

Firebrand 101

Chapter 101: The Copper Lady

The Copper Lady

The woman's words rang through Martel's mind. She knew they were mages. They had been found out. He felt panic rise and tried to consider the situation. He realised why she wore such heavy jewellery with her work clothes; the gold protected her from their powers. Likewise, Martel guessed that the brass knuckles on the thug behind him probably were not made from brass after all; as for the second man, the blade had looked like bronze, yellow-red, which probably was not the case either.

Maximilian's hand grasped the hilt of his dagger. "If you think we are mages, it is unwise to corner us. You let us leave now, and we both avoid trouble."

Undaunted by any kind of threat, Kerra sat down behind her desk. "I have no doubt you could cause all manner of havoc. Probably burn the whole place down. But rumours of a magical battle would reach the ears of inquisitors, I can assure you. And downstairs has a lot of witnesses who saw the pair of you playing and gambling. In fact, I have told my staff to take note of your name and description, should anyone ask."

"We never told you our names, and do not think you can gain them by your threats," Maximilian growled.

Kerra smiled. "You are as subtle as a fox in a chicken coop, Maximilian of Marche." A small object appeared between her fingers, and she began letting it run across her knuckles. "Of course, having this made learning your name even easier."

"That belongs to me." Maximilian's voice gained a menacing edge.

"It certainly did. Until you gambled it away."

She finally held the item still, and Martel caught a glimpse. It was a signet ring, bearing the axe crest of Marche.

"That rat Vernon! I told him I would get the money!"

"Oh, Vernon did not sell this to me. No, he works for me. All the gambling houses in the copper lanes belong to me. When he acquired this, faithful Vernon brought it to me." She resumed running it across her fingers again, just like Martel had seen jugglers do with coins at the marketplace. "I made some inquiries, wondering if a rival of your family might pay more than what you promised Vernon. Imagine my surprise when I learned that Maximilian of Marche is a mage."

"This is why you did this?" Martel stared at Maximilian. "You didn't do this to help me, you needed to dig yourself out of your own grave!"

"You had your reasons, I had mine! You made no complaints while it worked! You failed miserably on your own if I recall," Maximilian snared.

"And now we are caught because you can't control yourself!"

"As entertaining as this is," Kerra's voice cut through, "I did not bring you here to watch you squabble."

"You will get nothing from me," Maximilian declared. "I'm leaving with all my fingers and my ring." While his right hand drew his dagger, his left held out an empty palm in expectation of the jewellery.

Behind him, the two thugs took a step forward with weapons ready, but Kerra raised an open hand to dismiss them. "Both can be arranged, with certain conditions. I am first and foremost a businesswoman, my dear viscount. You broke the rules in my place of business, and you lost your ring in an honest wager. I need something in return for both." She palmed the signet ring; when she opened her hand again, it was empty.

Maximilian sheathed his dagger and threw his heavy purse of silver on the desk. "Here," he growled. Martel felt a tinge of disappointment at the thought of the lost silver, but given the situation, he was not going to haggle for their freedom.

"That is a start, of course, paying me the money stolen from my customers," she remarked dryly. "But you swindled me two nights in a row before this, not to mention, you agreed a price of hundred birds with Vernon for the ring."

"I'll get the blasted coin!"

"Given all your attempts so far have been futile, I have my doubts. In fact, that is why we let you continue to gamble, even after learning you're a mage. You clearly weren't using magic to cheat." She turned her eyes from Maximilian to Martel. "Until our new friend here came along, of course."

"So what do you want?" the young nobleman asked impatiently.

"If you will relax, take a seat, and we can discuss this like business associates rather than dogs snarling at each other." She gestured at the empty chairs opposite her own. Eager for any solution that did not involve violence, Martel sat down, albeit with a disgruntled expression. Maximilian did the same. "Very good. Now, you will have to indulge me as I do a little explaining. See, I run a variety of businesses, though gambling certainly is among the more lucrative. Basically, I control the copper lanes."

She spoke the final sentence a little slower, with a little more emphasis, and Martel understood. She was not simply the proprietress of a few gambling houses and such. Even now, the two thugs stood at the door in silence, barely moving a muscle, exhibiting the discipline one might expect of veteran legionaries; actually, they probably were former soldiers of the legions, he considered, at her beck and call. No doubt she had many more, and presumably eyes and ears throughout the area.

"My counterpart in the harbour district is called Tibert. As his territory has plenty of legal gambling houses, he has little incentive to pursue such business. In fact, he and I have had an understanding. He does not step on my toes, and I stay out of smuggling and other such affairs better suited for the port. I say, we had."

"No honour among crime lords? I am shocked," Maximilian remarked.

"A rather judgemental attitude for someone who's been caught using magic to cheat at illegal gambling," Kerra retorted. "Tibert has begun hosting prize fights. He does not feel this violates our understanding, but it nonetheless pulls business from my doors. I want redress, but without him tracking it to my doors and escalating our little spat into a greater conflict."

"And you have a plan to accomplish this that involves us," Maximilian considered, looking none too happy about it.

Kerra, on the other hand, smiled. "Exactly. I want you to do the same to him as you did to me. Join his fights. Use magic to win against the odds so that I can win a tidy sum when I bet on you, recouping my lost business."

Martel finally understood what it felt like to leap from the frying pan and land straight into the fire.

"You may refuse, of course. I have no interest in starting a fight with two wizards in my home. But if you leave without an accord, the Lyceum will be informed of your activities tonight, which does not bode well for your future education. Reverse, if you accept, all fences between us will be mended, you shall win ample coin from the fights, and I will return the good viscount's ring to sweeten the pot."

She smiled affably, and Martel could see how this woman ruled the copper lanes. Her calm behaviour and demeanour even in the face of threats, her refined manners of speech, and the methods by which she had engineered this situation to be certain of her desired outcome, it all pointed to a cunning mind. She did not require brute force or violence, though he expected she wielded such when needed; rather, she used guile and knowledge, having manoeuvred Maximilian and him into a trap without escape.

Martel did not know how to respond. It did not seem like they had any choice, yet he could not make himself speak and actually make the choice. Finally, Maximilian put him out of his misery.

"Prize fights, you say. Fine. If it will get me my ring back, I will do it." He crossed his muscular arms in front of him.

Kerra shook her head. "My dear viscount, magic or not, you look the part of an able fighter. You would hardly command good odds. Worse than that, your aforementioned lack of subtlety makes it rather doubtful your identity will remain hidden as needed, should anyone inquire into your background." She looked at Martel. "I want you to fight."

Chapter 102: Cornered

Cornered

Walking home from the copper lanes third night in a row, the young men's mood was reversed from previous trips. Their purse was empty, their confidence shaken from being caught, and the threat of expulsion from the Lyceum, should their illicit activities be revealed, hung over their heads.

"You should have told me about the ring."

"I was embarrassed," Maximilian defended himself. "My father had it made and given to me when I joined the Lyceum, a sign of his pride in his mageborn son. Should one of his political rivals get their hands on it, it would make a mockery of both him and me."

All the trouble they were in, just for pride. "Why didn't you just ask your father for the coin?"

"He already gives me an allowance that I require for my daily needs. I could not very well explain the reason why I suddenly needed a hundred extra silvers."

Stupid, stupid pride.

"You will do it, right?" the young nobleman asked.

Walking on empty streets to the distant sounds of cats fighting, dogs barking, and sounds stranger than that, Martel thought back on the conversation with Kerra and the choice she had put before him.

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"I want you to fight." Kerra's words rang through her study.

Martel sat gobsmacked, forgetting to close his mouth. "I can't fight," he finally protested.

"You have magic." Kerra stared at him as if she somehow understood sorcery better than he did.

"Yes, I can blow wind around or make ripples in water. I cannot wield weapons or punch people, and I certainly can't take any punches," Martel tried to explain.

"You're not entirely useless," Maximilian argued. "You have been in a few fights, and you do have a little empowering skill. Certainly enough to beat someone with none."

Martel looked from the crime lord to the nobleman and realised he was on his own. "My skill is elemental. If I use anything like that, I will be found out immediately. I've got no talent for the kind of magic useful in a physical fight."

"Then I suggest you learn swiftly." Any hint of the affable smile had left Kerra's face. "Tomorrow evening, I expect to be informed that you entered Tibert's tavern and agreed to fight for him. If not, I already have a messenger ready to go to the Lyceum, detailing your actions and relevant witnesses."

"I can't win," Martel tried to object.

"Losing a few fights is not an issue. In fact, it might even drive up your odds. As long as you put on a good spectacle and keep coming back. Eventually, you will earn your way to fight Tibert's top brawler, Leatherfist."

"I don't want to know why he's called that," the novice mumbled.

"He has never lost a fight. The odds of a gangly creature like you beating him would be insane. When you do, Tibert will lose so much coin, that should cure him of any desire to move on my business," Kerra claimed.

To Martel, this plan seemed far less fool-proof than she suggested. Sure, from her point of view, it was worth the attempt; she lost nothing if Martel got beaten to a pulp. He, on the other hand, stood to lose all his teeth. And he had no doubt the punishment meted out by the Lyceum, if he were discovered taking part in prize fights, would be the same as the one for gambling.

"Martel, I will be by your side," Maximilian guaranteed.

The novice looked at his friend. "In the ring?" he asked sharply.

"Not physically next to you. You know, I will be there to encourage and support you. Get you back on the horse," the mageknight said helpfully.

"And what happens when I keep losing fights and I never get to meet this – Ironfist?" Martel asked, looking at Kerra.

"I am not unreasonable. If all your attempts fail, and it is clear you cannot stand a chance of beating any of Tibert's top fighters, I will consider our matter closed. Of course, that means I keep your

friend's ring with an increased appraisal of its value. In fact, its price will only increase day by day." Her cordial smile returned.

Maximilian growled, and Martel feared for a moment that the mageknight might spring into action, dagger drawn. But he wore no armour, and his magical shield would not stop a knife with a blade made from gold. "May I consider it, at least?" Martel quickly asked, hoping to keep Maximilian from doing anything drastic.

Kerra gave a nod. "Certainly. As I mentioned, I will await a report from my man in Tibert's tavern tomorrow night. You have until then."

Not much of a reprieve, but Martel had no room to negotiate. He got on his feet. After a moment's hesitation, so did Maximilian.

Kerra nodded at her guards. "Show our visitors out."

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Soft rain fell over Morcaster, slowly soaking the two young mages on their way home. Ahead, illuminated by moonlight against the horizon, the Lyceum waited for them with its promise of a dry bed, though Martel could not imagine sleeping soundly this night.

"You will do it, right?"

Maximilian's repeated question pulled Martel from his memory of the conversation with Kerra. "I don't have much choice, do I? It's all right for you, but if I get thrown out of school, I'll be in debt for the rest of my life."

"Expulsion will have consequences for me too," the mageknight protested. "At the very least, my father will disown me."

"I can't wait to think of all the excuses I'll need to explain why my face is all bruised, lying to all of my teachers day after day."

"Hardly the first time you've lied to them, I believe. Simply claim that you sparred with me, and I got a bit too eager," Maximilian suggested. "In fact we should do that regardless. I have seen you, you are hopeless in a fight where you cannot use your elemental tricks."

"You told that crazy woman that I could win!"

"I exaggerated a little. In your current state, probably not. With my help, definitely. I imagine."

Martel sent him a dirty look as they escaped from the rain to enter through the gates of the Lyceum. "If not, I'll volunteer you to take my place."

"Fair."

Chapter 103: The Stableboy

The Stableboy

Despite it being an interesting class usually, Martel did not pay much attention to Master Fenrick. His mind kept thinking on what lay ahead. Not just tonight, where he would have to go to this unsavoury character Tibert, but also afterwards, taking part in fights. The only other thought in his head concerned what happened if he did not show up, which would lead to the end of his dreams of becoming a mage. Considering the ease with which Kerra had ensnared them, Martel could only

hope that this Tibert did not have her cunning. But if not, that suggested he maintained control of the harbour district through brutal means instead, which did not bode well either.

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Maximilian had told Martel to join him after sixth bell in his room, which he did. As he entered, the mageknight threw some clothes into his arms. "I have devised a disguise for you."

"Better than the last one, I hope."

"You jest, but there is some truth. Obviously, my noble bearing cannot be disguised."

Martel fought the urge to roll his eyes. He lost.

"And since some know I am a mage, I figured it is best you speak to this fellow alone, but I will be in the tavern, should you need me. I have also fabricated a story for you. You are a stableboy whose family is in desperate need of coin, hence your interest in the fights."

"That explains why these clothes smell like horse."

Maximilian beamed. "Every detail accounted for. That reminds me..." He pulled something out of his pocket and threw it to Martel.

"An – eyepatch?"

"Once in the ring, you will have a lot of eyes on you – no pun intended." Maximilian's smirk made Martel suspect it had been very intended. "Use this to disguise yourself. This way, if they ever get curious about your identity, they will look for a one-eyed stableboy."

"I guess that's not a bad idea." While Martel appreciated that Maximilian had put some thought into this, he did not like how the mageknight seemed to consider this all a lark.

"It is a brilliant idea," Maximilian claimed. "Alright, let us get something to eat. After that, you change clothes, and we leave."

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Dressed as a stableboy, Martel followed Maximilian into the city. On the way, they rehearsed the story that Martel would use; already, his hands felt sweaty at the thought of deception.

Reaching the harbour district, Martel was surprised to recognise their destination, which greeted them with a sign showing a broken crown. It took him a moment to remember from where. This particular tavern, larger than most, was where he long ago had gone with Maximilian to see a mageknight fight a berserker. What a strange turn of events that they would now return to this place, though it did make sense; both times, prize fighting had drawn them here, though now they came as participants rather than spectators.

"I will wait a little while after you before I go in. You need me, I am in the common room," Maximilian explained. Martel nodded and continued on his own.

Inside, the place looked much as he remembered. Two floors, lots of tables and chairs, and plenty of patrons enjoying a drink. He made a quick inquiry from the doorman and received directions. Making his way through the half-crowded space, he went up the stairs towards a door with a guard in front. Martel was reminded of yesterday, when they had been lured to Kerra's chamber, and he did not like the feeling.

"What you want?" The dour-looking guard stared at him. With long daggers and several scars, he looked the part.

"I understand your master always looks for new fighters," Martel explained. "I want to join."

The guard grunted, giving the stableboy another glance, and motioned for him to stay put. He opened the door, stuck his head inside, and exchanged a few words. He looked back at Martel. "Knife stays outside."

Knowing he had other weapons besides steel, Martel surrendered the knife once given to him by Master Jerome and went inside.

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Past the threshold, he found an austere chamber. Nothing on the walls and only a few pieces of furniture. A weapons cabinet stood to the side with an armoire for clothes opposite. The middle was dominated by a desk and a chair, as one might expect, but no other seats were available. The desk held a bottle and a dirty glass along with some scraps of parchment. Behind it sat a bald man, clean-shaven, oiling a knife.

Tibert was somewhere in his fifties, with a lean look and deep-set eyes that scrutinised his guest. He had an aura of danger to him; perhaps that was simply because Martel had already been afraid before they even stepped inside the chamber, or maybe it was the knife that he casually yet dexterously handled. Martel noticed that the pommel had the letters XII inscribed.

"I'm told you want to fight." His eyes, never blinking, moved up and down to examine Martel.

"Yeah. I work in a nobleman's stables and could use some extra coin." Better to say less than more – complicating a lie only made it easier to become unravelled.

"Long arms on you, that's good." Tibert's eyes finally blinked. "But there's not a lot of meat on them."

"I'm stronger than I look," Martel claimed. Especially with a bit of magic employed, though he could not mention that. "I can handle even the big stallions in the stable."

Tibert stared at Martel's patch covering his right eye. "Not without a price, it seems."

Martel's palms felt sweaty again. "My family needs the money. I'll fight hard." Not entirely untrue if one considered Shadi his family.

The man finally rose from his seat. He was not as tall as his visitor, but he walked around his desk with careful motions that suggested discipline. "What's your name, boy?" His intense eyes stared at Martel.

"Uh, I'd like to keep that to myself. My folks live here by the harbour, and I don't want them to know where the money comes from. In fact, I'd like to have a mask when I fight."

Coarse laughter came from Tibert; not the kind that invited others to join in. "The boy with an eyepatch wants to hide his face." He stretched his neck. "Why not? Hidden face, assumed name, bit of mystery to it – I can work with that."

Martel allowed himself to feel a tiny bit of relief.

"But if you cause me trouble, boy, I'll come looking for you."

"I wouldn't," Martel claimed, glad that his heart was hidden inside his chest, beating at twice its usual rate.

"Right. Let's go see what it's all about."

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Tibert led him through a hallway, avoiding the main area to reach the fighting chamber through a backdoor. Martel recognised it, though it was strange to see the balconies and lower floor bereft of people.

"Listen, boy, I don't care if you win or lose. Only that you fight. Do you understand?"

Martel raised his gaze from the fighting pit in the centre to look at Tibert. "Yeah. You don't want me giving up easily."

"That's right. Once you go down, and you stay down, the fight is over. But if it happens after the first couple of punches, you're not welcome back."

"Yeah, I got it."

Tibert gave his callous smile. "Come along. I want you to feel what it's like to be down there."

They descended from the balcony to the lower floor. The ladder leading into the pit already stood on the sand, granting access, and Tibert climbed down first, followed by Martel.

"Mark?" the tavernkeeper called out. "You out there?"

A short man whose eyebrows shook hands appeared. "Yeah, chief?"

"Pull up the ladder."

As Tibert's order was carried out, he turned his eyes back on the novice trapped in the pit with him. "This is how it feels. No escape once you're down here. Not without taking a beating first."

Martel looked up; the pit was deeper than he was tall. He had to bend his neck just to see the single-browed man by the edge of the ring. Further up, the balconies rose. He tried to imagine how it would feel to have scores of people looking down, shouting and cheering for blood.

"We do fights either with fists or staves, no blades, nothing sharp, and nothing heavy like a hammer."

"I'll do staves." At least that was familiar to him, Martel considered. Perhaps he would not fare as badly as he feared. He looked down at the sand underneath his feet. "Why is the ground covered in sand?"

Tibert's lips curled upwards as he knelt and grabbed a fistful of the material, rubbing it between his fingers. "Allows for a softer landing when a fighter gets knocked to the ground. Also easier to clean up the blood."

That sounded less reassuring, but Martel knew he had to expect that.

"I'm not sending you into a fight untested, though." Tibert pulled off his shirt and threw it out of the pit, revealing a variety of scars across a muscular torso. "You want to fight in my ring? Prove yourself!" He raised his fists and struck out against Martel.

Chapter 104: Hospitality

Hospitality

Tibert's fist hit Martel on the cheek. Not with sufficient force to send him on his back, but he did stagger one step backwards, as much from shock as from the blow itself.

Martel had never really been in a fist fight. He understood the basic principle, but he was far from ready to implement it. As Tibert swung at him again, his first instinct was to use magic to protect himself. But if he did, everything would be ruined. Instead, he took another step backwards to get out of reach.

He could not keep doing that, as he would run out of room momentarily. It was clear that Tibert was an experienced fighter, and without magic, Martel would not stand a chance. But he had to fight regardless. He raised his hands in front of his face and steeled himself.

Sensing no chance of retaliation, Tibert pummelled him with both hands. It hurt, but nothing worse than being struck with a staff during Reynard's training.

Knowing that he had to do more than defend, Martel finally lashed out. His opponent easily sidestepped and used the opportunity to get past Martel's guard and land a strike on his chin.

A little shaken, but quickly collecting his wits, Martel tried another attack. Same result.

"Hope you fight better with a staff than your fists!" Tibert mocked him.

Angry, Martel struck another blow. As he did, Tibert not only evaded, but had the time to grab sand from his pocket and throw it in Martel's face.

Blinded for a moment, Martel did not react in time before his opponent crouched low and swept his legs from under him. With a heavy sound, he landed flat on his back.

Martel got on his feet again, more incensed than ever. The urge to break out into magic and punish the bald bastard in front of him felt overwhelming. Setting fire to his trousers should wipe that smirk from his face.

Yet Tibert stepped back, lowering his fists in a signal that the fight was over. He stood, watching Martel once again with unblinking eyes.

"Is that the sort of dirty fighting I should expect?"

Tibert shook his head. "No, any such tricks mean you forfeit the fight. But right now, you're feeling angry. Mistreated. The first time you lose a fight and walk out of here with nothing, that will feel just as unfair as now. I need to know that in spite of it, you'll still be back. Or I can't use you."

Martel scowled, but his fury had already begun to subside. Remembering why he had come, he slowly got a hold of himself. "I'll be there. Just tell me when."

The bald man nodded slightly. "Come back on Pelday, I'll have a fight for you. First time you win, ten silvers. Double that for your next victories. But if you lose, you leave with nothing, and I still expect you back. Don't waste my time if you can't get back up."

Not like Martel had much choice. He was far more motivated than Tibert could understand. "I'll be there, and the next time."

"Good. Lower the ladder," he told his man up on the floor, "and you can go get yourself an ale on the house. As a courtesy to my newest fighter."

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Martel did not want to disrespect the man in his own house, but nor did he wish to linger and make it easier for people to recognise him, so the novice quickly drank his ale and left the tavern – once his knife had been returned to him.

Back on the street, Martel took a deep breath. His arms ached from being pummelled, and his jaw was a little sore, but he had felt worse. Most importantly, their deception had worked. Now he just had to actually show up and win the fights. As much as Martel had dreaded this all day, he realised this had been the easiest part. The real challenge lay ahead.

Maximilian appeared and gave him a slap on the back. "That went well. Come along, we must return home." He set into motion, and Martel followed. "I watched a bit, listened along. From a distance, of course. You leave yourself wide open when you swing, and obviously, your speed is abysmal. But fighting with a staff will help some of that. The rest, I will teach you."

"Glad that you are optimistic," Martel grumbled. "I didn't stand a chance, and my meagre abilities with empowerment won't make a difference."

Despite the late hour, plenty of people were on the streets. Final barter and deals were struck in the market district, and the pair moved against the traffic as people went to the harbour in search of entertainments offered all night long.

"I do believe that works to our advantage," Maximilian remarked.

Weaving in and out, Martel reached his friend, thinking he had misheard. "How could that ever be good? Magic is my only chance, and a slim one even at that."

"Because," Maximilian said patiently, "a proper magical shield would stop a blow from even reaching you, which would give the game away. At best, your shield will soften the punch a bit, letting you take many more. The audience will be delighted at your endurance and resilience."

"I am so happy that my ability to get punched in the face repeatedly will cause such a thrill."

The young nobleman shot him a look. "The city has changed you, Nordmark. You were never this snarky when we first met."

"And then I met you." With a demonstrative gesture, Martel pulled the eyepatch from his face and rubbed his face.

"Again! And directed at the one person promising to help you avoid aforementioned punching to the face."

"The least you can do, considering I'm getting you your ring back."

Maximilian sighed. "I cannot deny that." He looked up at the darkening horizon. "Too late for sparring tonight. What's your schedule tomorrow?"

"Full until lunch, nothing after."

"I have a class either fifth or sixth bell. We'll spar whichever I have available, and again after supper."

Martel took a deep breath. "Fine. Sounds good."

Nearby, a loud ringing could be heard from a temple tower. Last bell had rung; all decent folk would be going home.

Chapter 105: Gentle Sting

Gentle Sting

For more than a month, Martel had enjoyed the end of classes with Reynard in the gymnasium. Empowerment remained his weakest skill compared to any of the elements, and his teacher had done nothing to help him overcome that. Now, he suffered the consequences for it.

He spent the morning fielding questions about his bruised face, explaining that sparring with Maximilian carried certain risks. Mistress Rana allowed him to take some skin salve if he promised to make more to replace it, and Martel gladly placed the cooling balm on his damaged face.

Late in the afternoon, Martel stood in the gymnasium of the Lyceum, wearing his leather tunic. Although his classes with Reynard had ended, Martel still came here for practising magical endurance every Manday with Master Fenrick, so the place felt familiar.

But even though the place was used for training and learning, the stone benches surrounding the centre circle reminded him that it also served the function of an arena. Differently built, but ultimately the same purpose as the fighting pit in Tibert's tavern.

Indeed, Martel had already once used it for such a purpose when he put Cheval in his place. The memory warmed Martel, and it made him a little more reassured. If he had been able to teach that arrogant mageknight a lesson after just a few fivedays' study of magic, surely he could learn how to best someone possessing none.

Maximilian arrived, carrying two staves. He threw one at Martel, who fumbled to catch it. "On your guard!" The mageknight swung his staff, and Martel reacted too slowly, taking a strike on his shoulder.

"I wasn't ready!" Immediately, Martel knew how that sounded.

"You are in the ring, Nordmark, you have to be ready every moment!"

They continued to exchange blows, or in Martel's case, he attempted to do so. Maximilian moved faster, always ready to block and retaliate before Martel could react. The most depressing part was that he did not think the mageknight actually used any magic to move quicker; Maximilian just had the training to act without thinking.

"Enough. Put your staff aside," the mageknight told him.

Martel complied, dropping his weapon, before he noticed that Maximilian kept his. "What are you doing now?"

"We need to train your shield. If you can take a hit without actually being hurt, that will go a long way to ensure your victory. Especially since you can sometimes allow a blow to hit you and use the moment to make your own strike."

Martel saw the reasoning, but he did not relish the prospect of practising this particular spell. He had barely done so since he first unlocked it, as he had plenty of other kinds of magic he needed to learn, more relevant to his future.

"Stop fussing, I will not hit you hard. Now raise your shield."

Grudgingly, Martel did so. Nothing changed visibly; he knew that the shield of a powerful mageknight could be seen as a shimmer, but clearly, that of a novice did not qualify. Still, he felt it, the way you might feel a layer of warm air surround your body.

Maximilian's staff swung through and hit Martel on the shoulder.

"Ow!" Martel's outburst came more from surprise than actual pain, as the leather armour had taken the strike; still, it felt uncomfortable, especially as Martel suspected his shield had done nothing to soften the blow.

"Spare me your indignation, that barely hit you. No thanks to your shield, mind you. We will be at it a while. Again!"

"Great," Martel mumbled, raising his shield once more.

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Maximilian only let up when the time for supper had come, and he graciously allowed Martel to recover for half a bell before they continued practising in the evening. Not bothering to change clothes, Martel ate a quiet meal while Maximilian went off to handle an errand before their next round of exercise.

Leaving the dining hall, he heard quick footsteps behind him in the corridor. "Martel, wait up." He turned around to find Eleanor catching up to him.

She looked at his miscoloured face. "What happened? Why are you wearing leather? Are you training?"

"I have been, yeah, with Max."

"He should really learn to be more careful." She shook her head and raised a hand to place her fingertips carefully against his bruised cheek. "At least learn to avoid your face."

Despite the gentle sting on his damaged skin, Martel leaned in against her touch, and he felt compelled as always to be honest with her. "Those are not his fault. Well, not directly. I got into a fight in town."

She withdrew her hand. "What happened?"

Martel waited while some other students passed them in the corridor. "Max and I went to the copper lanes to play dice for money. They caught us, so now I have to do fights in the ring at this tavern in the harbour."

Eleanor sent him a look. "That is not funny."

"I know, I'm the one who has to take a beating."

She wrung her face in disbelief and disappointment. "Why would you do such a thing? Are you purposely looking for ways to get thrown out of school?"

"Not so loud," Martel hissed, looking around the hallway. "Look, some of this is Max' fault too. Alright, the dice game was my idea originally, but he's the reason we got caught."

"That is hardly an excuse. Whatever possessed you to do something so reckless, so wrong?"

For some reason, this part was hard to admit. Maybe because it was not his story to share; maybe because he could not tell how it would affect Eleanor's opinion of him. "It's for Shadi. She and her dad can't pay their rent. They'll lose their home," he muttered.

The anger faded from Eleanor's eyes, and her shoulders untensed. "That does sound like you. She's lucky to have you."

"Just as I'm lucky to have you and Max."

She gave a sigh. "Spare me. Is Maximilian going with you to these fights?"

"Yeah. Well, he's in the audience."

"Good. He can look after you. I will not go just to watch you get thrashed by your own volition." She walked past him, shaking her head and muttering under her breath as she disappeared down the hallway.

Chapter 106: Stallion

Stallion

His thoughts revolving around his first real fight tonight, Martel found it hard to concentrate on his elemental class. He realised this had happened for a while now; although this particular distraction was new, he had not been a particularly diligent student for the past several fivedays. He did not know how many fights he would have to win before Tibert would pit him against Leatherfist – a name that Martel still did not know how to feel about – but hopefully not many. Or perhaps he could work out something with Kerra; find some other way to take advantage of the bald tavernkeeper.

"Let's take a quick break," Master Alastair suggested as Martel's spell faded out much faster than he should have been able to maintain it. "Are you feeling all right? I couldn't help but notice the bruises on your face."

"Yes, don't worry, master. I've just been practising empowerment with Maximilian."

The Master of Elements nodded. "Mageknights can be zealous, and the young viscount is no exception. But it's good that you are practising, since you will take the novice's examination in three to four months."

Martel frowned. "Will I need empowerment for that? If I'm going to learn elemental magic going forward."

His teacher looked a little apprehensive. "Normally, the school overlooks if a student is lacking in certain areas that are not required for their studies as an acolyte. But you being a special case, going through your training at twice the pace, might invite extra scrutiny. It is best that you are not found lacking in any skill, just to ward off potential criticism."

"Master, do you think I might not pass the examination?" A tinge of worry snuck into Martel's voice.

"No, no, don't worry. You have already gained all the elemental skills you need, and will keep honing them over the next months. When the time comes, I am sure you will impress your teachers, not just me."

"All right," Martel mumbled, though he did not feel particularly reassured.

"In that spirit, let's give it another try. This time, we'll try with earth and air, two opposites..."

~

Martel was no stranger to anxiety that arrived the moment you woke up in the morning and remained a steadfast companion, only increasing throughout the day until it had taken over your mind completely. Yet compared to last fiveday, this felt worse. Before, his concern had been what would happen if the worst came to pass and they were discovered gambling illegally; at least he had the comfort that if things went well, he would earn the silver he needed.

This time, the best he could hope for was a thrashing that he might still walk away from. At worst, they would be discovered, he would still get a beating, and he would be thrown out of the Lyceum. As he changed into the clothes of a stableboy, and it started to feel all too real, anxiety shifted to dread. The eyepatch did not help his mood either.

~

Perhaps Maximilian could sense Martel's mood, as the usually exuberant mageknight only spoke sparingly on their walk towards The Broken Crown. They entered the tavern separately as last time, and Martel found it crowded compared to earlier visits. Nearly every table had men and women occupying the chairs, drinking one or the other thing. The clamour was loud, fusing the countless conversations into a singular noise.

Unsure how to proceed, Martel stood by the threshold, almost tripping in place. He usually followed Maximilian's lead in these circumstances, which was not an option.

The doorman got up from his stool, looking him over with a grin. "Young lad with an eyepatch, you must be the new fighter. Careful you don't lose the other one!"

Ignoring the jest, Martel simply asked, "What do I do now?"

The guard made a throw with his head. "Tibert told me to take you through. You'll be the first fight tonight. Next time, if there is one, you can go in through the back. Come along."

He led Martel across the crowded space through an unassuming door, down a hallway, and into a small, sparse room with nothing but a bench.

"Wait here. When it's your turn to fight, someone will fetch you." He nodded at the other door in the room, beyond which the fighting pit lay, presumably.

Anxiety steadily rising, Martel hoped it would not be long. He pulled out a piece of cloth about the size of a scarf and tied it around his face to hide the lower half. Not a perfect disguise, but with the eyepatch over his left eye, hopefully it would serve its purpose.

Someone entered, the same way he had. A young boy brought Martel a tankard of ale. "Good luck!" he grinned and disappeared.

Pulling his mask down, Martel drank it quickly and immediately regretted it; his stomach already felt unsettled thanks to his nerves, and the liquid did not help.

A while passed before the other door opened. Beyond, he could see the structure of the fighting pit and its balconies, filled to the brim. The doorman looked at him with a toothy smile. "You're up, one-eye."

~

Walking down a hallway, Martel reached the door to the large space containing the ring. As he pushed it open, the audience roared in anticipation until a lanky boy entered, wearing an eyepatch and a mask. The clamour turned confused and divided in reaction to this sight, and a few hasty bets were made.

The ladder into the pit was lowered, and the doorman gestured for Martel to climb down. He did so with trepidation, understanding there was no way out now. He was committed. He felt the sand crunch under his boot, promising at least a soft landing for his face.

He was joined by a man many years his senior. Judging by wrinkles, his opponent could be sixty. He had a ring of hair just over his ears and a few scars, one of which ran across the right eye. When it came to sight, it seemed they were evenly matched.

Beyond that, Martel did not favour his chances. The other man looked tough and lean, hardened by decades of labour or fighting, perhaps both. He was easily stronger than Martel, and despite the situation and the deafening noise of the crowd, he stood calm and fully attentive on the novice, not the slightest twitch of his face revealing any emotions beneath. While Martel wore his leather tunic, his opponent wore a simple linen shirt, his confidence shown by his disregard for protective equipment.

Martel, on the other hand, felt anything but calm already. His blood pounded in his ear with each heartbeat, and lacking one eye made him anxious about all noises coming from his blind side.

Several floors above, Tibert appeared on a balcony. He raised his hands to gain silence, achieving only modest effect. "You all know Lothar, who has bested many a man in our pit! A veteran of the seventh legion, tonight he faces a newcomer, never before seen fighting on the sand. I present to you, Stallion!"

The crowd reacted with both cheers and amusement, while Martel groaned. He could not tell what was worse, being saddled with this name or finding out his opponent was a veteran legionary.

"Weapons!" Tibert called out.

Two staves were thrown into the pit, and each of the fighters picked up one. Lothar immediately assumed a stance, crouching a little in his knees, while Martel withdrew a step.

"Fight!"

Chapter 107: Blooded

Blooded

Lothar's staff came sweeping out against Martel the moment that Tibert gave the signal for the fight to begin. Near panicking, Martel barely raised his staff in defence, saving himself a heavy blow to the head.

His opponent quickly followed up, clearly experienced with his weapon. He launched a series of attacks that flowed smoothly, and Martel struggled to keep up with the high rhythm.

When sparring with Maximilian, there had always been a limit to how much pressure placed on Martel. Even when fighting with Cheval during those early lessons of empowerment magic, his tormentor had never attacked at full strength, preferring to toy with Martel and make a spectacle of him.

No such considerations here. Lothar attacked every opening, only relenting if he took a step back to regain proper footing before striking again. Martel had never fought with a staff before where his opponent was putting every effort into defeating him, quickly and decisively.

While the novice had certainly been in scraps before, most notably against a Tyrian berserker, those experiences did not help him fight back in these circumstances. He could not use fire to make Lothar regret his aggression, nor throw a golden chain around him to wither his power away. Martel could only use magic to protect or empower himself, neither of which he had achieved with any success against Maximilian under much less pressure.

But if previous encounters did not offer aid on what to do physically, they might help mentally. To begin with, Martel had been in worse straits. He had survived a berserker and being kidnapped by soldiers. He was not in genuine danger here, not like what he had already suffered and overcome. Martel would not be beaten so easily. He began to fight back.

The next time that Lothar retreated, Martel stood ready. He lashed out against his opponent's blind side, calling on his magic to empower his strength and land a hefty blow on the shoulder. The crowd erupted with excitement as Lothar staggered, spurring the stableboy on.

The retaliation came swifter than Martel could anticipate or defend against. Extended from his own attack, he could not withdraw in time. The old veteran's staff came swinging through the air to smash against Martel's temple and sent him hurling to the ground.

His vision turned black for a moment. The cacophony of the crowd pierced his ears, amplifying the ringing inside his skull. He could smell blood, or taste it, or both.

Martel struggled to think, to determine what he should do. If he got on his feet, his vision still blurry, he knew to expect another blow just like this, and he felt nauseated.

But if he stayed down, that was the end. He would not get a second fight. He would have failed his assignment, and the cold-hearted lady of the copper lanes was sure to punish him for it, getting him thrown out of the Lyceum.

Grasping his staff next to him, Martel staggered on his feet. He finally remembered his sole advantage and summoned his shield for protection, however feeble. It did nothing, but the situation proved less dire than anticipated, as the expected attack did not come against his head. Instead, Lothar hit him on the arm, which smarted, but nothing worse. Regaining proper footing, Martel defended himself.

He had been hesitant to call upon his magic, afraid to give himself away, but clearly, the alternative was a humiliating defeat with barely any resistance shown. When he got the chance to attack, Martel poured empowered strength into his staff and struck.

Lothar intercepted as expected, but the sheer force of the blow pushed him back and off-balance. Still letting magic flow through his body, Martel increased his speed to strike before his opponent could ready himself, smashing against the shinbone.

The leg did not break, even against Martel's increased strength – it seemed Lothar wore protection under his trousers – but it forced the old man down on one knee. It did not leave him defenceless; he thrust his staff forward like a blunt spear, hitting Martel in the chest to push him back. Immediately, Lothar was back on his feet and attacking again.

Unable to keep up while also retaliating, Martel summoned his shield again. He was beginning to feel exhaustion set in, not just from physical exertion, but also pushing his magic to the limit. He would fall prey to one or the other soon.

Lothar did not let it come that far. Taking advantage of Martel's failing defence, the old veteran struck down to sweep the leg from under him. Falling on his back yet again, the decision to step back up was taken out of his hands. Lothar placed one foot on Martel's staff and pointed his own at the fallen novice's head in a clear sign of domination.

Martel realised that Lothar could have ended the fight at any time, probably; he had simply allowed it to continue to provide a spectacle. Perhaps he had even gone easy on Martel rather than press his advantage at times.

Catching his breath, his mind no longer flooded with the urge to fight, Martel slowly untensed. He became aware once more of the crowd, whose noise had seemed so distant during the fight. They cheered and shouted, apparently in a good mood. A hand appeared in the air before him. Grasping it, Lothar pulled him to his feet.

"Good fight, lad. You got up when you needed to." The old veteran looked dour as ever, but without any trace of malice or condescension on his face. "You're blooded now."

Martel felt strange. A moment ago, the sight of Lothar had filled him with equal parts fear and fury, and his only thought had been how to pummel the man into submission. His head hurt an awful lot, and a stinging sensation in his mouth told him he had bitten his own tongue, all thanks to Lothar. Yet he could now stand calmly next to his erstwhile opponent and even feel a trickle of pride and gratitude for the old man's words.

The ladder was thrown down, letting them climb out of the pit. Martel adjusted his cloth mask; at least the knot had held, protecting his identity. A host of people crowded around the combatants, mostly Lothar as the winner. Grateful for that, Martel slipped away and back to the small room next to the fighting ring.

~

Once finally alone, Martel tore the mask from his face and gasped for breath, not just for physical reasons. He had dreaded this hour for days, and it was over. His physical pain mixed with mental relief, which left him feeling rather eerie.

Tibert appeared, closing the door behind him. "First fight, boy, and you're still alive. You may not go home with coins, but you earned yourself a few bruises and the respect of the crowd."

Worn and in pain, Martel was not in the mood for lengthy conversation. "Yeah."

The bald man regarded him with his unblinking stare. "Now the question is, will you be back?"

Martel raised his eyes to meet Tibert's unflinching gaze. "I will."

Tibert grinned. "Good. Lothar knows how to sort those who speak from those who do. Come back on Manday. I'll have an opponent for you closer to your skill. And have yourself an ale on the way out." With a satisfied look on his face, the tavernkeeper left.

~

Martel left the tavern through a backdoor, avoiding the crowds in the front rooms, and found Maximilian waiting for him. "Well fought!"

"I didn't win." Speaking the words summoned disappointment. If Martel had won, he would at least have had all the money for Shadi and something to show for his torment. The realisation that he would have to do this again appeared in full force, driving away his fleeting sense of relief that the night was over.

"There is always next time," the mageknight remarked prosaically, which only depressed Martel further.

"Let's just get home." They set into motion, walking down the alleys of the harbour district.

They had not come far before a voice hailed them from behind. "Good masters, wait one moment!"

"If this is a mugging, you deal with it," Martel said with a tired voice.

"Yes, yes," Maximilian replied impatiently, one hand on the hilt of his dagger as they turned around.

The speaker approached them, looking like any ordinary worker from the harbour. When he had come so close that Martel, despite his weary state, felt ready to blast him with wind, the man finally spoke again. "Kerra sends her regards, glad to see you sticking to the bargain."

"A pleasant description for extortion," the mageknight scoffed.

"I'm just here to deliver a message. Kerra suggests you walk home through the copper lanes after your fights."

"That'll take twice as long," Martel complained.

"Why?" Maximilian asked brusquely.

"If anyone gets curious about the man underneath the mask, don't make it easy for them to follow you home." The messenger shrugged. "Seems foolish to take other precautions, but leave this door wide open."

The novice and the acolyte looked at each other. Martel sighed and turned towards the slums. "Let's go."

Chapter 108: What Flows Beneath

What Flows Beneath

Martel woke, feeling battered. The healing effects of skin salve had its limits, and it could not cure headaches sustained from direct blows to the temple. It promised to be a long day, especially since he already had to prepare for his next fight, unless he wanted the same outcome. He thought about the small vial that Mistress Rana had once given him, alleviating his pain, but he did not dare ask for anything, lest he provoke questions about why he needed it. He could explain away a few

bruises now and then as a result of sparring, but he did not wish to press his luck by raising the subject unnecessarily.

Only after breakfast did Martel remember which day it was. Malday, which meant his second lesson with Mistress Vana. As he made his way to the entrance hall, he prepared the usual spiel to explain away the current state of his face.

As it turned out, she cast a glancing look at Martel and the other novices, and that proved to be the full extent of her curiosity. "Follow me," she simply said, walking down the corridor.

Unlike last time, going into the city to reach a water tower, the trip proved short as she led them to the workshops. They passed by other students busy at work and also Master Jerome, who nodded at the teacher and winked at Martel.

Mistress Vana led them deeper into the workshops than Martel had ever been before. Finally, she stopped before an ordinary-looking hatch and pulled it open after unbolting it. A stench rose into the air. "This leads down to the sewers. I suggest you cover your noses." With that, she descended down the hatch.

Breathing through his mouth, Martel followed, as did the other novices. They stood in a dark room, though their teacher summoned light in her hand. Martel did the same, as he figured it would be good to know where he stepped.

"The less glamorous work of a watermage lies in the sewer system. This runs across the city, of course, but I think one lesson on the subject will suffice, so we shall visit those right here underneath our own school." Mistress Vana began to walk deeper into the darkness.

They walked in a tunnel of sorts, and the sound of flowing water could be heard. The stench intensified, impossible to ignore even when breathing through the mouth. Reaching a grated door, Mistress Vana unlocked its padlock with a key and stepped through.

They continued until they reached a ledge. Ahead of them, in the middle of the tunnel, the waters of the sewers flowed. On either side, an elevated path allowed for dry steps.

"Whenever you pour water down the grates in your dormitory tower, it ends up here. Along with all the other forms of waste, of course."

Martel thought about Eleanor's potion which he had emptied down a drain. He wondered if any rats or fish might have gotten a taste. "As you can imagine, I'm not showing this because I enjoy the scenery. Occasionally the pipes of the school may get blocked, requiring some investigative work. Though usually we manage to sort out anything before it becomes an issue by maintaining the pipes above ground."

She continued down the ledge that took a turn, leading them further in. Behind her, one of the students almost slipped.

"I should not have to warn you, it is rather wet and slippery down here."

They continued for a while, walking through the eerie tunnel with the terrible stench. Besides the few conjured lights, darkness swallowed their surroundings, and when Mistress Vana did not speak, the only sound was the flow of water.

They eventually reached a crossroads of sorts, with a variety of bridges built over the streams of water. The tunnel branched into several more, disappearing into different directions.

The teacher directed her light towards a collection of pipes against the wall. "The main place where waste flows from the castle down. If there is an issue we cannot solve up above, it will most likely be here instead. If any of you show skill with water, Master Jerome may occasionally have need of you to come this far and get things flowing."

One of the novices looked towards the other tunnels, whose stonework could barely be discerned outside the circle of light. "Where do they lead?"

"Deeper into the network of sewers, though I caution you against going past this point. Further beyond, you will find the old catacombs from centuries ago."

"What's catacombs?" Martel asked.

"Burial grounds. Centuries old, long before the Asterian Empire. The entire place is a labyrinth filled with the tombs of thousands. Treasure hunters occasionally venture in, or researchers with a taste for the macabre. They usually don't return, probably losing their way or dying to traps left behind to protect the dead and their rest."

Martel stared with open mouth, and not just because breathing through his nose was so unpleasant. Morcaster had seemed like such an incredible city when he first arrived, and in many ways, he still had that impression. To suddenly discover he had only seen half of it, what lay above ground, ignited both his imagination and his fear. He remembered his trip to the Stone of Archen and the monster that roamed the tunnels underneath the earth. Having enough trouble dealing with the living, Martel decided he would have nothing to do with this resting place for the dead.

"Come along," Mistress Vana told them. "Let's get back."

~

In the afternoon, Martel met Maximilian in the gymnasium. "I will not lie," the mageknight declared. "Your performance against an old man was pitiful."

"You said I fought well," Martel protested.

"I was speaking as a spectator, happy with the performance. As your teacher in the arts of war, I am disappointed."

"Can you actually be called a teacher when you haven't taught me anything?"

"Try your biting remarks in the ring on Manday, see how far that gets you."

"Well, you have any actual advice for me?" Martel asked.

"You did manage to land a few blows, at least – well done spotting the opportunity when it arose. You might even have stood a chance if you had not taken that strike to the head."

Martel doubted that, given how Lothar had seemed in command of the fight. "So what should I do? If I had known how to keep him from smacking me in the head, I would have done that."

"The answer is obvious. Your shield did nothing for you last night. It is one of two emperors in your hand."

"Please, no imagery based on card play or dice or anything of the sort." Martel never wanted to hear about gambling again.

"We have to train your shield up that you can actually withstand a blow. Right now, it is useless."

"Train how?" The novice asked, though he had his suspicions.

Maximilian made a fist. "No need for weapons, really. Get ready, shield up!" And he punched Martel in the chest.

Chapter 109: Motivation

Motivation

The only difference between Maximilian and Reynard as a teacher of empowerment magic was their motivation; the latter had taught him grudgingly, if at all, while the former seemed to enjoy himself. As for the results, they were depressingly similar. In the fighting ring, and on a few other occasions, Martel had been able to strengthen himself using magic, but only because he did so without thinking. He could not do it on command, which made that particular skill unreliable. He needed to know that tomorrow, if he had the chance to finish the fight, his magic would not fail him.

It could be the problem lay not with Martel, but the method. Maximilian trained him as a mageknight because that was how Maximilian had been taught himself. Perhaps someone else, similar to Martel and with more experience as a teacher, could prove to be better guidance. He knew who to ask.

"Master Alastair, as battlemages, did you also use empowering magic often?"

His teacher finished smoothing the floor in the Hall of Elements, cracked from their latest exercise, and looked at his student. "Certainly. When an arrow or a hand axe flung by a Tyrian comes hurtling towards your face, you learn to appreciate your magical shield." The wizard gave a wry smile at his own words. "Though most of the time, my mageknight protector kept me safe. Why do you ask?"

"Maximilian is trying to help me improve my own shield, but I can only produce a weak effect. As for my other attempts of empowering magic, it only happens when I'm not thinking about it. I can't actually command the effect myself." Frustration filled Martel's voice.

Master Alastair nodded a little. "Those who are strong in the elements rarely do well with empowerment and reverse. It seems as if our magic either is focused on ourselves or the world around us, never both. Perhaps a topic for Master Fenrick to explore."

"But you learned it," Martel pointed out. "How?"

"Those of us with our particular bent of magic often have this frustration. Spells come to us on instinct, not by command. The only way I know to remedy this is to practice control, day in and day out for months or longer." His teacher regarded him with a studious expression. "I had two years to become a battlemage. I spent them training my shield, among other spells. But you are not joining the legions, Martel. Even a minor shield effect, produced reliably, will be fine for your examination, if that is your concern."

It was not, and Martel did not have two years. He barely had two days. But he could not tell his master that. "Thank you. I appreciate the answer."

~

Already worn from his lessons, Martel did not relish another evening as Maximilian's punching bag. But the fight was tomorrow, and Martel had made no progress whether with empowering his body or producing a shield that did anything other than tickle the mageknight's knuckles. Dragging himself from the dining hall after supper, Martel went to the arena. Yesterday, a few other mageknights had appeared to conduct their own exercises, and they had sent numerous glances towards the novice being repeatedly punched until they finally had to give up on their training due to laughter.

Maximilian appeared soon after. "Ready?" He had not brought any of the blunted weapons from the school's armoury of training arms, suggesting he intended to follow the same strategy as their last so-called lesson.

Martel sighed. "Ready." He tried his hardest to imagine a barrier of pure magic in front of him. At best, it felt like wearing armour made from parchment.

"You are a pair of fools." Eleanor's voice reached them from the entrance to the sand-coloured ring. "I passed by the hallway yesterday more than once, and you were doing the same thing over and over. I suspect you have not made any progress?"

"And you know better?" Maximilian asked brusquely. He crossed his arms with a sour expression.

She stepped inside the arena, shaking her head. "Martel has no sense of self-preservation. This is not how you teach him. Maximilian, stand over here." She gestured for the other mageknight to join her ten paces away.

As Maximilian did so, albeit looking reluctant, she handed him a dagger and walked over to Martel. He watched her approach with a frown, wondering about her intention, though anything at this point would be better than Maximilian's constant pummelling.

She looked up at him with her hazel brown eyes. "Martel, I have practised magic all day. I am absolutely worn out. Not a single spell left in me. If that dagger hits me, I cannot protect myself. It will hurt me." She turned towards Maximilian. "Throw it. Now."

Still processing her words, Martel was overtaken by shock as Maximilian complied with the order, showing no hesitation to make an empowered throw. At impossible speed, the dagger flew through the air, aimed straight at his friend.

Just before it struck Eleanor's face, Martel's hand shot up and caught the blade. He gasped, more surprised than anybody else – he had never moved that fast in his life. He had no idea he could. His hands clutched the weapon tightly. Confused at the lack of blood and pain, he realised the edge was blunted. His eyes turned from the knife in his hand to Eleanor.

"How did you know?"

She gave half a smile that seemed almost sad. "The one thing that makes you act without thinking is your need to protect others." She turned to look past his hand at Maximilian. "The face? Really?" The other mageknight shrugged.

Martel also glanced in his direction. "Did you check this knife was blunt?"

"I can recognise a knife from the school's armoury," Maximilian replied offended.

Eleanor returned her attention to the novice. "Do not think about protecting yourself. Think about protecting others, those you care about. Do that while we try again."

"My method was more fun," Maximilian grumbled.

Chapter 110: Equine Parentage

Equine Parentage

Martel sat in Master Fenrick's class, his mind stuck on a particular question. Finally, he raised his hand.

He could not tell if his teacher was exasperated that he always had something to ask irrelevant to the current subject, or delighted that he had something to ask. Perhaps both.

"Yes?"

"Master Fenrick, how can you detect if someone has magical abilities? In case they are trying to keep them hidden, that is."

"For this, we have turned to our neighbours. For some reason, Asterian mages have never developed such a method. Perhaps because, as we simply copied our neighbours, we never had need for our own."

"But what are they?"

"Our southern friends in Sindhu have, naturally, a complex mixture made from alchemy. Sprinkle it over any person or indeed any item, and the powder will ignite into sparkling bits of light. Very reliable, and useful as it can be used both on people and objects."

Martel remembered the gambling establishment, being exposed to such a powder. "What's the other?"

"One of the Tyrian runes has the ability to light up when in contact with magic, though I believe it only works on people. Due to their rather different understanding of magic, it might not always react either as we expect, or it might be easy to draw in a wrong manner, thereby ruining the effect."

The question of how to counter these effects burned at the tip of Martel's tongue, but it felt a suspicious thing to ask. He considered raising the topic with Mistress Rana, who surely would know all about Sindhian powder, as long as he could do it in an innocuous way. As for the runes, perhaps the library possessed a book. Not that Martel intended to try his hand at gambling again; but being able to hide his magic seemed useful, and since it certainly would have been once already, he at least wanted to know more about it. Pushing the topic from his mind for now, he turned his attention back on Master Fenrick's lecture.

~

Martel's second lesson of the day was the practical companion to the theory lessons, where the students trained their endurance and expanded their ability to manipulate magic. They did this in two ways, either by repeatedly casting a challenging spell such as drawing water from the air, or by maintaining a magical effect for extended periods of time.

It did not matter what they did, as long as they pushed their reservoir of magical power to be emptied, much like physical exercise would make a person stronger. Unfortunately, Martel expected he would need all his magical strength for the fight tonight, and he could not afford to waste it on the lesson. So he simply summoned a few flames, which he could do without causing any strain to himself, and pretended that keeping them burning left him tired. If Master Fenrick suspected that he was slacking, nothing was said.

~

Maximilian knocked on his door as evening approached. "Ready?" he asked through the barrier.

Martel checked that he had the items of his disguise in his pockets. He wore the clothes of a stableboy, as he could not change once they left the school, but wearing the eyepatch walking down the corridors of the Lyceum would invite more ridicule than Martel felt up for. For now, it rested alongside with his cloth mask in the pockets of his trousers.

He opened the door. "Ready."

~

Approaching The Broken Crown, Martel pulled out both eyepatch and mask, putting both on. He began steering towards the back alley behind the tavern when Maximilian stopped him. "You should go to the common room, get something to drink."

Martel's eyebrows made a frown, though only one of them was visible. "But I don't want a drink. I shouldn't have had one last time either. I am anxious enough as it is."

"Exactly! You need something to smoothen the wrinkles."

Martel shook his head. "I need to be focused. My stomach is already in a knot. Drinking or eating is just going to upset it."

"Fortunately, that is not a concern for me. I will see you in there for the fight, I suppose."

Maximilian slapped his friend on the shoulder and continued down the street towards the front entrance of the tavern.

Martel watched him leave. He knew it was best they entered separately anyway, but Maximilian sitting at the bar, drinking and having a good time, made him feel a little abandoned. Finally, he left the thoroughfare, walking through the back alleys to enter unnoticed.

~

After letting Tibert know of his arrival, Martel waited in the same room as his first fight. This time, when the boy appeared with a flagon of ale, Martel waved him away.

Tibert appeared through the other door. "You're up, Stallion."

Martel groaned inwardly, made sure his mask sat tight, and walked out to the fighting ring.

As before, crowds filled the entire space. Last time, Martel had been so anxious, he had not really taken it all in. The noise alone had seemed to overpower his other senses. This time, he took better note of how many balconies rose up the walls, and just the smell of so many people tightly packed together.

The throng parted to grant access, and he climbed down into the pit. Moments later, he was joined by his opponent for the evening. A man with hefty girth, looking like he weighed twice as much as Martel, even if a head shorter. He bared his teeth. "I'm going to bite your fingers off and stuff them down your mouth hole," he declared with an intense look in his eyes, following up with an imaginative insult concerning horses and Martel's parentage.

Martel stared with wide eyes. It had been his clear impression that mutilation was not part of the fights. Or was the only guarantee that they did not fight to the death?

Thinking about his last fight, how superior Lothar had seemed, Martel fervently hoped he would be allowed to surrender rather than lose any digits, should defeat be imminent.

From a balcony above, Tibert raised his hands. Two staves were thrown into the pit; Martel picked up his.

"Fight!"