Martel winked at the children, who made various outbursts of delight. Sitting down, Martel began weaving an enchantment.

## Chapter 585: Old Plays in New Bottles

### Old Plays in New Bottles

Martel took it easy for most of the next day, but when evening approached, he and Eleanor crossed the city to reach the market district, following the same route Martel had taken the day before, going to the same destination. At this hour, The Golden Goose bustled with life and light, and the two mages swiftly made their way inside.

"There they are!" Maximilian greeted them loudly, cutting through some of the noise. By the look of his red cheeks, he was already a few cups ahead of them. They joined him and made their way to three seats kept reserved in front of the stage; it paid to have friends among the performers.

Idle talk continued for a little while, mostly about the same topics as explored on the night of the solstice celebration, until the actors emerged on the stage. The storyteller stepped forward, beckoning for silence in the room. "Friends, I bid you welcome to the tale... of the Firebrand!"

Martel began to sink down into his seat.

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Martel found himself perplexed as the play unfolded. Based on the title and his conversation yesterday with Regnar, he had initially assumed this was somehow related to his duel at the solstice feast. But the story on the stage had nothing to do with any of that or him. It told the tale of a wizard going through various adventures, fantastical in nature and far removed from Morcaster. But why the title? Clearly this was not a brand-new play – the acting troupe could hardly have put this together with a day's notice. Yet neither could the title be coincidence.

It finally dawned on Martel that this was probably an old play they had simply repurposed, giving it a new title and adjusting a few lines. Ever the opportunists, they had taken advantage of the city being fascinated by gossip to attract an audience.

Having solved the mystery, Martel was able to actually focus on the story and enjoy it. The tale was unfamiliar to him, whether in this new version or however it had been previously. But the performance was great as always, and Regnar's magical effects work perfectly to create a spectacle. Mostly wind and weather, with rumblings of thunder or a flash of lightning appearing to frighten those in the front rows.

His magical senses far more honed, Martel could anticipate every spell as it was being cast; what effect it carried, where on the stage it would appear, and so on. At the same time, he could not necessarily recreate them himself. There seemed to be a bit of hedge trickery involved; magic that was not taught at the Lyceum.

As the play ended, the audience cheered loudly, Martel among them. Eleanor gave him an elbow. "Someone is famous now."

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"I think we both know whatever just happened on that stage has no connection to reality. Still, it was a good show."

They fetched themselves another round, and eventually, the acting troupe joined them. Music was played with dancing and merriment to follow, reminding Martel of his most joyous times spent in Morcaster. No intrigues or ulterior motives, no veiled insults or disguised contempt, nor complex rules of etiquette and social standing. Just the company and companionship of friends.

"It's good to see you laugh," Regnar said to Martel as they sat on a bench, surrounded by revelry. "I heard about those who come back from serving with the Tenth."

"Yeah." Uncomfortable thoughts came to Martel, but surrounded by light and laughter, they did not take root.

"You had any trouble? In the copper lanes."

"No. It doesn't look like anybody cares about my presence, which is how I prefer it."

Regnar shrugged. "Battlemages have a fearsome reputation, those fire-touched more so. And you live up to it, lad."

"Pretty sure that reputation is your doing, given your whole performance tonight," Martel retorted.

The hedge mage scoffed. "That was just a bit of theatre. Exaggerated storytelling. You can't see yourself, lad, the way you enter a room, and your eyes watch everyone. You got a hard face for someone so young."

"Well, I'd exchange it for another, if they'd let me."

Regnar laughed half-heartedly. "Well, in lieu of that, look for the things that might soften up those features a little."

"I'll keep an eye out." Martel was only paying attention with one ear, as he had been glancing around at the crowd; realising he was doing exactly what Regnar had just said, he got irritated with himself and stopped.

Silence between them followed for a moment. The hedge mage looked at Eleanor and Maximilian dancing. "Old men sit on benches. You should be up with them."

Martel looked at his friends. "I don't want to get in the way."

"Lad, if not now, when? We had this talk once before, as I recall. But I don't mind giving you another opportunity. Theodore!" Regnar cupped his mouth with his hands to address the lute-playing storyteller across the noisy room. "Can you play 'The Maid in the Meadow' for me?"

The minstrel acquiesced, and a new tune began to play. Martel felt a push in his back, and while he could have resisted, he allowed the momentum to send him towards the middle of the room, where Eleanor grabbed him and whirled him around.

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The moon shone on near deserted streets as the battlemage and his protector began their walk home. This was the most fun Martel had experienced all year, making him forget his troubles. At the same time, he felt spent, having spoken to so many people over the last several days. He looked forward to one or two quiet days; his lodgings at the home of House Fontaine were big enough to easily accommodate this.

A shadow emerged from an alley to Martel's right. Summoning his shield, Martel's next thought was to fling a fire bolt at his attacker. Before he could do this, Eleanor grabbed him by the wrist and held him back.

The shape entered the streetlight, showing him to be an ordinary day labourer, making his way home on staggered steps. He stared at Martel with the eyes of a drunkard as he stumbled past them, unaware of what Martel had nearly done.

"You are fine," Eleanor spoke to him in a soothing voice. "We are in Morcaster. You are fine."

Martel dismissed his magic and took a deep breath. "I'm fine," he told himself. They continued onwards.

## Chapter 586: The Burdens of Duty

### The Burdens of Duty

Although waking early again next morning, Martel stayed in his room and waited for breakfast. He did not leave for a while even after he had eaten, feeling worn out. Late nights and early mornings had taken their toll, and he found himself lacking sleep.

When he finally ventured outside his chamber, he did not go far. He made his way to the library, and he felt a little relieved that nobody else was present. Just the thought of polite conversation with people he did not know well tired him further. Instead, he looked through the different volumes, getting a sense of the knowledge collected in this room. Much of it focused on history, which fit the character of the legate.

Martel spent a while reading about the past days of the Aquilan Empire, brought to an end by the destruction of Archen with its cataclysmic ramifications. To his amusement, the name of Fontaine appeared in one place, mentioned as a commander during a battle.

Having finished the book, Martel read another about the early history of Aster, back when it was little more than the city-state of Morcaster. He was surprised to learn how the city had in its early days been ruled by a council of elders, known as the Senate. It had been abolished when the city was conquered by Aquila, more than half a millennium ago.

Martel had never learned much history, even if Father Andrew had made attempts to remedy this. Since Martel had grown up in the Empire, as had his parents and grandparents, it was easy to feel as if Aster had always existed to rule over them; even if by now he knew better.

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Making his way through a third book, Martel did not notice somebody enter. "Martel?"

He almost slammed the book shut, as if caught doing something forbidden. He looked up at Eleanor and relaxed. "Hey."

She walked over and sat down next to him on the couch. "I was wondering if we could talk about last night."

"Sure." To Martel, it had been a wonderful evening, but her tone of voice suggested something was wrong.

"You seemed agitated when we walk home. When that man suddenly stepped out in front of us."

"A soldier's instincts, I guess."

"And also during the solstice celebration. The servant who dropped the tray. You were ready to throw a spell at him." She looked at him intently.

Martel wanted to brush it off and dismissed her concerns, but he could never lie to her. "I know this seems silly, but in that very moment, I could have sworn I heard a Khivan musket being fired. I know the two sounds are nothing alike. It's probably because I don't sleep as much as I should."

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"I heard it too." Her voice came so quietly, Martel almost thought he misheard her. "My hand reached for my sword. I plain forgot where I was."

"I can't stop looking around at people. Whenever there's a crowd, my eyes keep moving from one person to the next, as if searching for something, but I don't know what."

"I wake early every morning. I'm tired during the day, but if I lie down to rest, it does not seem to help."

Martel felt his throat almost constrict just at the thought. "The smell of charred meat... It makes me think of corpses. Burnt bodies." He looked at her. "We are so far from the front. Why does it feel like it's everywhere we go?"

He could see her trying to contain her emotions. "I am not sure. My father says that some soldiers get accustomed to a life in war and find it difficult to return to peace. But I've never heard him speak of any of this."

"I don't want to be accustomed to war."

"Look, we have a lot of time left in Morcaster. I am sure these feelings will fade, and we shall feel much more at ease. This is just a period of adjustment," Eleanor claimed.

"And then? We have to go back. If this is how one summer has been, imagine the next nineteen." The thought made Martel feel restless, and he had to repress the urge to get up and walk around.

"There is no reason to assume the war will continue that long. And we can bring our case to the legate," Eleanor suggested, though her voice sounded almost feeble. "He must understand that we cannot be expected to constantly seek out the enemy, day after day."

"Why should the war stop? Does it affect any of the people who would make that decision? The Tenth Legion bleeds, but does anybody else? And I think we both know how likely the legate is to listen to our petitions," Martel remarked bitterly.

Her voice quivered, and it looked as if tears might force their way onto her face. "But what else can we do?"

The thought immediately came to Martel, yet he hesitated to speak it. "They send us out of camp alone... We could bring extra provisions. If we don't return, they'll never know what happened to us."

Her eyes widened in shock. "Martel, that is desertion! Dereliction of duty! The dishonour it would bring upon my family!"

Martel knew this would be her reaction, and he could not blame her. The same sense of duty, which had made her choose to become protector to her friend, likewise kept her loyal to her family and the Empire itself. "I know. Forget I spoke."

They sat in silence, neither of them looking at the other. Eventually, a bell rang to announce that supper was about to be served.

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The meal progressed with mostly Lady Fontaine and Genevieve speaking, along with the occasional remark made by Eleanor. The legate was absent, though Martel did not know why, nor did he ask. The thought of making conversation, no matter the topic, felt like a heavier burden than he could bear at the moment.

Near the end of the meal, the master of the house suddenly appeared. The dirt on his boots showed that he had arrived from the outside, and probably come here straight from his carriage. They all stood up in greeting as he entered and only sat down once he was seated as well.

"You have been working long hours today," said the lady of the house.

"Yes," he replied after brief hesitation, which struck Martel as odd. The legate looked at his eldest daughter and his guest. "News arrived this afternoon, of an unhappy nature. I am sorry to tell you this, but a Khivan army has crossed the Savena River north of Esmouth. In light of this, I can only assume you will both be immediately recalled."

Chapter 587: In the Eyes of the World

In the Eyes of the World

The sounds of the world faded away. Martel did not hear whatever the legate said afterwards, nor the responses from any of the other family members. He ended up getting a summary from Eleanor afterwards.

Making use of the unusually harsh winter, the Khivans had crossed the river to enter the frozen wetlands north of Esmouth, lightly watched at present by the legions. At the same time, their ships had struck to chase away any Imperial vessels guarding the delta, made easy by most warships being in port in Morcaster for refitting. As a result, the Tenth Legion was isolated, and the mages could not return oversea.

Reinforcements were being prepared in Morcaster, which would march overland to join the Thirteenth Legion, currently positioned north of Esmouth to shadow the Khivan army. Most likely, he and Eleanor would march with the reinforcements, which were due to leave in a few days. Martel had one full day left in Morcaster.

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Martel slept even less that night, and when he did, his dreams were full of forests and frantic running. He woke up feeling hot, and for a moment, he feared that he might have ignited a magical fire in his sleep. Fortunately, his bed and everything else seemed unburnt.

He left before breakfast, hoping fresh air or just a change in scenery would clear his mind. He drifted down the streets for a long time until he realised that he had unconsciously approached the Lyceum. He did not have the stomach for conversation – saying farewell and explaining to people why he was already leaving – but the familiar sight of the walls made him feel a little better, and so he continued in that direction.

He entered the castle, looking at the great clock in the entrance hall. Memories of happier times, if bittersweet, lifted his mood a little. He crossed the hall to enter the western courtyard, figuring it would be empty on a cold winter's morning, which proved to be true.

He walked over to sit by the foot of the statue, leaning up against the pedestal. He remembered his first days at the Lyceum, being here while practising water magic. As he looked up to see the chin of the statue, he recalled his last days, fighting alongside the legendary Atreus. It all seemed a fever dream, buried underneath the memories of scores of battles since. Feeling cold from sitting on the ground, he got back up.

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Although Martel felt unsure whether it had ever helped him, he decided to visit a temple. Since he was in Morcaster, he decided to go to the greatest one, the temple of Sol. He followed the main road as it wound its way north towards the district of the clergy. As he approached, more and more people on the street were dressed similar to him, though the robes usually had a single colour. The flaming embroidery on his set him apart, and it made people shy away, avoiding him as possible.

Eventually, the great towers of the Basilica came into view. While beautiful as ever, the sight did not improve Martel's mood, but that was not his purpose either. He entered the great temple and made his way through the crowd, who quickly stepped out of his way. Reaching one of the altars, Martel struggled to find the words for a suitable prayer. He took what money he had in his pockets and placed it on the pedestal. "Please, protect Eleanor and me. And if a choice must be made, look to her first," he mumbled, hoping that would suffice.

His offering done, he could leave, but every footstep felt so heavy, all of a sudden. He had no purpose, no destination beckoning him other than back to his current lodgings and wait for the

morrow. Delaying that, he stepped out of the way and found a more secluded spot in the temple, where he sank down on the floor, leaning his back against the wall.

Closing his eyes, he tried to let go of the passage of time. Yet the constant sounds of people nearby, their footsteps and mutterings, intruded on him. It made him feel vulnerable, being unable to scout around him, especially as he knew others were close by.

"May I join you?"

Martel opened his eyes to find that the voice belonged to a priest, maybe forty years of age. "I suppose."

He sat down next to Martel, though keeping a few paces of distance between them. "I'm not the best with this, but you strike me as a wizard. More than that, a battlemage."

"That's right. You can tell?"

"We have many veterans who come to the temple grounds. Some seek amelioration for their old injuries, others simply have nowhere else they may hope for a meal. Sometimes, I come across them in a situation similar to yours, trying to keep the world a little at bay. I'm Father Mark, by the way."

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"Martel of Engby."

"If it would ease your burdens to share them, I am happy to listen."

Martel doubted that, but he realised that he would most likely never see this priest again. There was no harm in trying. "Tomorrow, I return to war. I'm tired of it. I'm sick of the killing, all done while achieving nothing. They say magic is a gift, but the way everything has turned out, it feels like a curse." Now that he had begun, Martel found it difficult to stop. "I didn't even realise I felt this way until I returned to Morcaster. Out there, I never had time to feel anything. Every moment spent in safety was used for sleep. And now I don't know what's worse," he admitted. "Returning to war, or feeling like I never left the war in the first place."

A moment passed before the priest spoke. "Having seen so many of its victims, having heard the stories, I won't pretend that war is some great and noble purpose. If it were up to me, the fighting would end today. While I don't have your gift of magic, I sympathise with how you feel. How it has been twisted."

"Yeah." Feeling embarrassed about his diatribe, Martel elected for a short response.

"But I'm trying to find the good in everything where possible. Sometimes, our sacrifice, whether willing or not, can help others, despite our own pain."

"I'm pretty sure me fighting on the front won't help anyone, one way or the other."

"I said that I would not make such an argument. But for instance, do you know why this great temple was built on this exact spot?"

"I don't."

"Many centuries ago, it is said that people lived in dark and terrible times. Famine and war plagued the land. From his seat in the heavens, Sol tore out his own eye and hurled it through the spheres like a flaming star to strike the ground right where we are. It burned with a fire of its own, day and night, and still burns to this day, they say. Although painful to himself, he gave this as the gift to his people – a reminder of light even in the darkest times."

"Are you saying that thing is still here? Like a relic?"

Father Mark nodded. "The Eye of Sol, it is called. I have never seen it – such a precious item is kept locked and guarded at all times. But it exists."

While that it invoked Martel's curiosity, he failed to see the relevance of the story. "I don't think that's got anything to do with me, though."

"Well, it reminds me of a contemporary tale. Perhaps you are familiar with it, as it involves another battlemage. You may know him, given there are few of you. His name escapes me, but I heard about him from the veterans."

"Heard what?"

"Some days ago, he fought a public duel against three praetorian knights."

Martel had to struggle to keep his face blank.

"Now, I don't know why this fight happened, nor whether this battlemage feels the same way you do. But I can tell you that the news did much to raise the spirits of those poor veterans I see every day, always so dejected and downtrodden."

For the first time, Martel turned his head to look at the priest. "Really? Why?"

"Because they have returned to a city that rejects them, after spilling their blood to defend it. To them, that battlemage is one of theirs, just as the praetorians represent the city. To know that one of their own bested three of the emperor's finest – to them, that is a light in the dark."

Good for them, though it did little to raise Martel's spirits. "I should get going."

"Of course, my son. Sol's blessings upon you."

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The legate of Legio I Urbis sat behind his desk in his study, studying columns of numbers that detailed soldiers and equipment. The door opened to grant his daughter admittance. "You asked for me, father?"

He nodded. "Four centuriae have been gathered and are ready to depart with you tomorrow. By chance, the legion prefect of the Thirteenth was also in Morcaster, and he will travel with you. I advocated that soldiers from the First Legion should be released to go with you, but between Khivans and veterans in the city, the military magistrate is nervous about riots."

Eleanor bowed her head. "I understand."

"Together, the Thirteenth and the Tenth should outnumber the Khivan invaders, though how you will be able to link up or coordinate an assault... Well, I am not the commander in the field. But be mindful of Legate Aurelius."

"The legate of the Thirteenth?"

"Yes. While she is generally capable, she never struck me as someone to think quickly on her feet. This situation will have rattled her."

"I will keep that in mind."

"Very well." The legate paused for a moment. "Eleanor... I'm getting you transferred to another legion. It is slow work as I have no grounds for a formal request, but at least your future union with the House of Marche helps to give me the necessary sway."

"I see. To which legion are we being transferred?"

He shook his head. "Only you. Your time with the northerner will come to an end soon. You must have known this was inevitable."

"But he has proven himself," Eleanor impressed upon her father. "Just the other night in this very house! If you disagree with that, why would you orchestrate that situation?"

"I was simply salvaging what I could from your short-sighted decisions," the legate growled. "It repaired some of the damage done to your reputation, hopefully allowing me to push through your transfer to a more suitable posting."

"Martel is the strongest battlemage this Empire has. He is not only fire-touched, he is experienced far beyond his years. I belong by his side," she claimed.

"Do not be ridiculous. I do not question his skills or contribution, but he is a Tyrian pleb, and you are the daughter of a patrician house. He is not suitable company for you, least of all in Morcaster. I will not debate this further, as there was never anything to discuss in the first place. Go, make your preparations. You have a long march ahead tomorrow."

"Yes, father," Eleanor responded, turning on her heel to leave the study.

## Chapter 588: Connections

### Connections

Early next morning, a carriage awaited in the courtyard. The doors to the house opened and revealed two mages leaving, accompanied by servants carrying their luggage. Martel would have preferred leaving in the same manner as they had arrived, in a simple cart while hauling their own belongings, but it hardly mattered. This was a day of dejection no matter what.

Sitting inside the carriage as it rumbled down the street towards the fortress of Saint Marcellus, Martel looked at his companion, who in turn sat staring out the window. As much as he felt sorry for himself, he should not forget that others were in the same boat. "I'm sorry our leave was cut short. You hardly had time to spend with your family," he told her.

Eleanor looked at him with a sad smile. "I'm still lucky to have seen them at all. I wish you could have been afforded the same right, but..."

"I know." There would hardly have been time to reach Engby and return, even if their leave had not been disrupted. And it would have required further permission for him to leave Morcaster, as prefects were meant to be readily available, in case of a situation like the one currently unfolding.

Martel had intended to write his mother while he was in the capital, as he had assumed he would have plenty of time for this. Now he figured it was best to wait; he preferred to write once he could explain that the Khivan incursion had been driven back. Even in remote Nordmark, rumours and tidings of war spread, and his mother was bound to hear about the invasion eventually. It would be best if he could calm her concerns; he only hoped that the future aligned with what he intended to write.

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They drove into the yard of the fortress; Martel's noticed at least several centuriae of soldiers gathered, along with their lower officers. He also spotted several horses and realised one of them was for him. The joy of travelling overland, though at least he would be spared seasickness.

"Sir Fontaine, Sir Martel!" A mageknight in his thirties walked over to greet them by hand. Behind them, the carriage drove off. "I am Sir Godwin of Chesham, legion prefect of the Thirteenth. It's a pleasure to meet prefects of a neighbouring legion," he said with a smile. "A shame these are the circumstances, but I reckon we'll soon have the Khivans on the run, and the pair of you reunited with the Tenth."

A few things stood out to Martel. This mageknight did not have the same polished speech as most of them, and his name suggested no kinship with Aquilan nobility or Asterian patrician houses. In other words, he was a mageknight because he had the gift for it rather than because familial pressure forced him down that route. It did make Martel feel a little more at ease knowing their companion on the road came from a background similar to his own. "A pleasure," he said simply, shaking the prefect's hand.

"We are ready to make our departure when you are," Eleanor told him.

"In that case, no reason to delay. Centurions!" Godwin spoke, shouting the last word. "Formations! We march!"

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They marched through the city, attracting looks as they went; news had spread through the city by now, and everyone could guess why these soldiers went east. After passing through the bridge gate, they crossed the river to follow the Imperial road, snaking its way through the provinces all the way to the front.

When they made camp, Godwin invited his fellow prefects to join him for the evening meal. It turned out, regardless of any simple origins, he had grown accustomed to certain comforts; a servant accompanied him on the road, cooking supper. Considering travel rations and both his own and Eleanor's meagre skills, Martel made no complaints – until he realised one of the dishes was roasted meat.

He managed to restrain himself from any unpleasant reaction, but he refused the meat when offered, eating only the potatoes.

"Sir Martel, is something the matter?" The legion prefect looked at him as he conspicuously avoided the mutton.

"The food in Morcaster is a bit too rich for my stomach, after months of camp fare," he lied. "I'm sticking to simpler food for now, if you don't mind."

"More for the rest of us. I thought maybe it was due to a religious vow," the mageknight considered. "I know some of the orders refrain from eating meat of any kind."

"Sir Godwin, what do you know of the situation?" Eleanor interjected.

"Very little, unfortunately. I imagine your father knows as much and would already have told you."

"Even so, in case he neglected to mention something, I should like to hear every detail you possess."

"Of course. Several Khivan regiments have managed to cross the river, using the frozen marches to establish themselves on the Imperial road into Esmouth. I have no knowledge of numbers beyond that," the mageknight related. "Artillery has been spotted, which no doubt will be used in a siege against Esmouth. It also makes a direct assault by either the Tenth or the Thirteenth Legion a daunting prospect. I imagine the legates are trying to communicate and coordinate such an assault. We may arrive and find that they have already succeeded and driven the enemy back."

That seemed like better fortune than they could hope for, but at least there was the possibility. Facing a Khivan army with full artillery seemed dreadful, to say the least. Martel thought back on the assault against the outpost, where just three cannons had been terrifying. And the thought of fighting an actual battle between armies touched him with fear. He could handle skirmishes, where his abilities allowed him to sense the presence of everyone else, and he knew what he and Eleanor were up against. On a battlefield, with cannons and muskets firing everywhere – even magic did not seem like it would suffice.

"Your commander is Legate Aurelius, is that right?" Eleanor asked. "Would she be a member of House Aurelius, like the military magistrate?"

Godwin nodded. "The very one. Are you familiar with them?"

"Only by name. I look forward to meeting her and hearing the plan to stop this incursion." She looked at Martel. "We should sleep."

The battlemage inclined his head at the legion prefect. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"Of course. We have many days ahead together, and we shall soon fight side by side. Malac protect us all."

Eleanor bowed her head as well. "Indeed."

They walked back to their own tent, of the same primitive make as what they had used when sleeping in the outpost. Martel looked at her. "You asked about the legate for a reason. I can tell when your innocent questions are not so innocent after all."

She unbuckled her belt and began removing her armour. "Just a thought. I used to think legates were chosen for being the most able commander among a legion's prefects. But after our time serving under Legate Varus, I do wonder if his friendship with Duke Cheval weighed more heavily than any considerations of talent."

"And now you wonder if a relative of the military magistrate might have had that same advantage."

She exhaled slowly. "We will find out."

Chapter 589: XIII

XIII

They marched for twenty days until they reached the camp of the Thirteenth Legion. It had been set up as could be expected, with ditches and palisades providing defences, while the usual camp followers had settled some miles away, probably due to the proximity of enemy forces.

Plenty of guards kept watch, but once they passed through the wooden gate, they found the camp within to be ordinary. Regardless of the threat of an attack, soldiers still needed a place to sleep or fire pits for making all meals, clothes had to be washed and boots cleaned, and so on. Considering how many days it would have taken for a message to reach Morcaster, they had probably been encamped in this place for a month or so. Which begged the question why they had not been able to drive the Khivans back.

Godwin separated from them, returning to his legate. The camp prefect of the Thirteenth appeared to direct the reinforcements as to where they might raise their tents, providing a location for Martel and Eleanor as well. Glad to be done with the march, even if it meant that danger now lurked nearby, the two mages found their allotted space and made their temporary home. They caught a few glances from the soldiers nearby, who probably wondered about the presence of two prefects. Their tent rested on muddy dirt, caused by the ground sloping slightly towards their corner of the camp, making rainwater drain towards them; it felt like they had been relegated to the slums of the camp, so to say.

After a while, as they sat tending to their equipment, Eleanor looked up before nudging Martel with her elbow. He followed her gaze to see a prefect striding towards them; not only that, he wielded a staff. Martel could guess that like his own, it had a ruby in the tip.

They both got up and inclined their heads in greeting as the battlemage of the Thirteenth reached them. "You've arrived," he spoke. Martel guessed him to be somewhere in his thirties, probably close to the end of his deployment. That suggested skill, surviving so many years in the profession that claimed its victims young.

"I am Sir Fontaine, and this is Sir Martel," Eleanor introduced them.

"Sir Lennard," he replied without looking at her, keeping his eyes on Martel, which felt odd – almost like a challenge. "Sir Godwin mentioned you. Said you roughed up three praetorian knights, earning yourself a nickname in the process."

Martel dearly hoped the nickname would soon be forgotten. "It was a duel for entertainment's value, at the solstice celebration."

"I could have done the same." He spoke with a flat voice, as if stating a simple fact, though a slightly contemptuous smile made it sound like an insult.

Martel was not in the mood to pick a fight, but he found it strange to be antagonised by another battlemage on their very first meeting. Demonstratively, he turned his head west towards Morcaster. "All the praetorians are in that direction. I won't stop you."

The story has been taken without consent; if you see it on Amazon, report the incident.

Sir Lennard made no reply other than the continued expression on his face; barely dignifying Eleanor with a look, he turned and left.

"He seems pleasant." Eleanor looked at the battlemage walking away. "Perhaps we should repeat his words to the mageknights of his legion. I wonder if they have the same confidence in his abilities to defeat three of them at the same time."

Martel sat down, returning his attention to his equipment. "Thinking about that, say you were to duel him or any battlemage really, what would you do?"

She took her place next to him, picking up her cloth and the oil for her blade. "Draw my dagger and throw it at their face. Even if it does not hurt them, it will buy me time to get close."

Martel smiled as he sorted through his small collection of jars and remedies, ensuring none had come unsealed during their travels.

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A legionary appeared, just as the sun was setting and Martel had hoped to find sleep. "Prefects? Legate Aurelius summons you both."

The two mages exchanged looks and got their feet. "Take us to her," Eleanor directed.

They crossed the camp, walking slightly uphill to reach dry ground and the largest tent in camp. Still, it could hardly hold every prefect in the legion, so Martel assumed this was not a council of war as such, but simply the commander wishing to question them for one reason or another.

As they stepped inside, Martel saw one woman in uniform, who had to be the legate. Next to her stood Godwin, but the third person present made Martel blink in surprise; it was Wulfstan, the spy. Belatedly, he saluted the superior officer after seeing Eleanor do it.

"The battlemage of the Tenth and his protector," the legate murmured. She was around sixty and seemed what Martel had expected, gruff and direct. "I am told you have experience conducting raids on enemy supply lines."

"We've done it once," Martel muttered with a look at Wulfstan, recognising him to be the source of this information. "Sir."

"Good. The Khivans are still ferrying supplies across the river. Primarily munition and powder," the legate explained. On a table in the middle lay a map of the area. Her finger moved up and down the Savena River as she spoke. "Although they are now south of the wetlands, they are still transporting up north in that area, presumably keeping their distance from Esmouth and the Tenth. As we do not intend to give battle soon, I have decided the best use of your abilities is to send you into the marshes and destroy the Khivans' supply trains as best you can."

"You have not been able to establish communication with the Tenth Legion?" Eleanor asked.

We have not," Legate Aurelius replied curtly. "That is not your concern either. You have your orders – I expect you to move out tomorrow morning. The sooner you can disrupt their supply lines, the better."

"Yes, sir!"

"Yes, sir."

"Dismissed."

As the pair walked out, Wulfstan followed them. "I will have some useful equipment sent to you," he told them. "Brown cloaks, travel rations, and the like."

Martel looked at the spy, a little weary of him. He felt that on previous meetings, Wulfstan had questioned him under an innocent guise, only to use that information to plan out dangerous missions for him and Eleanor. It seemed an underhanded method, treating them like pawns. At the same time, Martel recognised they were on the same side, and intelligence could prove invaluable in this war.

"Very well." Eleanor gave him a nod, and the spy left them. She turned towards Martel. "We better sleep as much as we can." He could only agree with that.

## Chapter 590: Among the Reeds

### Among the Reeds

While Martel had his misgivings about the mission they have received, he could think of one positive: he and Eleanor would be on their own. Granted, it would only be until they returned, and it did entail them journeying into territory overrun by Khivans, but at least he would have a few days without suffering unwanted company. He also toyed with the idea that perhaps, their return to camp could be delayed. Given the situation, it should not be hard to come up with an explanation. Whether Eleanor would agree to such an idea... He would find out when he broached the subject.

They left early in the morning, even before dawn. This soon after winter solstice, the days were too short for everything that required doing. Thus, in the dark and cold, they packed some supplies and equipment; leaving their tent and bulkier belongings behind, they marched out of camp.

The Khivans held the area southeast, with the wetlands directly east of the Thirteenth Legion. While the Asterians conducted their own patrols to push the enemy back, the travelling pair had to consider the risk of encountering bands of Khivan soldiers, especially the closer they came to the river. To lessen this, although it nearly doubled their journey, they set a course northeast into the marshes, keeping many miles between themselves and the Khivan encampment. With brown cloaks

to make them less conspicuous, and Martel using his magical senses to search for nearby living creatures, they ventured into the wetlands.

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Winter's cold helped their progress, as the terrain was frozen, and they did not have to worry about finding their step. Still, their extended route meant that as the sun set, they were still far from the river. They found a small patch of land where they could make camp for the night, such as it were. Fire was obviously out of the question, and Martel could not make a quick enchantment either to provide them with heat; it would melt the ice that covered everything, leaving their bed rolls on the ground soaked. All they could do was eat some dried rations and take turns keeping watch while the other slept.

The night passed without events, and they continue onwards in the direction of the twilight, heralding the direction of the sun's rise. Neither of them spoke as they walked, and Martel maintained his vigilance using his magical sense; still, he found himself almost enjoying it all. The quiet company of the person he cared about most, walking in the wild far from any signs of war or even other humans, and with a beautiful sunrise in the distance guiding them.

Once during their progress, Eleanor broke the silence as they sat between reads. "Fortune has been with us. I would have assumed we would meet at least one Khivan patrol before we reached the river."

"Well, we haven't reached it yet. Don't skin the bear before it's dead."

She raised an eyebrow with a faint smile playing at her lips. "I love your quaint little sayings from Nordmark. I do worry though that the absence of the enemy means they have moved their supply lines further south. Otherwise, it is strange we have yet to see any sign of them."

"I'm sure we'll see more than enough of them soon." They finished their sparse meal and continued.

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Half the day had passed when they reached the river. They kept some distance to the bank, as getting close would make them visible, turning south to follow it until they might find their first target. Their progress became slow, as both were mindful that meeting Khivans was no longer a risk, but a certainty.

After another hour's march, Martel sensed it. In the distance ahead, through weeds and shrubs, the unmistakable heat of large creatures walking on two legs. He touched Eleanor on the shoulder, who knew what that signal meant. They both crouched low and carefully pushed forward, approaching the bank to get eyes on their enemy.

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A hundred paces downstream, they saw a barrage of considerable size along with a smaller boat, both of them pulled onto the bank. While a handful of Khivan stood guard, the same number of

soldiers was busy unloading supplies from the barge, moving them ashore, where others picked them up and placed them in the back of a cart.

Martel saw plenty of crates and sacks that he imagined contained food or other such basic supplies, but he also noticed barrels already placed in the cart; from what little he knew, that was how the Khivans stored their powder. Any kind of fire on them would cause the same reaction as during the raid he and Eleanor had conducted in the summer, beyond the outpost.

Eleanor turned to look at him, and he guessed she had made the same deduction. Rather than speak, she slowly formed the word 'how' with her lips.

Martel considered the situation. He could not reach out and simply ignite the barrels; distance, too much similar material in the vicinity, and the interference of humans made that impossible. Nor did he have any direct line of sight for a lightning bolt, assuming it would not lose power over such a distance. But he did have something else up his sleeve – or rather, in his belt.

He unclasped one pocket to pull out a fire pot. Inside the clay, a flammable liquid lay waiting, enchanted to explode once released. He made a throwing motion before offering the jar to Eleanor with a questioning expression. She accepted the pot, hefting it in her hand, and gave a nod. She looked at Martel, and he nodded as well in confirmation that she should proceed. Raising herself up to get into position, Eleanor hurled the fire pot with an empowered throw through the air. It landed exactly where it should, breaking as it struck the cart.

Nothing happened, except the entire Khivan band being alerted to something going on. Shouting in their own tongue, they all grabbed their weapons and scouted around, taking cover. Disappearing down between the reeds, Eleanor stared at Martel.

Praying he had done better work on the others, Martel took out another jar and offered it to her. With a doubtful look, she accepted the fire pot. This time, as she rose up, the Khivans spotted her. Several bullets flew through the air to strike her magical shield. Unfazed, she threw the jar as before, and it described a beautiful arc to land in the back of the cart. This time, as the clay broke, fire burst out in every direction.

Both the wizards dove back into hiding, knowing it was only a matter of time. They waited a few moments before a loud explosion tore through the area. Pieces of wood flew past them, and as Martel dared to look up, he saw bodies torn apart, including the horse that had been harnessed to the cart. But there was no time to consider the scenery or feel ill; they had to finish the fight while the last few Khivans were in disarray. Already, Eleanor rose from their spot, drawing her sword as she rushed forward.

Two shots rang out, both failing to make an impact thanks to her magical shield. Eleanor reached the nearest enemy, slicing him open; Martel unleashed his fire bolts on the other. However, the aftermath of the fiery explosion still affected him, and he could not rely on his ability to sense heat; his spells missed their mark. Fearful that he had failed Eleanor, he began to run forward to close the distance and ensure his next spell landed; it proved unnecessary as Eleanor sprinted across the small clearing to strike the other Khivan down. The fight was over.

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Martel walked along the edge of the small battlefield, using his magical sense to ensure nobody lurked in the surrounding reeds. Eleanor, meanwhile, did her customary destruction of any weapons. "Not a lot here," she remarked. "Not enough to supply a whole army. They must have other crossing points down the river."

"Probably, but there's nothing we can do about that. We announced our presence rather spectacularly, and they'll be wondering why these fellows aren't returning to camp."

"I know. It just feels like we accomplished little for all our troubles."

"We accomplished as much as we could have expected," Martel claimed. "We should leave. Go north and get out of reach of any Khivan patrols coming to hunt us down." And maybe he could persuade Eleanor that once they were safe, they should take their time making their way back to the camp of the Thirteen.

"Wait. Did you hear that?" Eleanor looked around. "It sounds like thunder in the distance, but the sky is clear..." She whipped her head around to look at Martel, as they both realised what it meant.

"Cannon fire," Martel mumbled. A battle was taking place.

Eleanor looked towards the west. "It is coming from this direction. The Khivans are fighting the Thirteenth."