

A foretelling of
A Fantasy Novel by James Shade

The Magistrate

Year 693

Chapter 1

Utopia and anarchy.

At seventy-one years of age, Quintus Magellis Baelarico had lived to see them both. He had seen his beloved Diathilos rise to become a sprawling empire that was the pinnacle of civilized society in the entire world of Dreganus. He had also seen it plunged into the chaos and anarchy that now ravaged the land. The splendor that was Diathilos fell prey to the scourges of decadence and decay. And though its history had spanned a mere one hundred eighty six years, it went before its time. Diathilos had so much to offer the world. If only those who had served it hadn't been so greedy, selfish and corrupt.

Quintus had been one of those servants, though he liked to think he had led a much more honest life in his service to the empire. His position as chief magistrate demanded that he be righteous and lawful at all times. But alas, some of those times saw him embroiled in the aristocratic bureaucracy that was the royal grandeur of Diathilos. It was then that he'd had to compromise and pass judgments that he was less than proud of.

But, no matter. Those days were over. Now survival was all that remained. After the fall, many of his countrymen had fled to the north, settling in either Gylanth or Armandia. The more foolish had stayed, in a vain attempt to carve out some sort of meager existence in the razed nation.

Quintus had been one of those fools.

He had far too much pride to go easily or quickly. For most of his adulthood, Quintus had wealth, power and influence, and at this stage in his life, in this setting, those memories and trappings were worth holding onto. They were all he had left. They were everything.

Well, almost everything. The boy on his left, helping Quintus walk, was Naleth Orië, though he could hardly be considered a boy any longer. Naleth had come all the way from Tar Kezra, far to the east, at the age of sixteen, just to serve as a clerk in Judge Baelarico's court. His exuberance, honesty and faith in Amitar, the God of Justice, reminded Quintus of himself as a youth. Naleth worked hard and never complained, an admirable trait that he had retained to this day. Quintus had never given the boy much thought or attention, but, on one occasion, shortly after his arrival at court, did inspire Naleth to pursue his aspirations of becoming a magistrate.

That was six years ago.

And so, after only two years of exemplary service, the empire collapsed and Naleth, like many others, had nowhere to go. Attempting a trip back home had been, and was still, too dangerous. He had of course sent word to his family but, not surprisingly, even after four years, he had heard nothing. His optimism, of course, told him that the letter simply hadn't reached Tar Kezra, but Quintus, as gently as possible, had tried to impress upon Naleth the fact that his parents and siblings were probably missing or dead. Nonetheless, Naleth had stayed on with his judge and mentor, offering his services as personal assistant. Considering the fact that the rest of his staff had fled, Quintus had little choice but to accept the boy's offer. Since then, he had come to rely on Naleth greatly, for emotional as well as physical support.

Quintus still held his magistrate's staff in his right hand, leaning on it ever more heavily in these last few trying years. This was his badge of office and a testament to the prominence of his station. Made of a smooth, dark mahogany, its bottom was capped by a mallet-head of brass, which produced a thundering CRACK when pounded against the marble floors of the courts of Diathilos. At the top, a downward pointing silver sword, with stylized Scales of Justice as a pommel and crosspiece, formed the head. This symbol of Amitar added another twelve inches to its already impressive seven foot height, and was resplendent in any setting. Both the staff and its bearer commanded respect wherever they went, though now, both were a little worse for wear. Quintus noticed how worn its finish had become, as well as the nicks and scratches that now covered its once polished surface. The symbolism was not lost on the magistrate, as he used the staff to poke through a pile of marble fragments, once a statue of some imperial dignitary. As a judge, he would regularly sift through the facts of his cases searching for the truth. Now, he sifted through the rubble of his homeland, searching for any remnants of his glorious past that could be salvaged.

But, he was also searching for something else...

"Come, magistrate," ordered Dorian, "we must be well away from here before dusk."

"At once, Captain Petronus," Quintus acquiesced. He trusted the former legionnaire implicitly, as he had found that the soldier had the same sense of duty Quintus felt in himself. If Dorian Petronus said it was time to move on, then one should make haste immediately. "Attend me, boy."

Naleth offered his young, strong arm to help Quintus up from his kneeling position, taking no offense at the nickname the old judge had used, if only out of habit. He knew that his mentor had every respect for him, and in fact, thought of Naleth as a son. Naleth didn't mind filling that role, believing that his presence was a gift to the venerable judge in his twilight years, allowing him to satisfy an unfulfilled ambition in the man's life that had been preempted by his honorable

service to the empire. The magistrate had no children of his own, having dedicated his life, at a very young age, to the pursuit of law and justice.

Naleth led Quintus to his horse, which was being quietly groomed and attended by the lovely Spiretta. Naleth, and for that matter, the rest of the party, knew little about her, save that she had been a horsemaster in the southern city of Xin Tara. Her beauty belied her age, though the consensus held that she was about ten years older than Naleth. Her strong, silent demeanor, combined with raven hair and a healthy physique, was enough to make even Captain Petronus shy when she was near. But it was her affinity with animals and knowledge of the wilderness that made her invaluable to the small, ragged band.

Spiretta held the black steed steady as Naleth helped Quintus into the saddle.

“Thank you both,” offered Quintus with a tired huff.

“Gladly, magistrate,” replied Spiretta, graciously and with a slight bow of the head.

Quintus was secretly convinced that Spiretta was indeed some sort of aristocrat or noble attempting to hide her true identity. Her discipline and mannerisms were too well refined. It wouldn't be the first he had seen. There were all sorts of vagabonds wandering the ruins, looking for someone to blame for this catastrophe. Most held the nobility and officials of Diathilos responsible, and those same misplaced masses were looking to commit rape and robbery to satisfy their lust for revenge. So if their comely companion was truly someone of import, it was not the judge's place to reveal her.

Dorian and Spiretta mounted up, their two horses leading the party, with Quintus and Naleth following behind. They had only gone a few feet when Quintus spoke.

“I believe it is time that we headed south,” Quintus declared.

Both Dorian and Spiretta wheeled their mounts to face Quintus. “Honorable Magistrate,” Dorian addressed the judge, “we have discussed this matter before. Xin Tara has been overrun and we will not be able to breach its interior. Every rumor we have heard, reliable or otherwise, supports this fact.”

“Precisely why we must go, Captain,” replied Quintus. “It is time that we settle this issue once and for all, and discover, *officially*, what has befallen our fair city-in-the-hills.”

Dorian lowered his head in a troubled manner. Quintus knew that the soldier wanted to argue the point of proceeding into this highly dangerous area but had too much respect for the old man to contradict him. Spiretta, who claimed to hail from Xin Tara, was oddly quiet on the matter. Her eyes, however, reflected her uneasiness at the thought of returning to her home town.

“Do you have anything to add Spiretta?” queried Quintus.

The gorgeous and rugged brunette paused for a moment, trying to think of something constructive to say. “We should avoid the roads. Stick to the forest until we reach the hills on the outskirts of the city.”

Quintus nodded his agreement. “If we keep a cautious pace, that should put a five or six day ride ahead of us. I should think that, between the four of us, we should be able to conceive a plan of infiltration by then.”

Dorian looked up from his thoughts to find the magistrate staring at him, waiting for a response. “Your Honor,” Captain Petronus complied.

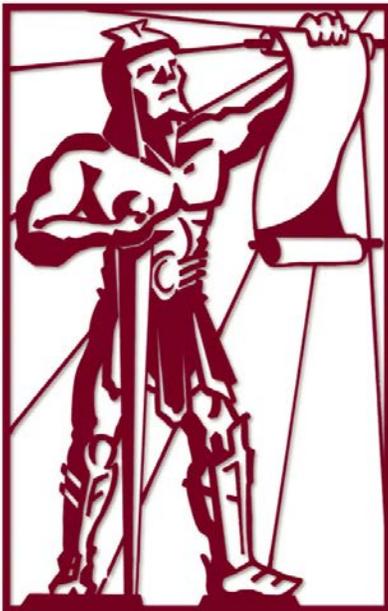
Quintus turned to Naleth, looking at him compassionately. “Once we reach Xin Tara, son, you needn’t follow us in. The danger may be---“

“I am with you, sir,” Naleth broke in.

Quintus put his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “I just want you to realize that, regardless of what you have seen, regardless of all the things that have happened here, you still have your entire life ahead of you.”

“And it is your path I follow, sir,” Naleth said proudly.

Quintus was nearly moved to tears as the party headed south through the forest...



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