

## Firebrand 111

Chapter 111: Butcher

Butcher

"Butcher! Butcher!"

The chanting of the crowd did nothing to ease Martel's fear. His opponent attacked with glee, and the novice simply defended himself, lacking the confidence to strike back.

Butcher's attacks came with less speed but greater force than compared to Lothar's. Even though Martel blocked, his hand cramped trying to hold onto his staff reverberating from the power of Butcher's strike. But he could defend. He was not out of his depth.

So when he parried another attack, Martel finally went on the offensive and lashed out swiftly, landing a blow on his opponent's upper arm. It barely made impact. Butcher did not need armour, protected by his hefty stature.

With a predator's grin, the corpulent man struck back and punished Martel with a heavy blow on the shoulder, making impact even through his leather tunic.

The spectators cheered, and the combatants resumed testing each other's defences, trying to get past. But every time Martel did, he received one in return. He was fast enough to block any initial attack from Butcher, but he could not land his own blow and get ready swiftly enough to defend. The solution was to hit so hard, his opponent would be too debilitated to retaliate, but the man scorned any blow on his portly frame. Even trying to use his magic did not help; Martel could not command it to such a degree that it made a difference. He needed to land a strike on the head, and Butcher never left an opening for that.

Finally, the opportunity arose. Butcher took a step forward and missed his swing, leaving him well within range. Martel struck, his staff aimed straight at his opponent's temple. With a grin, the shorter man ducked below. A feint. He pushed his staff forward like a spear to smash against Martel's chin, sending him several steps backwards.

A secondary attack immediately followed, and Martel barely evaded a direct blow against his head.

But the fight had turned against him. He was pushed back with limited room to move. When he brought his staff back, it hit the wall behind him, disrupting both his defence and offence.

"Butcher's got him on the hook!"

Indeed, Martel felt like a pig strung up, ready for butchering. Magic was his only way out. He tried to remember the gymnasium, what had activated it. He needed this for protection. Not for himself, but if he lost this fight, he could not take care of Shadi. She would be homeless, destitute, or worse, leave and never return.

Raising his shield, Martel left himself open.

Butcher attacked, striking Martel on the side of his neck.

He felt the wood touched his skin, but the expected pain and incapacitation did not happen. His shield held. Before Butcher could retract his staff to defend, Martel made the exact same attack, only mirrored.

The corpulent man's eyes lost focus for a moment. Pressing his advantage, Martel struck again, straight at the temple.

Like a sack of potatoes, Butcher fell to the ground, face first.

Martel held his breath, ready to strike once he got up again.

The corpulent man rolled around onto his back and raised an empty hand. "I yield!"

The crowd erupted in cheers. Martel threw his staff onto the ground and raised both hands to receive their adoration. Remembering the end of his last fight, he offered one of them to Butcher.

As the other man grabbed his arm to pull himself up, Martel had to call on empowered strength just to keep from toppling over, but he managed to pull Butcher to his feet.

"Not bad, boy!" This time, as Butcher showed his teeth, he did so in the form of a jovial smile.

Martel returned the expression, as the crowds chanted his name.

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Retreated to his room, Martel sat down on the bench to catch his breath, removing his mask. He was still elated, not just that he had earned the silver he needed, but from the mere fact that he had proven himself capable to win. The only crack in his joy came as he remembered why it was so crucial that he won; like an evil spectre, Kerra's threat still haunted him.

A serving boy entered with a mug full of ale, which he handed to Martel with a look of admiration.

The newly coronated victor barely noticed the boy, only three or four years his junior, in favour of swiping the tankard and emptying it in a single motion. The drink helped alleviate the utter dryness in his mouth and throat, which Martel had not even noticed until now.

Tibert appeared, dismissing the serving boy with a gesture. He counted out ten silver pieces on the bench next to Martel. "Not bad. Few who can take a victory on the second fight. Next time you win, you'll earn double."

"Tell me when." As exhilarating as this experience was, Martel saw no reason to prolong his exploits in the harbour district. The sooner he accomplished Kerra's task, the better.

"Peldays and Mandays, always. You show up, I'll find you a fight."

"I'll be there on Pelday."

Tibert gave Martel a nod before he disappeared back towards the fighting ring.

Once outside in the back alley, the young victor was intercepted by Maximilian. "Excellent fight, Nordmark! I knew you could do it!"

Martel sent him a consternated look, hoping to stop the mageknight before he blurted out anything else. "Not so loud! You'll attract attention."

Maximilian waved his hand around, dismissing Martel's concern. "Nobody's listening. What say you we stay a while? In half an hour, there is another fight. Ale is cheap, and you may learn about your future opponents."

The young fighter shook his head. "I don't want to draw attention to myself, or run around out there wearing my mask. I'm going home."

"Suit yourself. We shall talk tomorrow! We have more training to do, but tonight was an excellent step in the right direction." The mageknight patted his friend on the shoulder and disappeared back into the tavern.

On his own, Martel walked down the alleys, removing his eyepatch with a tired gesture. The excitement and energy had vanished from his body, now the fight had ended and he had left the tavern behind with its roaring crowds; all he wanted was to sleep. Walking the same path as last time after his fight, he suddenly remembered the warning sent by Kerra's messenger. With a sigh, he turned towards the copper lanes and the longer way home.

## Chapter 112: A Promise Made in Silver

### A Promise Made in Silver

While Martel's evenings were full of excitement and anxiety, his mornings and afternoons remained predictable and practically dull in comparison. He did not mind this; on the contrary, Martel had no appetite for risk, even when it paid off. He could never understand Maximilian, gambling large sums of money, not to mention an important gift from his father. The only way Martel could ever imagine betting money would be if he knew that winning was assured, and even that had failed spectacularly for him.

Thus, Martel happily appeared in the workshop, ready to do whatever mundane task Master Jerome had for him. It proved to be an easy one today, cutting feathers into quills.

The artificer directed Martel to the workstation and tools before he made to leave. Quickly, Martel intercepted him, as a question had come to mind. "Master, you enchant objects, right?"

"I do indeed." He gave an amused smile. "Why, you have a great need to get something enchanted?"

Not as such, but wearing his leather armour during the fights had reminded Martel of the artificer's abilities. While last night had gone well, it had hardly been an overwhelming victory, and Martel wondered if perhaps he could gain an advantage in another way besides empowering magic. "Not right now, I was just curious if it's something you use often. For instance, do you put temporary enchantments on your tools?"

"A well-made tool is magical enough on its own," Master Jerome laughed. "I do use some enchantments at times, or if the situation calls for it, a rune or two also works well." He gave Martel a sly smile. "And when you are an acolyte, you will learn the craft behind both. For now, I suggest you grab that entirely ordinary knife and begin sharpening those quills."

Accepting the answer, even if it did not help him as such, Martel went to work.

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Once he had finished his labour in the apothecary, not to mention eating a hefty lunch – fighting and sparring gave a good appetite – Martel went into the city. In his hand, he carried the same bag that had held his belongings when he first arrived to the Lyceum some eight months ago. Except now, rather than old clothes and a few provisions, the bag held a single, wooden box, which he had bought at the market for two silvers. Martel assumed that the old, ordinary-looking bag would discourage any interest in its contents, but should any take too keen an approach, the young mage did not feel concerned. By now, he had experienced a bit of everything and felt able to handle himself in any situation that might arise on the streets of Morcaster on a clouded Soliday afternoon.

That did not mean he acted carelessly. Besides hiding his box inside the bag, Martel avoided the shortest route to the Khivan enclave, which went down the main thoroughfare south, straight through the market and then the harbour. Even if his other visits had been in disguise, Martel figured it was best to avoid the port for now. So he took a slightly longer route going east before finally heading south and reaching the Khivan quarter.

Martel had not been here since the day of the riot. He began to feel uncomfortable, the further he went, as the memories returned. Shouting and screaming, the smell of blood and smoke in the air. Getting knocked down, the rioters attacking him and Shadi in the temple, exhausting his magic just to force them out and keep himself and her safe.

He looked down the street towards the square where the big fight had happened. Last he looked upon it, bodies lay across the cobblestones, more than a few of them never to move again. Blood had stained the area in places, and he remembered seeing a torn ear lying on the ground. Martel shivered at the thought of the sheer rage that had gripped these people, making them ready to inflict violence and even death on others.

Thankfully, he did not have to go further. To his right lay the workshop of Master Farhad. Remembering his last encounter with the man, Martel was not sure if he should step inside. It would have been best if he could talk to Shadi alone, but he had no expedient way of getting a message to her, and he had little time to wait for a reply anyway.

Feeling awkward, Martel tried the door. It was unlocked. He opened it quietly to see the watchmaker himself seated at his workbench, engrossed in his assembly of some kind of machinery. Looking further, Martel saw his friend sitting at the table in the middle of the room, likewise engaged in a task involving polishing tools and nails and other little bits.

Her eyes widened. "Dad, I'm going to take a walk, get some air."

"Be back soon. Need you later," he mumbled without looking up.

"I will," she promised and left her seat. A moment later, she stepped outside, closing the door behind her. She gave Martel a quick hug. "What are you doing here?" she asked with a quiet voice.

Martel glanced around the street, just to make sure nobody was looking. "This is for you. Open it once you are inside." He opened his bag to let her see the contents.

She reached down to take hold of the box. "What's inside?"

"Fifty pieces of silver."

Her eyes widened. "You're not joking, are you?" As he shook his head, she spoke again. "My dad will never accept that!"

"Don't tell him it's from me." Martel had anticipated this, given how Master Farhad had acted during the last encounter. "Tell him you found work in town. Bring him a handful of coins now and then over the next fiveday."

Her eyes welled up. She placed the box on the doorstep behind her and gave him a tight embrace, mumbling her gratitude.

"It's alright," Martel told her while awkwardly patting her short hair. "I won't let anyone take you away. You belong here."

## Chapter 113: Oak

Oak

"For our first match tonight, our newest fighter Stallion faces up against Oak!"

The crowds responded with their usual noise. Already in the pit, Martel ignored them. All that mattered was him and his opponent. Oak had nearly the same height as Martel, but he was so lean, he looked all sinews and bone. A vicious scar ran along the right side of his jaw, leaving that part of his beard barren. His expression remained blank, giving Martel nothing to read or interpret.

They received their weapons. Martel raised his staff, taking a solid position with his feet.

"Fight!"

Both of them made tentative strikes, trying to get a sense of their opponent. A few things became clear to Martel. Oak struck with more speed and accuracy than Butcher in his last fight. He might not have the same strength behind each blow, but if they landed, they would hurt well enough.

Distracted by his considerations, or perhaps just too slow, Martel took a hit to his left ear. As predicted, it made his head sing and left a stinging sensation where his ear had been curled together. Sneering, Martel tried to strike back, to no avail.

This repeated itself again; they would strike back and forth, and eventually, Oak would find an opening and make the most of it.

It was clear that the gaunt man was a better fighter; to be expected, given his experience. Martel's advantage lay in his magic, above all his shield, which let him take a hit without injury. But the novice's magical reservoir was not deep; sparring with Maximilian last night, he had only managed to raise his protection four times before it became too weak to matter. And if he summoned it, but did not have need of it, keeping it in place also drained his magic.

He could only use the shield when he knew it would be needed, and it would give him the chance to retaliate, but Oak was too fast; whenever Martel realised he could not defend in time, before he could raise his magical protection, his opponent's staff had already struck.

His only recourse lay in dictating when he would be hit. As he and Oak exchange strikes, Martel left himself open while raising his shield. The expected attack came, smashing against Martel's cheek. He made sure to move his head along with the staff as if impacted, even though he barely felt it. At the same time, he made the exact same attack delayed by only a moment, hitting Oak on his scarred jaw.

His opponent growled and spat in response, retreating a step. For the first time, Martel saw that the man missed his natural teeth and instead had a pair of wooden replacements in front.

As for the spectators, they roared in revelry at seeing both fighters land a blow, and watching Martel receive his with barely a flinch made many call out his name.

Recovered, Oak came at him again. Martel defended, waited until it seemed plausible that he would leave himself open, and raised his shield. He took a strike, gave one, and only one of the fighters staggered in response.

With clear frustration, Oak readied himself again, and he remained calm and measured in his movements; Martel could not help but admire his discipline, even as it made the fight harder for the novice. Two shields used, two left.

Martel did not wish for this to drag out; he needed to win before his magic ran dry. As they came at each other yet again, the novice prepared to end the fight. With his protection raised, he poured his remaining powers into his arms to land a strengthened blow.

Oak took a hit straight to his temple with such force, he stumbled sideways into the wall of the pit and dropped his staff. Martel had the next attack ready when the gaunt man fell to his knees, raising his hands before his face. "I surrender!"

As before, Martel only became aware of the world outside the pit once he realised the fight was over, the danger ended, and his enemy vanquished. Throwing his weapon aside to raise both fists up, Martel accepted the accolades of the crowd.

Pride surging through him, the victor glanced at his defeated opponent. Martel's elation shattered as he saw Oak lower his hands, revealing his face; across his expression, fear was written.

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Martel had barely removed his mask in the small chamber before the servant boy brought him his ale.

"You're so strong," the boy said with admiration. "You took that blow like it was nothing!"

Martel grunted something, his mind distracted and disturbed.

Tibert arrived, nodding for the lad to leave them. He emptied a purse onto the table, and a score of shiny silver coins fell out. "I would not have bet against Oak," he admitted.

Martel, sitting down, raised his head to meet Tibert's unblinking eyes, too tired to give a response. He had spent all his magic to win the fights, and besides his physical exertion, it left him feeling hollow.

"I'll see you here next time." The tavernkeeper grinned and left.

Finally a moment to himself, Martel tried to understand why seeing Oak in fear left him so distraught. He had made men fear him before; those who attacked him and learned to regret it, or that young fellow who had preyed on Weasel and his gang.

But they had deserved it. Oak was just a fighter, competing for a prize. Having never met the man before, Martel did not care about him, but nor did he wish him ill. Yet Oak had looked at him as if Martel would beat an unarmed man who had already surrendered.

He wondered how many fights he had left before Kerra would be satisfied.

Once outside in the back alley, Maximilian appeared, his usual exuberant self. Martel did not pay him any attention, letting the mageknight talk in excited terms about whatever was on his mind. Patting the pocket with his money, Martel left it to his friend whether to follow or stay at the tavern, and departed.

## Pressure upon the Veins

With the other three novices, Martel waited in the entrance hall on another Malday morning. He felt a little awkward, as everyone passing by would know why they waited, and he stood out being a head taller than the other novices. It was a strange reverse to last night, when people had shouted his name and he felt like a king among men. Obviously, this was for the best; all Nether would break loose if his teachers discovered his evening activities.

Mistress Vana appeared and gestured for them to follow her down the hall. "On the next fiveday, we will return to the city and the other water towers, but today is another class spent at the castle. Don't worry, no sewers or anything like it today."

Martel gave a mental sigh of relief, and he suspected the others did as well.

Their teacher led them towards the workshops, but their path was not the same as last. They descended into a basement of sorts, into another direction than the hatch which had led them to the sewers.

Mistress Vana ignited a large orb of light in the dark, and they continued down a naked passageway until it suddenly opened into an enormous chamber, dug beneath the ground. It was not empty; a large object, as far as Martel could tell, took up most of the space.

"Any clever head who can guess what this is?" she asked.

One of the other novices was faster than Martel. "A water reservoir."

The teacher nodded. "This connects to the city's waterways, and thereby the river. All the water in the castle comes through here. Even the taps on your floors outside your rooms. Who can figure out what the challenge is?"

This time, Martel was quicker. "Getting the water from underground and up the towers."

"Liquid does have the annoying habit of always flowing down. In older times, the solution was to build reservoirs somewhere high and simply have watermages transport the water up there. The various towers around the city are a remnant of that system. Fortunately, we stumbled upon a more elegant solution, coming from perhaps an unlikely part of the world."

Mistress Vana beckoned for them to follow her as she walked around the cistern and let her light float gently down towards the ground. Martel saw that in between the tiles, a metal pipe ran from the reservoir across the floor to disappear underneath the wall.

Their teacher leaned down to point at complex engravings into the pipe. "Tyrian runes. You'll have to ask Master Fenrick about the principle of it, but briefly said, this particular symbol creates motion. It causes pressure for the water to move, even upwards if need be. Now, a Tyrian skáld might be able to imbue this rune with magic permanently, but my mastery of their barbarous sorcery is not at that level, hence from time to time, it must be renewed."

Holding her hand over the rune, she whispered a word that Martel did not catch. The rune glowed briefly. The quiet rumbling of water inside the pipe could be heard. Although the whole affair lasted only a moment, and the use of this kind of bespelled symbol seemed almost mundane, Martel felt a little fascinated. This was an entirely different magic than what he knew and could wield. Yet despite coming from a different tradition, Asterian mages could use it nonetheless. Though with limitations, it seemed; Martel wondered what a skáld might be able to do with runes.

"Once you become acolytes, you will be taught how to use these symbols. Should any of you consider a future as a watermage, I strongly encourage you to pay attention when the time comes." Standing up, Mistress Vana moved towards the door. "Come along. I'll show you a few other parts of the castle's waterways."

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With only classes in the morning on Maldays, Martel could spend his afternoon practising. Maximilian was occupied, so he did it alone. In the western yard, by the statue of Atreus, Martel tried to do as he had done yesterday, raising his shield while also empowering his body to move faster. He had a feeling that he looked odd, moving around the pedestal in strange bursts, but his room was far too cramped to allow this kind of training.

"If you keep practising empowerment this much, people will assume you want to be a mageknight."

Martel turned towards the speaker, already smiling from recognising the soft voice. "Perish the thought. I leave that to people more comfortable wearing silk."

Eleanor gave a muted smile of her own. "When it comes to the praetorians, you may have a point." She narrowed her eyes, studying his face. "You do not seem to have more bruises than last. Unless they all lie in the same places as the old."

"I've become quite good at making salves in the apothecary." Fortunately, or else all of Martel's winnings would end up in the apothecary paying for remedies to ease his pains and discomforts.

"I am sure." She hesitated before she spoke again. "Did you win? Did your shield protect you?"

He nodded. "Yes, to both. Thank you. You're a better teacher than Maximilian, or Reynard, for that matter."

"This was a special case. I just happen to know how you work."

"Would you like to see? My next fight, I mean." Martel had not given it much thought beforehand, but he suddenly wished that Eleanor could see him how he was in the ring, victorious and admired, rather than the hapless novice from the small town, always out of his depth and trying to catch up.

She seemed to waver before slowly shaking her head. "I am glad if you are not getting hurt, but I do not think I want to encourage you any further. I will just see you around the school." With half a smile as her farewell, she turned around.

Martel watched her walk away, feeling more disappointed than he had expected to be.

## Chapter 115: Marius

### Marius

"Tonight, for our first match, the familiar name is Stallion while his opponent is the newcomer! From the seventh legion, fighting for the first time in our ring, comes Marius!" Tibert's voice boomed across the hall and still nearly drowned in the noise from the audience.

Martel evaluated his opponent as they stood across each other in the pit, waiting for weapons and the signal to start. The other fighter looked in good shape, no better or worse than someone like Lothar, but he could not be older than somewhere in his thirties. A former legionary, common



enough in the ring, but he could not be old enough to have completed twenty years of service – at least, Martel did not imagine so. Regardless, from what little Martel knew, he doubted the legions would discharge someone in the middle of a war unless that soldier could no longer fight.

Clearly, this fellow could still handle himself in a scrap, else he would not be here; but if he had been thrown out of the legions for some manner of dishonourable conduct, like theft or cowardice, would he not be imprisoned? Well, perhaps he had been released. Picking up his staff, Martel accepted that his knowledge of the army did not suffice to answer the question, and he honestly had little desire to learn about life in the legions anyway. He would just have to beat this Marius like he had done the others.

The command came to fight, and their staves met in the air. With more confidence than in his last bout, Martel did not move backwards. He pushed and pressured his opponent, measuring his speed and movements in hope of finding either wanting.

No such luck, and the legionary made several attempts of retaliation against Martel's left side, where his eyepatch hindered his sight. Skilled and cunning.

Martel made a swipe that his opponent evaded by stepping back, though as Marius quickly shifted all his weight to the other leg, it kept him from retaliating. A small error, though it showed that the man did make mistakes, which Martel could take advantage of.

As had happened before, the novice got distracted by his observations and paid for it by taking a hit on his lower arm. It hurt, but the leather took the worst of it. Gritting his teeth, Martel got his head back into the fight and struck out again with his staff.

They exchanged blows once more, and as before, when Marius stepped away to avoid a strike, he always moved his weight onto his left leg. Martel realised why. The legionary favoured one over the other because he had an old injury or such, weakening his right leg; the kind that would get you discharged from the army if you could no longer march or stand all day. Marius could hide it getting into the pit, but the swift movements in the ring meant extra strain and the need to favour the other leg.

Martel had his advantage, and he was not above using it. Summoning his shield to keep himself safe. He went on the offensive. The crowds shouted in surprise and delight seeing Martel so reckless, ignoring blows to pressure Marius and force him to constantly put weight on his bad leg.

It cost Martel three hits and therefore three uses of his shield before his tactics worked. Marius' leg buckled under him, and he fell to one knee with a pained expression. Quickly, Martel slammed his opponent's arms and wrists until he dropped his staff. Unarmed, his head hanging low, he had to concede.

Shouts and cheers rose from the crowd as Martel claimed another victory. He raised his hand and waved, breathing heavily under his mask. As he climbed out of the pit and the people made way for him, he suddenly locked eyes with a man staring at him. All sorts of characters, including plenty of unsavoury nature, frequented these fights, yet this fellow made Martel's skin crawl. He had shorn hair and stubbles for a beard with a thin mouth that looked ready to sneer. Apart from a pair of deep-set eyes, Martel was disturbed by the man's hands; one was wrapped in a leather glove while the other was missing, leaving only a stump.

With no wish to prolong his presence in the fighting hall, Martel hurried onwards.

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Tibert entered the small chamber and gave Martel his winnings. "Not bad. I wondered if you would find his weakness."

"I did." Martel collected his coin. As usual, his elation over victory lasted briefly, and he just wanted to go home.

Tibert left again, moving through the hallways to reach the front room. He approached one of his people and spoke quietly to him. "He's leaving in a moment. Catch him through the back."

The other fellow, a short and wiry man whose eyebrows connected above his nose, nodded and made a quick departure.

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With tired steps, Martel walked through the alleys of the harbour district. Maximilian had opted to stay behind, which was no cause for surprise. With some distance between him and The Broken Crown, he removed his eyepatch and continued along the dark streets with a turn left towards the copper lanes.

In his weary state, he did not notice the quiet man following him at a distance. He simply walked on, already dreaming of his bed, not to mention some cooling skin salve for his latest bruises. He envied the mageknights who could maintain their shields for hours if need be, according to Maximilian.

Moving deeper into the winding roads of the slums, he disappeared from the sight of his unknown follower. Increasing his steps, Tibert's man hurried to keep up.

"Spare a coin, good master?" A beggar appeared, practically jumping in front of him.

"Out of my way," came the angry reply as he tried to push the vagrant aside, eyeing the corner where Martel had disappeared.

Out of nowhere, another beggar showed himself. "He asked you for a coin, just a copper." The words were spoken with a threatening tone.

Tibert's man tried again to push and move past them, but they blocked his entry. Next, a small blade flashed in the moonlight, helped by the second vagrant.

Glancing at the steel, the fellow with the single eyebrow turned around and ran. The beggars watched him flee, exchanged looks, and laughed as they returned to their post.

Chapter 116: Money to Spend

Money to Spend

It was only morning, but Martel already looked forward to lunch. Not that he was hungry, but that would be the earliest that he could take a nap. After every fight, he rarely had time to sleep more than three bells, which did not quite suffice. At least it was only two nights every fiveday, and he had the occasional spare hours in the afternoon to catch up on sleep.

"Pretty good." Nora examined his latest work, a tonic to strengthen the heart meant for older people or those of a weak constitution. She poured a few drops onto her hand and tasted the concoction. "It looks, smells, and tastes right. I'll tell Mistress Rana that you got another recipe to your name."

"Great." Martel began clearing away the tools he had just used. After an evening in the ring, always harrowing even when he won, he appreciated the quiet, methodical work of the apothecary. Not to mention, Martel preferred using his knowledge and skills to help people rather than hurt them.

At the same time, he had to admit the latter paid a lot more. Locked inside a strongbox Martel had purchased solely for this purpose, the novice now had forty pieces of silver, except what he had paid for the box and a few other small expenditures. He wondered if he could send money to his mother. Obviously putting coins into a letter was not a particularly safe method.

"You've been here a while now," Nora continued. "At the school, I mean. When are you going to lose that brown robe and become an acolyte?"

"Still a few months away." He hesitated. "Is the examination hard?"

"No, not at all. You just do some basic magic. At the time, I was going to be an earthmage, so that was really the only part where I had to do well."

"How long have you been an apprentice to Mistress Rana?"

"Gosh, straight after I took a course on alchemy. She had been on the lookout, and she liked my work. I wasn't particularly enamoured with earth magic, and being an alchemist sounded much more interesting. I guess that was two years ago?"

"Are you still an acolyte then?"

She shook her head. "Oh no, I was released from my contract. Well, Mistress Rana paid out in order to take me on. So I have to work for her for at least a decade, but since she's teaching me everything I know, I can hardly complain."

Finishing up his work, Martel considered how many fights he would have to win in order to pay out his contract. If such was even allowed; perhaps exceptions were made for people in higher position, like Mistress Rana. Or the duke of Cheval, who had made such a promise to Martel. If it came to it, the novice would rather spend his nights in the fighting pit.

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Once Martel had caught up a bit on sleep, he went into the city. His pockets full of silver, he walked to the market district. He felt generous enough to even spare a coin here and there to the beggars, though he only gave them pennies. His young friends in the copper lanes had taught him that giving silver to beggars on the street would get him noticed, followed, and finally mugged.

Underneath the statue of the long-dead legate, Martel sat down and waited. They were in the last throes of summer, but accustomed to much colder weather, Martel still found it pleasant outside.

"Hey, magic boy."

Martel turned around with a smile and received a hug from Shadi. "Hey, mundane girl."

"Oh, is that how you magic folk refer to us normal people? How very rude." She grinned.

"Only when you lot aren't listening." He reciprocated her expression.

"Where do you want to go? Lots of new ships in port, I noticed walking up here."

"I was thinking somewhere else than the harbour." While that particular district always promised to have new and exciting things or people, Martel preferred to give it some distance. An eyepatch

could only do so much to disguise his face, and at least a few people in The Broken Crown had seen him without his mask. "I'm not busy today, so if you got time, we can eat at a tavern tonight. My treat, of course."

"If you are sure?" she asked with a cautious smile, to which he nodded. "That sounds really nice. But I had lunch before I left home, so I'm not hungry any time soon. What should we do until then?"

"I thought we might walk to the Temple of the Sun. It's supposed to be really nice this time of year, with the sun illuminating the whole place."

"It is, yeah. That sounds nice also."

They began walking, entering the crowd of people that crawled all over the market district like peas in a hive. "And on the way, let's find something for you. Like a scarf, or maybe a new perfume." He jangled some of the coins in his pocket. "We might as well spend some of this before someone steals it." He laughed a little, but left his hand by his money, just in case.

"Aren't we generous today," she remarked with a smile before her face became serious. "I should really thank you again for what you did. My dad is busy with work again, but we'd never have gotten the money in time if not for you."

"You're welcome. Have you told him yet?"

"I did what you suggested. Told him I got a job in town. I disappear for some hours every day, and I give him a handful of silver now and then. He's very proud of me. Tells me that he knew things would work out if we just kept trying."

"Well, I suppose they did, even if he doesn't know how."

"Yeah." As the street grew narrow and the massed tangle of people dense, she took his arm. "How did you get the money? If it's alright that I ask."

Enjoying the feel and touch of her presence, Martel saw no harm in sharing. "Well, it's one reason why I keep my head down in the harbour district these days..."

## Chapter 117: Calculations

### Calculations

"Since a couple of beggars proved too much for you, I have a different task." Seated behind his desk, Tibert stared at Mark, the man whose eyebrows met in the middle. "You're going into the ring against the stableboy tonight. Try to learn something about him in between getting smacked in the head." With a gesture, Tibert dismissed the fellow, who quickly left the chamber.

From a corner in the room, the fighter known as Leatherfist emerged. "I saw the boy the other night. He looks nothing special." He stretched the fingers on his right hand, covered by a brown glove.

"And still he wins. Even with a blind side."

The other man raised his left arm, which ended in a stump. "He wouldn't be the only one winning at less than full strength."

"Not like this." Tibert shook his head and looked at his fighter. "This is on purpose. First time that stableboy was here, he wore the eyepatch on his right eye. Next time, on the left. He's keen to hide himself, and it doesn't sit well with me."

"You think he's got a cheat? Alchemy?"

"It's possible." Tibert stretched his neck and drummed his fingers against the desk.

The fighter scratched his arm stump against his stubbles. "Put him in the ring with Lothar. No way a fresh-faced pup can beat that old codger unless he's got something up his sleeve."

"If he does, nobody can know."

"You leave him to me, and nobody will." Leatherfist scraped his tongue over his teeth. "Been too long since I had fun in the ring."

~

"Four nights and four victories for our young Stallion! Can he make it five when he faces Mark tonight?" Tibert asked the crowd, who shouted and jeered in response. Weapons were thrown into the pit. "Fight!"

Martel sized up his opponent. Quickly done, as he faced a rather short fellow, whose most distinguishing feature was how his eyebrows met above his nose. A little distracting, but the staff in his hands threatening to smash Martel over the head brought back focus.

Besides his magic, the young mage had the advantage of reach with his long arms; reversely, Mark presented a much smaller target, and he could more easily defend himself. Striking him on the head was out of the question, unless Martel could first throw him off balance.

Their staves met as they both tried to land a blow, and Martel took a few hits on his arms, though nothing to trouble him. He even allowed himself to suffer another attack, this time against his shoulder. He groaned and twisted as if it had caused him injury, even as his shield had taken the sting.

The audience made various exclamations, enjoying the spectacle; besides that, Martel tried to lure his opponent in, make him overconfident.

It took a few more tries before it worked. While raising his shield to take the next blow, Martel empowered himself to move faster than he normally could, stabbing his staff into Mark's stomach.

The wind knocked out of him, the short man retreated to buy time and recover. Martel did not let him. Magic pushing him along, the novice struck with speed to send Mark to his knees and the staff from his hands.

Victorious again, Martel raised his fist into the air triumphantly.

~

Waiting in his small chamber, Martel was able to relax himself much faster than previous nights. By now, he had become accustomed to the entire ritual; stepping into the ring did not make him anxious as before, nor did the experience of victory leave him as elated as the first time.

He did enjoy receiving his winnings every time; that never got old. Tibert emptied the coins onto the bench as usual, and Martel quickly stacked them up into four piles of five each.

"You coming on Manday?" The bald man gave the novice one of his intense stares, bereft of a smile.

"Certainly." Martel led one of the coin stacks fall through his fingers, hoping to give the impression that he was eager to fight for the sake of money. While not his primary motivation, it was certainly a pleasant secondary benefit.

"Good. You've beaten my other regulars, so I want to put you against Lothar again. See how you fare against him now you've got some experience under your belt."

"I'll be glad to."

"Since you're here, why not grab an ale? While I know you can afford it, I don't mind giving one on the house to my victorious prize fighter." The words were spoken as if meant with kindness, yet Tibert's eyes did not reflect this emotion, and his voice became a growl at the end.

Regardless, Martel felt no temptation. "I have to get home. Work starts early tomorrow."

"With how much you're winning, you don't have to be a stableboy much longer. You should come by early one evening, we can talk about your future. Besides, the other fighters will start to think you've got something against them if you won't even have a single beer with them." The tavernkeeper smiled, yet his words felt more threatening than his demeanour would suggest.

"Thanks. I'll give it some thought," Martel declared, hoping that a vague answer would get him out of this conversation. He stood up and began demonstrably filling his pockets with his winnings, and Tibert finally left him.

Once this was over, Martel would miss having his pockets full of silver. But he would be glad to part with the fights and the sense of unease he felt the moment he stepped inside The Broken Crown; a feeling which became heightened in Tibert's presence and only disappeared once he could leave the tavern.

It was not only that Martel was deceiving the man and games of deception made the novice nervous; regardless of what Tibert said, no matter how cordial his words seemed, the bald tavernkeeper's intense eyes and expressionless countenance gave Martel the impression of a man always calculating whether it was profitable to gut Martel and carve him up for parts. He looked forward to the day when he would never have to look or be looked upon by that man again.

## Chapter 118: Summons

### Summons

Another Malday meant another trip into town. While they had spent this particular lesson at the castle for the past two fivedays, Mistress Vana wanted to show the students the remaining water towers in the city before they would finish off the course back at the Lyceum at the end of the month.

Martel did not mind; while not the most thrilling of subjects, it was nice enough to walk outside, and it gave him the opportunity to ask a few questions of the woman who hopefully would instruct him as an acolyte.

"Mistress Vana? You're the teacher who instructs weathermages, right?" Martel asked.

She glanced at the novice walking next to her down the street, already taller than she was. "I do. Master Alastair has mentioned your name to me, don't worry."

"Oh, in a good way?"

"It's not in his nature to speak ill of students. You can be calm, boy. Not many novices who actually want to be weathermages, having to leave the city for their posting. If you have the desire, and Master Alastair is correct in his assessment of you, you're certain to make the cut."

Martel fell a few steps behind her, forced by traffic. It was reassuring to know, though. Even if he sometimes considered other options, such as seamage or alchemist, he still felt an obligation towards his first ambition. And if he studied diligently, perhaps he could accomplish more than one of his goals. Certainly, regardless of whether he became a weathermage or seamage, people around him would need a good alchemist.

~

Back from the northern water tower, which resembled the eastern to such a degree, Martel could not rightly tell why it had been worth visiting, the novice did his work in the apothecary and went to lunch. Doing his daily check for letters or messages, his efforts were rewarded.

Henry the air mage rummaged through a drawer and pulled out a small note. Yet rather than hand it over, he regarded Martel with a mischievous look. "Now, this didn't come in an envelope, and I had to look at the message to see the recipient."

Martel frowned. "You read my letter?" He reached out to grab it, but Henry pulled back.

"I had heard you spent a lot of time in town. I'd never have guessed this was the reason." He gave a knowing smirk, even as Martel used magic to grab the note and fly it into his own hand.

Scowling at the air mage, Martel stepped away to look at his message, written in flowing script.

Dear Martel,

I must insist upon your presence at the earliest convenience.

If not today, please pay me a visit tomorrow at the latest.

It is imperative we speak before the eve of Manday.

The Copper Lady

The wording threw Martel off for a moment until he guessed this had to be Kerra, ordering him to the copper lanes. His next fight was Manday, which presumably explained why she wanted to meet before that. Martel could go this evening, but having the afternoon off, he had agreed to spar with Maximilian for two bells, which he knew would leave him absolutely exhausted. Not to mention, he disliked being summoned like a dog by a woman extorting him. She could wait until tomorrow evening, Martel decided. For now, he had training to do.

~

"Come on, you can do better than that!" Maximilian practically roared at him.

If beating the other fighters in the ring instilled any kind of confidence in Martel, sparring against Maximilian was an efficient method for losing it again.

The novice knew that many of the other elemental acolytes, and perhaps some of the teachers, held some disdain for those mageknights who could only wield empowerment and lacked any skill in other forms of magic. At times, Martel even shared the sentiment, especially after he had met Cheval twice in a duel and handily beaten him. Of course, the son of the duke was not much of a mageknight to begin with. Fighting Maximilian was an entirely different endeavour.

It did not matter how hard Martel hit, even if he poured his magic to lend him strength; his staff did not even touch Maximilian before it was stopped by an invisible barrier. As for his own shield, it barely withstood an onslaught from the mageknight, always shattered by the strain of resisting a single blow. Thanks to his increased speed, Maximilian could easily land a second attack before Martel had the wits to raise his shield again.

Not to mention, the novice burned through his magical reserves each time he summoned his protection; as for Maximilian, making an empowered attack strong enough to blast through Martel's defence took such little effort, he could do it at will without any strain.

If only Martel could use fire, he would have the mageknight dancing to extinguish the flames licking his boots. But he could not use such powers in the ring, so he had to stick to empowering magic.

Separating, Martel raised one hand in a request for a break. Maximilian shook his head. "I have seen Lothar, and if you want to beat him this time, you need to improve."

"Just give me a moment," the novice gasped, trying to catch his breath. They had been at it for an hour, and Martel was starting to realise he would not last two full bells at this rate.

"You are not giving me a lot of confidence to bet on you come Manday night."

"That's a jest, right? You're not actually betting on my games."

"Why not? When you have an inside tip, you use it." Maximilian shrugged.

"That's how we got into this mess in the first place!"

"Correction, how you got into this mess. I was gambling fine for months without any trouble."

Martel gave him a look. "You lost."

"Yes, but I did not get into trouble. Unlike you. Now on your guard!"

Before the novice could react, a staff swept his legs from under him, and he fell on his back.

Maximilian looked down at him. "I said, on your guard." The mageknight shook his head.

"Definitely a risky wager."

## Chapter 119: In Style

### In Style

With all his recent troubles, and his dedication to properly learning empowerment magic, Martel had paid less attention to his elemental skills lately. He felt guilty about it, as he had done this before and been called out by Master Alastair for it, but it was unavoidable. He was meant to spend some of his spare bells practising a variety of exercises to hone his elemental magic, but those free hours were quickly devoured by fight nights and sparring with Maximilian.



Still, Martel did not wish to disappoint his teacher, so he did his best to pay attention during the lesson and at least appear to be a dutiful student. Of course, that only lasted until a thought occurred to him concerning his next fight, or how much his back hurt from all his landings on the arena floor, or how hungry he felt all the time from his many physical activities.

His mind was engrossed on how to sharpen his ability when raising his shield while also using magic to attack when he absently pulled on water and fire to appear between his hands. The distraction meant he did not even notice what had happened at first.

"Martel."

His teacher's voice snapped his attention back to his surroundings. He looked at the space between his hands. Instead of flaming sparks or droplets of water, a cloud of steam hung in the air.

"You did it, lad."

Martel looked at Master Alastair. "I did?"

The balding man gave a smile. "Two elements conjured as one, creating something new. Well done."

The novice grinned and used a puff of air to dissolve the steam before conjuring it again.

~

Martel's joy lasted until he remembered his other tasks for the day. He had postponed it yesterday; he could not delay further. As uncomfortable as the prospect made him feel, he had to go see Kerra of the copper lanes and find out what she wanted. He doubted she planned an ambush or the like, but even so, he showed her note to Maximilian and asked the mageknight to accompany him. Ever helpful, and rarely disinclined towards danger and the possibility of fighting, the young viscount agreed.

Rather than cut straight through the market district, they walked west before turning south, reaching the slums without going near the harbour. While it felt a little excessive, there was no harm in taking the precaution. It did mean that they spent nearly two hours before they finally reached the establishment known as The Copper Drum.

The place looked much the same as last, with people drinking and gambling at most tables. The lutes of a string were plucked in feeble contest against the clamour of the hall, not to mention the hammers of carpenters working in an adjacent room.

"Where is this cat of yours?" asked Maximilian.

"Let's ask." They approached the bar, and Martel got the attention of the man serving drinks. "I'm here to see Kerra. She expects me."

The bartender exchanged words with a guard, who left.

"While we wait." Maximilian dropped a handful of pennies on the desk and received two mugs of ale, one of which he pushed towards Martel.

The novice shook his head, rolling his eyes a little, and pushed the tankard back towards the mageknight, who shrugged and began drinking.

The guard returned soon after. "Come along." As they turned around, he pointed at Martel. "Just you."

"I will wait for you," Maximilian told him, not looking particularly disappointed with his two mugs of beer.

Martel followed Kerra's man into the complex. They walked through twists and turns of narrow hallways until he suspected the place had been built to confuse intentionally. The doors all looked the same; he only recognised his surroundings once he stepped into Kerra's chamber.

The Copper Lady sat behind her desk, practically dressed while also heavily laden with golden jewellery. Clearly, she did not take chances.

"What is it you want?" Martel asked.

She gestured for him to take a seat. "While I am not one to stand on formalities, I do feel more at ease if we are both sitting down." He complied, making her smile. "Good. I hear you are doing well over at The Broken Crown."

"I'm winning, if that's what you mean."

"Yes. Unfortunately, Tibert is a suspicious fellow. The other night, he had you followed home."

Martel could not hide the sense of alarm from his face. "So he knows?"

Kerra wagged a finger at him. "I told you to go through the copper lanes, didn't I? My men sent the spy packing. Your secret is safe. For now."

"Is that what you wanted to tell me?"

"I wanted to warn you. You should hasten our plan. Tell Tibert you want to fight Leatherfist next time."

"Your plan," Martel mumbled, wanting to correct her yet afraid to do so loudly. "I'm fighting Lothar tomorrow. But the night after that..."

"Excellent. Another thing. You should leave your mageknight companion at home."

"What? Why?"

"Because he only recognises subtlety after it has tripped him up. He enjoys his drink, and he bets on your fights," Kerra pointed out. "This is not a game, yet he treats it as one. If he lets out the wrong word at The Broken Crown, the entire ruse is done for."

Martel could not tell what annoyed him most; that Maximilian acted recklessly, or that Kerra seemed to know everything. "I'll tell him to stay home."

"Good. You are nearly at the destination, Martel. A little more, and all this is over."

"Fine. But I can't keep doing this," the novice declared, for once daring to stare the Copper Lady straight in the eye. "I'll fight this Leatherfist, and I'll win. No matter what happens after that, with you and Tibert, it's none of my business."

"Of course." She smiled affably. "That was our agreement."

~

They walked home, Martel feeling burdened whereas drink seemed to have uplifted Maximilian. The mageknight hummed and sang a popular tune, switching between one or the other depending on when he remembered the lyrics.

"Max," Martel finally said, though he had to repeat himself before he got his friend's attention.

"Yes?"

"I think it's best you stay home from the fights. We don't want to draw attention unduly."

"And who will watch your back?" the mageknight protested.

"Well, I'm fighting alone in the ring whether you're present or not. It's nearly done, anyway."

Maximilian eyed him with suspicion. "Is this that Kerra woman's idea?"

"I was followed home the other night," Martel told him. "If I hadn't gone through the copper lanes, where Kerra's men chased him off, Tibert would know everything by now."

"Did you see the man following you? Or is that what she told you," Maximilian questioned.

"Look, I'm almost done. Two more nights, hopefully."

"I don't like this copper woman," the mageknight grumbled. "Her entire plan never seemed solid in the first place. A lot of steps for you to tread, just so she can win some money from this bald mug polisher."

"I don't care," Martel remarked wearily. "I'll do what she asks, and that'll be the end of it."

"And if she persists? If she demands another favour after this one, and another, lest she spills her mouth to the Lyceum?"

"We'll burn down her Stars-damned tavern with her inside of it."

Maximilian nodded thoughtfully. "If we are going down, we might as well do so in style."

## Chapter 120: Lothar

### Lothar

"Our favourite Stallion returns to the ring to face the one opponent who ever bested him! Tonight, he faces Lothar!" The crowds responded to Tibert's announcement with the expected cheer.

Martel knew he could win against the old man. When they first met, he had never tried fighting in the pit before, and he did not know how to use his magic. Now, Martel was no longer intimidated, and he had acquired the abilities he needed. On the other hand, he also had to win. He could not expect to gain a match against the champion of The Broken Crown if he could not beat Lothar.

"Fight!"

Martel made a few tentative attacks. They were swiftly denied, and he practically had to leap back to avoid the retaliation. If there had been any doubt, Martel knew for certain that Lothar had gone easy on him during their first fight. Clearly, no such favours were bestowed now. The old veteran struck with speed and precision without ever leaving himself vulnerable. After every attack, he was immediately ready to defend.

Martel decided to test the limits of this. He raised his magical shield and allowed an opening. Lothar took the bait, striking against the shoulder. Ignoring this, the novice made his own assault. His staff met nothing but air, and he had used the first portion of his spellpower.

Opting for caution, Martel decided to hold back using more of his magic until he had a better sense of his opponent. The first fight had been so one-sided, he had not really learned anything about Lothar. Now, he could better focus and actually analyse how the old legionary fought. Every time they exchanged strikes, each of them attacking and parrying, Martel got a better sense of the speed and strength he faced.

It soon became apparent that he was outmatched. He finally tried to use magic to increase his speed, which made no difference; he could not move fast enough to land a proper blow. Lothar always defended, and he even managed to land his own strikes on Martel, who by now was growing sore and tired across his upper body.

The only thing that Martel could reliably hit was Lothar's staff. Which, perhaps, could also work. But it required Martel to push his magic further. He raised his shield around him, creating a slight shimmer only visible to those with magical sight. But this time, he needed to protect more than just his body.

He focused on the staff in his hands. Made of living wood, Martel imagined it as part of him. An extra limb. He pushed his magical barrier to extend across the surface of his weapon.

Using the last of his magic, Martel poured power into his arms as he struck. As expected, Lothar raised his staff to parry, probably already prepared to retaliate now that Martel had brought himself off-balance.

The force of the blow cracked Lothar's staff in twain; Martel's shield protected his own from similar damage. Pure surprise overtook the old man's face, and before he could recover, Martel thrust his staff up against the veteran's throat, as if holding a blade that might cut him open.

Dropping the broken pieces in his hands, Lothar exhaled. "I surrender."

~

Retreated to his chamber, Martel removed his mask with a smile. In just a few fivedays, he had gained enough control of his empowerment magic that he could defeat someone as skilled and experienced as Lothar. He did not imagine he would ever need these fighting skills once this task for Kerra had ended, but knowing he could shield himself and move with greater speed, attack with greater force, filled him with satisfaction.

Tibert entered. "Quite a fight. Never seen anyone strong enough to break a staff before." He poured out Martel's winnings on the bench.

"I got lucky. Got the hit right."

Tibert regarded the novice with his unblinking eyes and a calculating expression. "You've beaten my regulars. Except one. Nobody has ever defeated him, which is why I offer fifty birds to anyone who can."

Martel had wondered how to best raise the subject of getting a fight against Leatherfist; it seemed that fate had done the work for him. "I'm interested. I'll fight anyone."

"This man fights with just one fist, even against your staff. But you shouldn't underestimate him."

"I won't."

"On the other hand, no getting cold feet. If I announce to my patrons that I finally have someone who dares to face Leatherfist, you better not disappoint. Don't make a liar out of me." The tavernkeeper blinked once as he stared at the novice.

Nothing could persuade Martel from staying away. "I'll be there."

Tibert nodded slowly. "On Pelday. It'll be the only fight that night. Expect a crowd. Everyone will want to see this."

Martel left the tavern. For a moment, he wondered where Maximilian might be, until he remembered that the mageknight had not joined him; he himself had told Maximilian to stay away. With tired steps, he began walking away. As always, he quickly felt drained and almost guilty after a fight, having beaten someone who did not stand a chance against magic.

"Boy, one moment."

Martel turned around. In the darkness of the alley, he could scarcely see the speaker, but he recognised the growl that belonged to Lothar. He wondered if this was some kind of ambush or whether the old veteran had come to settle a score, but hopefully not; Martel had spent his magic, and even summoning enough fire to light a pipe would exhaust him.

Lothar approached him. "We need to talk."

"About what?" Martel tried to keep an eye on the surroundings, should any sudden movement appear; the eyepatch forced him to be rather conspicuous about it, turning his head.

"Not here, not now. Further down the main street, there's a tavern called Pork and Pepper. I'll be there tomorrow evening at sixth bell. Meet me then."

With those words, Lothar turned around and disappeared back into the building, leaving Martel to wonder what conversation awaited him.