

Firebrand 121

Chapter 121: In Low Places

In Low Places

Martel did his work for Master Jerome and Mistress Rana in the morning and spent a bell in the afternoon sparring with Maximilian, recounting how he had extended his magical shield to protect his staff while also breaking that of his opponent in half. The mageknight seemed less impressed than Martel would have thought, but perhaps he was simply still annoyed at being left at home.

"Any decent mageknight can extend his shield to cover his weapons if need be."

"Really? I've never noticed you do that the times we've been in a tight situation."

Maximilian shrugged. "That is because you are too busy to pay attention."

"Anyway, I am going up against Leatherfist on Pelday," Martel explained. "We'll soon be done with all this, and I won't need any more sparring."

"A shame. You were just starting to show the least bit of promise." The mageknight gave a grin and lashed out with his staff.

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As sixth bell approached, Martel went towards the harbour district. He did not bring his friend, since he doubted that Lothar would attempt an ambush during daylight in a public tavern. Whatever this meeting was about, it required wit rather than muscle, which might be another reason to leave Maximilian behind.

He found the place without difficulty; wearing his eyepatch, he entered. The place was half full, serving only drinks. Nobody ate or gambled or such; it seemed a simple watering hole of the sort that littered both the harbour and the market district.

Martel quickly spotted Lothar, seated at a small table with a tanker in front of him. Dropping a few pennies to get an ale of his own, Martel walked over. "You wanted to talk?"

Lothar gestured for Martel to sit down opposite him. "Yeah. You beaten all the regular staff fighters at the tavern, so I imagine Tibert will soon give you a proposal."

"Which is?"

"If he likes you, he'll offer to make you a regular like us. You won't earn as much for winning a fight, but you'll get room and board, and you'll get paid even if you lose."

"And if he doesn't like me?"

Lothar cleared his throat. "He'll offer you a fight against Leatherfist. He's always itching for that. He'll offer you a big prize, I'm sure, because he can charge twice the admission for such a fight. Don't take it."

"Why not?"

"Last guy who went into the ring against Leatherfist? He died. And you've seen Oak with his teeth? One-handed bastard took those, kept punching Oak in the mouth even after he surrendered."

That explained why the fighter had looked fearful after he yielded in his match against Martel. "I thought all of that was against the rules."

"Who cares about the rules? The crowds don't, so neither does Tibert. The fights aren't legal in the first place, so he pays off the city guard. They're not going to investigate because someone died in the pit."

Lothar shifted in his seat, and Martel realised that the grizzled veteran was afraid of Leatherface, or at least, uncomfortable at the thought of fighting him. "But he only has one hand," Martel objected, "and I have a staff! How can I lose against this guy?"

"That's what they all think. That's why the spectators love to watch him fight, why Tibert makes so much coin from it." Lothar drank from his mark and looked out at the room. "Don't fight him, boy."

Martel wondered briefly if he should hide the fact that he had already agreed to do so, but the fight would be announced soon enough anyway. "I already told Tibert I would. We are fighting tomorrow evening."

Lothar turned his head sharply to stare at the novice. "Tell him you changed your mind, or just don't show." He took a deep breath and leaned forward, elbows against the table. "Look, I can't prove it, but I don't think Leatherfist fights fair. It's the only explanation why he can win against the odds."

"What makes you say that?" Could the one-handed fighter be a spellcaster? Clearly not outside the realm of possibilities, given Martel's own activities.

"Once, I caught him leaving an alchemist's shop with a little vial. When I asked about it, he said it was balm for his stump, take away the itching."

Probably skin salve, or some variant thereof. "That doesn't sound strange."

"Not in itself. But the only times I've ever seen him with such a little vial are the times he's had a fight." Lothar leaned back into his seat. "I don't know what's going on, but take my advice and don't risk your life for this. Better ways to make coin."

Martel could not do as the old legionary suggested, but he did know a thing or two about alchemy; he just needed more information. "Thanks for your advice, Lothar. I appreciate it."

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Martel walked home through the copper lanes, and not only to protect himself against being followed. Before he steered towards the Lyceum, he made a turn towards a once derelict house, though a few improvements and renovations had been made in recent times. Wise from past mistakes, he avoided the front door to enter through the back. A number of children greeted him, eager to both ask questions but also relate a variety of stories to him.

"Martel, look! I learned how to do the salve you make."

"You bring us something?"

"Can you look at this rash I got?"

"I kept sneezing yesterday, like you wouldn't believe."

Martel tried to calm them down and gain some quiet; eventually, he succeeded. "Where is Weasel?"

The young chief of the group appeared, walking down the stairs. "What's this ruckus? Oh, it's you."

"You don't have to sound so disappointed," Martel told him. "I have a task along with a silver coin for you and your friends."

Chapter 122: The Scent of Apples

The Scent of Apples

The day of Martel's last fight had arrived. He did his morning class while running through his conversation with Lothar in his head, wondering what to make of it. As he had never seen Leatherfist fight, Martel had no idea if he really cheated and how, but obviously, it was not a far-fetched idea. Though he could not imagine that the fighter could seriously pose a threat to Martel, given his magic. If that alchemist had such powerful potions to sell that a one-handed man might defeat a mage, he would be selling his elixirs to emperors and kings, not some brawler in illegal prize fights.

Hopefully he would soon know more. When he had a spare bell in the afternoon, Martel went into town to meet up with Weasel. "How did it go?"

"All good. Your man went to the alchemist's shop this morning. We snagged it straight after." Weasel held out a small vial between his fingers.

It paid to have friends in low places. Of course, Leatherfist could simply buy a new one, but Martel might learn something from this one. He reached out to grab it, and Weasel hold back.

"If this is important enough for you to pay one bird, you can pay another."

"You'll rob anyone, won't you?" Despite his grumbling, Martel dug out another silver piece in addition to the one he paid last night and flicked it over to the boy, who handed over the small flacon.

"Pleasure doing business." The urchin disappeared, leaving Martel alone.

The novice stared at the small vial in his hand. It looked to be a clear liquid, same viscosity as water. He removed the stopper to smell the content. Different scents reach his nose, and he recognised one as apples. Somehow, he did not imagine that Leatherfist went to an alchemist for a drink of cider. He needed to ask someone more knowledgeable.

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Entering the apothecary, Martel found Nora at work. While Mistress Rana might be better to ask, he was a little wary of involving the stern alchemist, who might be prone to suspicion; in comparison, her apprentice seemed the better choice.

"Martel, back again? Did you forget something this morning?"

"No, but I found this strange vial in the entrance hall, lying in the corner. I thought I would bring it here, in case you might know what it is," he lied.

"Well, I haven't sold anything like this." She did as Martel had done, smelling the odour that rose from the small bottle. "Better not taste it, however tempting," she laughed and took another sniff.

"Yeah, better not. All I can smell is apples, but I don't know any recipe that uses that."

Nora shook her head. "It's not. I think that's chamomile what you can smell."

"What's that used for?"

"It helps people relax, both physically and mentally. If they are having seizures or being hysterical."

Not exactly what Martel expected. He had guessed the potion might give magical strength or something like that, but this sounded like the opposite. Maybe Leatherfist took this to calm his nerves, though it was hard to imagine him being nervous before the fight, given Lothar's description of the man.

"We better get rid of this," Nora considered. "If we don't know what it is or who it belongs to, it's best not to leave it lying around." She poured the liquid down a grate.

Well, perhaps Martel would find out its purpose tonight.

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Walking down the main street that ran from the docks north towards the market, Martel stopped as The Broken Crown came into sight. Already, people were crowding up outside. Despite the short notice, Tibert had clearly no issues attracting people to his prize fight. Adjusting his eye patch a little, Martel felt the familiar sensation of anxiety slowly rising. He had beaten all the other fighters, and he should not be nervous; but Lothar had done a good job building up Leatherfist as a fearsome opponent. At the same time, this could be the last night Martel had to do this, which only added more emotions to his mental state. All in all, his stomach felt jittery.

He avoided the crowd outside to enter through the alley, found the small serving boy and bade him tell Tibert of his arrival, and went to his chamber by the fighting hall. Mask in place, he sat, trying to keep his breathing calm. He knew he could do this. His shield could withstand any blow. He could make himself stronger and faster. He had a staff, and he was fighting a one-handed man. He would simply not allow the other man to get within reach.

One of the doormen appeared. "It's time."

~

Martel had always felt the fighting hall was filled to the brim during the bout. Tonight proved his previous understandings wrong. The place was completely packed. Every balcony was stuffed with people. He could hardly make his way across the floor to reach the pit. The doormen had to push and shove people aside, and it still took much longer than usual to cross the small distance before Martel could climb down into the ring.

The noise felt absolutely deafening, as if all of it became channelled down the hall and compressed into the small space where Martel now stood. But he knew, once the fight began, it would all fade away.

A grim-looking man jumped down into the pit. The crowds went wild, screaming his name. A staff was thrown down for Martel to pick up. He glanced at his opponent, observing that he wore metal bracers on his arms along with a hardened tunic much like Martel's own.

The ladder was raised. There would be no escape, no way to back out. Martel left a winner, or if Lothar was to be believed, not at all.

Martel would not let it come to that; he had his magic to draw upon should the worst threaten to happen. And with his staff in hand, he felt confident. Yet he could not dismiss a cold sensation of dread slowly creeping down his spine as he stared into the deep-set eyes of his opponent.

The brawler raised his left stump into the air, and the spectators responded with maddening shouts. As for his right hand, he clenched it into a fist inside its leather glove.

From on high, the command came. "Fight!"

Chapter 123: Leatherfist

Leatherfist

In this very moment, Martel's world consisted of a pit, about fifteen feet across. The ground below was sand, the walls were stone, and one other person existed within this place.

Leatherfist stood with his arms raised defensively, eyes focused on Martel. His face betrayed nothing, neither rage nor fear, malice or sympathy.

Despite his superior reach, Martel played it cautiously, fearing some manner of treachery. If Leatherfist had bought some kind of potion to increase speed, agility, or strength, he might catch Martel off-guard with a powerful punch to decide the fight.

Carefully, Martel made a few quick strikes with minimal strength behind them, just to understand how the brawler responded.

The bracers on Leatherfist's arms came up to deflect, protecting his body and head. Excellent defence, but it did not afford him any chance to retaliate as Martel remained outside of reach. If that was all he had, the novice did not fear him.

Growing in confidence, Martel kept ready to raise his shield and stepped up his attacks, seeking a path to knock his opponent on the head and take him down for good.

Swiftly, Leatherfist parried as before, avoiding any damage. This time, he even had the opportunity to hit Martel on his left hand.

The novice felt the leather glove strike against his knuckles, but it caused him no pain, nor did he lose his grip on his staff. Unafraid, he continued his assault, realising his opening. The brawler could protect his face and upper body with his bracers, but not his legs. Martel's staff came straight against the shin bone, making a mark even through the hardened leather trousers worn by his opponent.

Leatherfist flinched in pain but remained standing, taking a swipe at the youth. It missed, as Martel simply leaned back. The grizzled veteran came at him again, and the mage decided to take advantage of this, using the same feint from previous fights. He summoned his shield to protect himself and aimed a blow at the other man's head.

The leather glove struck Martel on the cheek just above his cloth mask, but protected by his shield, he hardly felt it. Meanwhile, his staff struck the brawler on the temple, making him stagger backwards. A moment of vulnerability.

Sensing victory at hand, Martel moved forward to strike another blow and finish the fight. Yet as he moved, it felt as if the hit to his cheek had actually made impact, leaving him as dazed as his opponent had to be. His staff came too slowly, allowing Leatherfist to evade. Strangest of all, Martel thought he could smell apples.

His hand felt numb. While it had been struck early in the fight, he had barely felt it. Yet now it reacted slow as he tried to move his fingers, just like his mind seemed less agile. Leatherfist came again, and Martel barely managed to avoid a direct punch to his face.

Stepping back to gain some distance, though the ring would not allow much more, Martel raised his hand in front of him. He saw no signs of damage, yet the fingers moved at half speed to close and open. And the smell of apples came even stronger.

As Leatherfist flexed his one hand and made to punch at Martel again, the novice stared at the glove before he finally managed to dodge by stepping to the side. The leather-bound fist barely missed him, bringing the strange scent with it, and Martel finally understood.

Chamomile and other herbs, no doubt, to cause relaxation or even lethargy. Leatherfist did not drink the vial he bought from the alchemist; he poured it onto his leather glove and made contact with his opponent's skin.

Martel's knowledge on alchemy had its limits, and he could not tell how powerful the effect might be, or when it would wear off. But he understood now the secret behind Leatherfist's dominance in the ring, despite the man's disability and disadvantage. Already, Martel's mind felt hazy, like in a dream, and he could feel his reactions and movements slowing down.

Leatherfist came at him again, and the novice could not hope to evade this time. He summoned his shield, which took the brunt of the blow, but he only had enough spellpower left for two more of those. He could not hope for the concoction used by Leatherfist to wear off within the next two swings.

Desperate to buy time, Martel lashed out wildly with his staff just to keep his opponent back. His last resort, rather than expending all his magic on shields, would be to use his remaining spellpower to simply knock Leatherfist into the ground. But that would leave the novice exhausted and trapped at the bottom of this pit, with hundreds of furious spectators recognising him to be a cheat. Not to mention what Tibert might do to him.

Through the blur, Martel saw the smirk on Leatherfist's face. He seemed fully aware that his tincture was doing its work, promising him victory. He flexed and clenched his fingers inside the glove, and his expression promised no mercy for Martel. Briefly, he recalled Oak with his wooden teeth, another victim of Leatherfist's brutality.

Praying to the Stars for deliverance, the novice glanced up for a brief moment. He saw the hazy faces of countless onlookers, shouting for his blood. And then – little sparks of light.

Martel thought it was the effect of the elixir as his field of vision became filled with bright flashes. Yet as he eyed his opponent, he saw a dumbfounded look upon Leatherfist's face.

Finally, Martel remembered and recognised what was happening. Sindhian powder, strewn generously to fall down on him and reveal the presence of magic by bursting into light. With the realisation came panic.

"He's got magic!" a voice cried out.

From another balcony came a second. "He's cheating!"

And a third. "The fight is rigged!"

All Nether broke loose as the fighting hall turned into a frenzy of people screaming for Martel's blood.

Chapter 124: Far from the Madding Crowd

Far from the Madding Crowd

The fighting hall of The Broken Crown had turned to pure chaos and mayhem. Many tried to escape and found themselves trapped in the crowd or worse, flung to the floor and trampled. Quite a few shouted for their money back, especially those with large wagers on the fight. Lastly, some shouted to kill the cheat, throwing anything at hand into the pit at Martel.

If Leatherfist felt intimidated by facing a mage, he quickly overcame it to launch an attack at the novice. Unfortunately for the brawler, Martel had no reason to hold back. Even in his dazed state, he raised the wind with such force, it knocked Leatherfist straight into the wall.

Acting with as much speed as he could muster, Martel grabbed the fighter's arm and pressed the leather glove against the man's face, giving him a taste of his own medicine. He added a kick to the head for good measure, and Leatherfist ceased to stir, falling unconscious back down.

That took care of one enemy; only several hundreds to go. From above, someone threw an empty mug at him. He was only safe until they managed to put the ladder down and descend into the pit, or maybe they simply decided to jump into the ring and overwhelm him. Martel had enough magic left for one major spell, and he could not think of anything that might get him to safety; he could not even escape the pit.

Leaping from the floor, a powerful figure landed inside the ring, making the sand spray up. Martel swung around, wielding his staff.

Maximilian caught the weapon with one hand and tore it away from Martel's grip. Grabbing the novice by the collar, the mageknight made an empowered throw and flung Martel up from the pit to land on the floor, knocking several people to the ground. Immediately, Maximilian made his own escape with an empowered jump to land next to his friend.

Surrounded by people brawling and trying to escape, the mageknight used elbows and the pommel of his dagger to knock people aside. Martel looked around to find the closest door, all the while trying to avoid punches and blows.

The exit to the back rooms of the tavern lay nearby, only ten feet away or so, but a tightly packed mass of people stood between them, making flight impossible. Gathering his remaining power, Martel remembered his spell from the temple in the Khivan quarter. From the ground, he ignited a line of fire.

He did not have the strength to make the flames powerful – simply casting the spell drained him beyond his abilities – but they looked sufficiently dangerous that panic of the crowd escalated. On both sides of the fire, people pushed to escape, trampling and squeezing each other.

Seeing the clear path, Maximilian grabbed Martel by his tunic and pulled him along. They fled down the line of fire, feeling the heat singe at them, though it lacked the intensity to truly burn. Moments later, they burst through the door, fleeing the fighting hall.

They were not alone in doing this. Some had already fled this way, and others did so now. Down the narrow corridors and through the back rooms, the tumultuous stampede continued as people either

sought to escape or catch Martel. With his eyepatch and mask, he was easy to recognise, and the angry mob pushed forward against him and Maximilian from both ahead and behind them; only the cramped space kept them from overwhelming the two mages.

"Cover me," Maximilian growled. Wielding his dagger, no longer using only the blunt end, he lashed out to carve a way to the outside.

Turning around to stand back to back with the mageknight, Martel faced the furious crowd. Fists came against him, and he raised his arms to shield himself. Further back, he recognised Tibert's bald head and cold eyes, now alight with wrath. "Kill the stable boy!" the tavernkeeper shouted, as if the others needed any encouragement.

Martel released a blast of air to push them back, but it did little besides giving him a headache due to his drained spellpower; his targets stood so tightly packed, they kept each other standing up. A blow struck him on his mouth, and he tasted blood.

Seeing the small bench where he usually sat before and after fights, Martel grabbed it and threw it at his attackers. It worked better than his spell; besides pushing them back into each other, the bench lay like an obstacle, buying Martel a few precious moments.

He made full use of them by turning to follow Maximilian, who had cut a bloody path down the corridor. Martel had to step over people lying on the ground, groaning and clutching wounds. Although they had been ready to inflict the justice of the mob upon him just minutes earlier, he felt pity for them, but he did not let his sentiments slow him down. Following the mageknight, Martel stumbled out of The Broken Crown to enter the alleyway behind it.

"Stable boy!" came the roar. With a malicious glint in his eye and a vicious knife in his hand, Tibert and two henchmen pushed through the wounded to reach the alley as well.

Reacting without hesitation, Maximilian engaged the nearest opponent, wrestling with him to push him into his companion. Tibert, meanwhile, came bearing straight for Martel.

Exhausted in mind, body, and magic, Martel dearly wished for a weapon as Tibert lunged forward. Drawing on spellpower he had already spent, Martel suppressed the urge to vomit and summoned his shield. Tibert's knife slashed the mask around his face, but the dwindling magic kept Martel from actual harm, stopping the blade as it reached his skin.

At the same time, Martel struck Tibert with an empowered fist straight on his chin. The bald tavernkeeper fell backwards to the ground thanks to the power of the blow; judging by the cracking sound as Martel's fist met his face, Tibert received a broken or dislocated jaw in the bargain as well.

"Come on!" Maximilian grabbed Martel by the arm and pulled him away. They broke into a run; the last that Martel saw, glancing over his shoulder, was Tibert's menacing glare as he got on his feet, clutching his injured jaw with both hands.

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They did not stop running until they had put considerable distance between them and the tavern, escaping down the alleyways of the harbour. They only slowed down as they reached the market district, where Martel tore both eyepatch and cloth mask from his face.

Continuing at walking speed, no sign of pursuers behind them, Martel looked at his friend. "How did you know to help me? I didn't know you were at the fight."

Maximilian waved one hand dismissively. "Yes, yes, you told me to stay away, but you did not seriously think I would leave you on your own? I needed to make sure I would get my ring back. I was at the last fight as well."

"Thanks. Turns out, you were smarter than me. I would never have gotten out of there without you."

"That goes without saying, though I would not mind if you did say it again." The corner of Maximilian's mouth tugged upwards.

Feeling an overwhelming sense of relief at their escape, Martel did not mind obliging. "Thank you, Max. You saved me back there. Again."

The mageknight patted him on the back. "No trouble. Come along, I need a tankard of the strongest ale ever brewed by Man."

Martel only wanted to go straight home to the Lyceum, but given the debt he owed Maximilian, he could not refuse. At least his nausea from magical exhaustion had disappeared, even if the mere thought of doing the smallest spell threatened to recall the unpleasant sensation. Traversing a small distance, they reached The Golden Goose and bought two mugs of their best beer.

As the drink began warming Martel, and he finally had a chance to sit down and gather his thoughts, he allowed himself to consider what had just transpired. "How did they know? Someone went to the trouble of throwing Sindhian powder at me. They planned for this to happen, and they planned ahead."

Maximilian scratched the frail beginnings of a beard on his chin. "There is one person who knew from the start. Kerra."

"But she sent me in to win, not to have the fight disrupted."

The mageknight shook his head, looking sceptical. "Her plan never really made sense. Tibert's champion losing might have cost him a bit of silver, but hardly enough to put him out of business. On the other hand, a highly anticipated prize fight against his undefeated champion, sure to pack the place full – you saw how the crowd reacted when your secret was revealed."

Slowly, the pieces fell into place. Kerra had dispatched him neither to win or lose, but to be unmasked as a cheat at the worst possible moment. Nobody would ever go to a prize fight at The Broken Crown again, let alone place any wagers or pay admission for it. The Copper Lady had ruined her rival, using Martel as a pawn.

"I could have died in that pit if the crowd had gotten their hands on me." The scale of the betrayal sank in.

Maximilian took a deep draught from his ale. "Which is why we do not listen to sketchy women running illegal gambling operations," he said sagely.

"That Nether-born bitch." Facing Leatherfist had seemed bad enough; he alone could have killed Martel if his trick with the glove had worked. Martel had been forced to escape possible death twice in quick succession, all because he thought he was clever by cheating at dice. Because he had to save Shadi. He swallowed, starting to realise the depth of his folly – of his actions.

"Another reason to never play games with those people."

"You did, though. You lost your ring."

"Well I know that now," Maximilian grumbled. "If you want, we can go set fire to her tavern."

Martel sighed. "No." Any retaliation carried the risk of the Lyceum catching wind of his exploits, and starting a feud with a crime chief seemed unwise. And his anger, quick to rise, had left him as swiftly, replaced by weariness. This felt more like a situation of cutting his losses. At least he had the silver won in the previous fights. Shadi could stay in her home, and he had escaped his predicament with all limbs intact. In some ways, he had achieved his goal, and this could be considered a victory, but if that were the case, he felt too tired to savour it.

Chapter 125: Satisfaction

Satisfaction

Martel dreamt of fire and mobs pursuing him, led by leather-gloved legionaries. Even if his ordeal at The Broken Crown had come to an end, his mind still needed time to process the events, it seemed. When he finally woke, even before first bell had rung, he barely felt rested. His only consolation came from knowing that the dream would not chase him into the waking world; his time as a pit fighter had come to an end.

After breakfast, he waited in the entrance hall with the other novices for Mistress Vana. She appeared soon after, and rather than leaving the castle, she led them down the corridors of the school. Approaching the Hall of Elements, she chose a door just before the entrance to Master Alastair's domain, going down a flight of stairs until they reached a large space.

Despite being underground, light was not an issue. Lamps glowed with some kind of magic unknown to Martel. Thanks to them, he could see that this was in fact a large pool, with a number of pathways crossing the water. Large glass pipes rose in the corners from the basin into the ceiling, allowing him to see the blue liquid within.

"The Vault of Water, as we call it. I assume the name requires no explanation," Mistress Vana said dryly. Martel looked up to see the domed ceiling. "We are directly below the Hall of Elements, which you should all be familiar with. In fact, the glass pipes connect the circle of water above with the pool here underneath. This is where watermages practice their craft once they become acolytes and must learn to control large bodies of water." She shot a glance at Martel.

The novice looked around, imagining having classes in this place. The soft glow of the lamps and the gentle movement of the water gave a tranquil impression, entirely opposite to how he had spent his nights lately. Watching the light reflected in the pool made him wish he could come here every day; that his training could begin now.

"Today, we will make a few exercises to help determine your aptitude with water. Nothing complicated. First, I would direct your attention towards the edge of the basin." They all looked down at their feet and saw that the ground had been inscribed with runes. "Another little discovery from the North. These symbols help to purify the water and keep it from turning into a swamp. You will learn these runes once you are acolytes, as access to clean drinking water is obviously always useful. But for now, some practical exercises for you to learn."

Martel looked away from the symbols and directed his attention at his teacher, prepared to impress her and earn a spot as a future watermage.

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"Any letters?"

Henry gave a smirk. "I know why you ask, and your prayers have been answered. Your female liaison has seen fit to grace you with another missive." The airmage handed over a note, which Martel quickly snapped away.

Dear Martel,

My heartfelt congratulations on your latest endeavour.

You have accomplished the rare feat of impressing me.

I consider our arrangement concluded to satisfaction,

but my door remains open for future ventures.

The Copper Lady

Martel scowled at the paper. After throwing him to the wolves, did she think he would ever have anything to do with her again?

At least she did not try to extort him any further. Perhaps she knew better than to keep pressuring a mage, however young, or maybe even those engaged in illicit dealings had some semblance of honour. Regardless, Martel had no interest in ever seeing that woman again. He ignited a flame between his fingertips holding the paper, watching it burn.

"Hey, Maximilian!" Henry called out as the mageknight passed by.

Martel looked across the entrance hall, watching his friend receive something from the airmage acting as clerk. They exchanged some words before Maximilian turned around.

Spotting Martel, the mageknight walked over, raising his hand in front of him. "Well, that damnable woman does not renege on her agreements, at least." On his finger sat a signet ring with the crest of Marche.

"Write her a note to say thank you, she seems to love writing letters," Martel grumbled.

"Ah, surely we can put this all behind us now."

The novice looked around, just to make sure nobody was standing close, listening to their conversation. "It wasn't you she used as bait."

"But it was me who got you out," Maximilian pointed out. "You sound like Eleanor, all tempestuous over this little affair. Me, I have my ring back. I have satisfaction."

"A lot of that going around. When did you speak to Eleanor?"

"Oh, this morning. We have training every morning, after all. I had to tell her of our thrilling escape."

"Not so loud," Martel hissed.

"All those concerns will age you before your time," Maximilian warned him, sauntering off.

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In the evening, Martel retired to his room. He enjoyed the quiet solitude compared to last night and being spared any sparring with Maximilian, now that he no longer needed to prepare for his fights.

Instead, he could focus on his exercises from Master Alastair. His trip to the Vault of Water had invigorated his desire to practise elemental magic, putting empowerment behind him.

A knock interrupted him. Frowning, Martel got up. Did Maximilian think they were still going to train together? There was no need for that anymore.

As he opened the door, he saw Eleanor outside. To his surprise, she quickly wrapped her arms around him. "I am glad you are safe," she mumbled before releasing him, barely giving him time to reciprocate. "I am sorry it took me a while to see you. I needed to consider what to say first."

"That's fine. It all went well," Martel told her, still feeling a little startled. "You don't have to say anything."

"I do." She looked up at him, taking half a step back. "Martel, I warned you. To stay out of trouble, to stop getting involved with everything. To ask for help, advice, rather than charge off on your own."

"Hey," he protested, "I remember not so long ago, it was me giving you advice." It had not been much more than a month since her ill-fated attempt at making a dangerous elixir.

"That was once, and I listened to you. But Martel, you take risks again and again. How many times have you needed Maximilian to save your skin?"

"Well, he hasn't complained about it yet." Martel crossed his arms, starting to feel angry at this line of questioning.

"When I first met you, I thought your desire to help others was admirable."

"And it isn't? I told you how this mess started, why I needed the silver," he argued.

"And you could not think of a better way? You never asked me for help. You did not even ask me for advice, you simply forged ahead and got yourself neck-deep into trouble!" She raised her voice a little, frustration overflowing, eyes darting away.

Martel almost bit his tongue. She was not being fair, but he knew he would regret anything he might reply to her in this moment.

"I am sorry." She took a deep breath. "I did not mean to sound angry. I just needed to explain my reasoning."

"For what?"

She looked him in the eye. "I think you have a need to be a hero, Martel, and that is what really drives you. I also think it will get you seriously hurt or worse, sooner or later. I have tried to reason with you, but since you do not listen, I will not wait around for my prediction to come true."

"What do you mean?"

"I think it is best we spend our remaining time at the Lyceum apart. Take care, Martel. I really hope you do." She did not wait for an answer but turned around and walked away with quick steps.

Dumbfounded, he watched her leave, disappearing down the stairs.

Chapter 126: Playing the Fool

Playing the Fool

For more than a fiveday, Martel did not leave the Lyceum. He attended classes, ate his meals, and practised his spellcasting. On a few occasions, he passed Eleanor in the corridors, or their eyes met briefly in the dining hall; that was the extent of their interactions. He saw Maximilian at some of the meals, declining the mageknight's invitations to hit the taverns, and otherwise kept to himself. He did not bother trying to make another friend; at present, all his classes were with other novices several years younger than himself.

His last day with Mistress Vana came, at least for the foreseeable future. Returning to the Vault of Water, Martel and the other novices were given a series of exercises to conduct, each of them testing their ability to shape the blue liquid. Martel got through them all, whether raising water into a pillar, reverse its flow, create a small maelstrom, or calm the waves into a quiet surface. While he knew such were basic spells that any decent mage could cast at will, Martel felt reassured by Mistress Vana's behaviour and acknowledgement of his progress. Becoming a watermage, and weathermage after that, was within his reach.

He also made sure to pay attention in Master Fenrick's classes, though since he enjoyed the subject, that was hardly a chore. Martel might not be able to remember everything he was taught, but simply being made aware of a particular subject allowed him to read more about it in the library at his leisure.

"I believe I hear the bell ringing, which concludes not only this lesson, but also our topic concerning the stars. Next fiveday, we delve into the bleaker matter of maleficars." Master Fenrick gave half a smile seeing his novices exchange looks. "I thought that might get your attention. But you'll have to wait. See you this afternoon."

For Martel, the brief message held more than the promise of an interesting lecture; a month had passed since the event with the maleficar in the slums, and Martel had not paid it a single thought since then.

~

Martel was not getting involved. He was not going to barge through the copper lanes, hunting down a dark sorcerer, who certainly would be far more powerful than anything he could handle anyway. He would not do anything to attract trouble.

But – he did have friends in that district, whom he knew the maleficar had targeted. Quite possibly, the warlock remained a threat to Weasel and his gang. Although Martel had visited them last fiveday, it had only been for his own sake. He had been too preoccupied with the upcoming fight to even consider if the children needed help. He had not even asked about Sparrow. It reminded him of Weasel's accusation about how Martel only helped to make himself feel better.

At least Martel had silver to spare, and gifts quelled a guilty conscience. Going to market, he picked up a handful of the more common herbs that he imagined they could use in their provisional apothecary.

Going straight west after into the merchant quarter, Martel made sure to avoid the harbour as he moved towards the slums in the south-western part of Morcaster. Soon, the familiar house beckoned.

The children greeted him with their usual enthusiasm, questions, and remarks already before he reached the backdoor. The novice laughed, begging them to hold on at least until he was inside and had gotten rid of the bundle in his arms.

Depositing the herbs on the table in their common room, he looked around, once the children gave him a moment to breathe. "Where's Weasel at?"

The small chief appeared as if summoned from the shadows. He had a habit of doing that. "Back again? Who do you need followed this time?"

"Nothing of the sort. Just a few gifts." Martel motioned towards the plants he had delivered. "And I wanted to ask about Sparrow."

"Oh, you remembered about her, did you?"

"Everything's a barb with you, isn't it," the novice retorted. "How is she?"

"Sparrow's fine. Not your concern anyway."

"I guess not. But if you've had any more trouble with whoever took her, you'd need someone with knowledge of the arcane," Martel pointed out. However ill-suited the novice might be to tangle with a maleficar, the children were surely in a worse position to deal with such a nefarious individual.

"Well, we've had no trouble. Barely any news. Well, discounting all the trouble in the harbour!" Weasel's mouth turned into a rare grin. "Big prize fight with this leather-gloved fellow, turns out his opponent could use magic! Huge brawl broke out, and the mage damn near burned the place down."

That was an exaggeration, Martel knew; his little wall of flames had been barely more than sparkling lights. "What's it to you?"

"Nothing. I keep my nose to myself. Stay out of other people's business."

"Unless you can make coin from it, I wager."

Weasel shrugged. "That would make it my business, after all."

"Well, I have nothing to do with prize fighting. Not my business either." Basically true, counting from the last couple of fivedays.

"That's good. Now that it's moved to the copper lanes, I wondered if we'd start to see you hang around our little part of town."

Martel frowned. "Wait. They're doing fights here now?"

"In The Copper Drum." Weasel's face lost its smug expression. "If you intend to go, make sure to leave our name at home. We don't want to cross paths with the Copper Lady. Better for our health."

Martel did not intend to go, yet he could not help but ask all the same. "When's the next fight?"

"There's one every Solday, I think, and sometime else in the fiveday. Don't rightly remember."

Martel was not getting involved. His business with Kerra had concluded. There was nothing gained by pursuing this.

But – tomorrow was Solday, and he wondered if the Copper Lady had played him for a fool in more ways than one.

Chapter 127: The Bond of the Ring

The Bond of the Ring

Martel spent most of his morning considering whether to go to The Copper Drum or not. On the surface of it, it posed no danger. Kerra's note had said as much, that she considered their business concluded. He had no specific reason to avoid the place, other than his own opinion on the proprietress of the tavern.

But Kerra had already made a fool of him, blindsiding him completely. Could this be some kind of a trap? Her note had extended an open invitation, which he had ignored. What if she had made Weasel dangle bait in front of him to lure him towards The Copper Drum? Given her sway, it would not be hard for her to discover Martel's friendship with the urchins, nor would it be the first time that Weasel let him walk into an ambush.

In the end, curiosity won over caution. He had no specific reason to suspect a trap. But just to be on the safe side, maybe he should take Maximilian along. Even if Eleanor's words about relying on the mageknight to save his skin still stung, Martel had to admit that he would not have escaped The Broken Crown without his friend's assistance. And he had no reason to expect trouble that would require intervention. And should it happen, Maximilian would probably relish the prospect anyway.

"Max, do you want to go see a fight with me?"

The acolyte looked up from his lunch meal. "I wondered how long you could keep up this facade of dutiful student. I did not expect you would want to see a prize fight of all things, but why not?"

"Great. There's one tonight, at The Copper Drum."

"Wait." Maximilian frowned. "You want to go to that hag's place? Since when do they host fights anyway?"

"Exactly. Rather suspicious timing. I can't deny being curious."

The mageknight regarded him carefully. "You realise we might walk into a viper's nest? Considering what happened last time we went."

"I don't plan on starting anything. Our business with that woman is done. But should something happen – we are mages, aren't we."

Maximilian slapped his hand against the table. "Indeed we are!"

~

The Copper Drum was all but packed. Not the common room, though it saw its share of patrons as well, but the new fighting hall that had been added or constructed among the chambers of the complex. It resembled its counterpart at The Broken Crown, with a lowered pit and balconies allowing for many spectators. Paying the admission for himself and Maximilian, Martel entered with his friend to find a spot among the crowd.

The fight had already begun, so Martel missed any announcement of the fighters. He did not require it where one party was concerned; looking down into the pit, he recognised Lothar.

For the next ten minutes, they watched the old veteran thrash his opponent. Although Lothar made it seem tense and as if the outcome might have been in doubt, Martel could tell from experience who had the upper hand from start to finish. Finally, the other fighter yielded, and Lothar emerged from the pit to applause.

The two mages left the fighting hall along with the other spectators, who poured into the common room or the gambling chamber. "Are we getting something to drink or what?" Maximilian asked as they finally made their way to the bar.

Martel looked out at the room to note Lothar sitting alone, quenching his thirst. "Yeah. Can you get started? There's someone I should talk to."

They separated, and Martel wove in and out among the other patrons to reach the old fighter. Looking up, he glanced at the novice for a moment before recognition flitted across his face, and he scratched the scar that ran down his cheek. "I see that your eye has healed better than mine."

"Yeah." Guilty about his deception, Martel was unsure what to say. "I'm sorry I lied to you. You tried to help me out. Warned me against Leatherfist."

"That's a lot of good it did me." Lothar took a sip from his ale, but he kept his eye on Martel.

"You're really a mage, then?"

"I am, though I'll deny ever having set foot in The Broken Crown if anyone asks."

"Given your disguise, it's not like there's a lot of witnesses. Tibert's in hot waters, once they found out about the illegal fights and him bribing the city guard. As for me, nobody is going to take the word of an old veteran doing illegal fights over that of a mage." Lothar watched him with an inscrutable expression. "The truth doesn't matter in the city, only who you are."

"People don't like me either just because one of my ancestors is Tyrian. And they hate my friend just for being Khivan, even though she was born right here in Morcaster."

"There's no helping your friend, but you at least got a way out. Nobody messes with a mage, certainly not anybody among ordinary folk. I've seen guards bow and scrape to your kind while having only disdain for veterans like me, despite all our years of service to the Empire."

"I'm sorry they treat you that way," Martel said earnestly. "Even if I am a mage, I know what it's like to be hungry. The only reason I ended up doing the prize fights was to get coin for my friend, so she wouldn't get kicked out of her home."

"Times are hard." Lothar gave him an examining look. "Did you use magic when we fought?"

"The second time, yeah."

"At least I didn't get beaten by a pup still wet behind the ears," the old veteran grumbled.

"Actually, since you tried to warn me about Leatherfist, I wanted to return the favour. You should know that your new employer was behind everything. She made me do the fights, and she revealed my secret to cause all the chaos and panic."

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised. She already had the pit built and everything, and she was awful quick offering me and the other boys to work for her."

"You should watch your back. I don't know if I trust her enough to stay in her employ," Martel said.

Lothar gave a shrug. "She went after Tibert, not me or mine. Here, we have a home, food, and silver. For an old man with no other skill than fighting, this is as good as life gets."

Maximilian pushed his way through the throng, careful not to spill his mugs of ale. "There you are," he growled. "You could have told me where you went."

The veteran looked up at the mageknight before turning his attention to Martel again. "Look, I'm not in the mood for more talking tonight. But I'm not the only one you injured, boy. If you want to make amends, come by tomorrow evening." His gaze turned intense as he locked Martel's eyes with his own. "You cheated in the pit, broke the bond of the ring. The others deserve to hear that from you."

The old man got up, emptied his mug, and let it hit the table with a forceful sound. Maximilian took his seat, glancing at Lothar as he left. "Nice of him to give us his table."

Chapter 128: Blooded Anew

Blooded Anew

Martel spent another morning contemplating whether he should go to The Copper Drum, though he had different reasons for his indecisiveness this time around. He no longer feared a trap of some sort; he and Maximilian had spent at least an hour in the tavern without any trouble of any kind. Instead, he hesitated because of the conversation that lay ahead. Talking to Lothar last night had never been his plan; he had simply seen the opportunity and felt the old man deserved a warning about his new employer, same as Lothar had tried to warn him.

The other fighters would be angry at Martel, and rightly so. The mage did not relish the idea of giving them the chance to express their anger or scorn any apology he might make. Yet he knew this was the thinking of a coward; he had done wrong, and he ought to accept the blame for it.

~

His decision made, Martel set out for the slums second night in a row. As before, he took the longer route, avoiding the harbour. Approaching The Copper Drum, the place looked lively as ever. People drank and gambled, and he had begun to understand what services some of the younger women and even men sold at the place, dressed provocatively and laughing at Martel's reaction to their invitations.

Looking over the common room, he saw Lothar seated with Butcher and Oak. Rather than appear empty-handed, Martel bought three ales before he approached the table. He sat the drinks down before the men. Seeing confused looks sent his way, he hurried to speak. "I owe you an apology. Consider this a start."

Both Butcher and Oak squinted, staring at him. "No, you can't be...?" asked the portlier of the two. "Afraid I am," Martel replied.

Oak ran his tongue over his wooden teeth. "You're the bastard who cheated? You can cast spells." "I can."

"So I can't beat you up because you'll just knock me down with magic."

"Well, yes... But I don't want to. I didn't want to fight in the ring in the first place. Kerra sent me in, so she could steal Tibert's business, and I couldn't refuse her," Martel argued in defence of himself.

"You cost me silver, losing that fight," Oak growled.

"You cost us all silver," Lothar chimed in.

"I know, which is why once you finish these mugs, I'll get three more." Martel gestured at the beers on the table.

"That's a start, at least," Oak grumbled.

"Good," Butcher added, smiling. "Because I already finished mine while you lot were yapping." He placed his empty tankard on the table.

"I'll get three more," Martel promised.

~

After he had done so, the fighters grudgingly allowed Martel a seat at the table. They stared at him with various emotions on their faces, though none of them overtly hostile, at least.

"You're really a wizard?" asked Butcher.

Martel nodded and summoned a small flame at the tip of his finger, letting it wander around his hand.

Butcher stared with obvious delight. "That's amazing, Stallion!"

"My name is Martel," he hurried to explain. "That whole nickname was Tibert's idea."

"I always thought those made up names were stupid," Lothar grumbled.

"My name is Cornelius," Oak revealed. "I actually don't like being reminded of my teeth every time someone says my name."

They all turned to look at Butcher.

"You'll never find out what my real name is," he said happily.

"I scarcely believed my man when he said we had such an auspicious visitor." Kerra's teasing voice slithered into their conversation.

Immediately, the three fighters sat up straight while Martel turned his head to look at the proprietress. "My presence is not a problem, I take it?"

"Why ever would it be?" Kerra opened her arms in a gesture of protest. "You and I are on the best of terms. In fact, I thought you might have returned looking for work. Magic has many uses for a woman in my position."

"Better not be in the ring," Lothar mumbled.

"No, I just wanted to pay my respects to the other fighters, make sure they're doing all right, since they lost their previous work thanks to me, among others." Martel's heart beat a little faster, and he sat ready to summon his shield at any sign of hostility.

"In that case, nothing to fear. I take good care of my people. All the copper lanes, even, bringing business to the quarter."

An idea came to mind; he had not considered this before, but perhaps worth mentioning. "If that's the case, there's something you should know."

Kerra looked at him expectantly.

"A month ago or so, a man tried to kidnap one of the urchins that live here in the district."

"Regrettable, but those things happen. You're not suggesting I am involved, I should hope?"

Martel quickly shook his head. "No. I only mention it because the man is a maleficar. He had dark designs on the child he stole, and since she got away, he might try again." Martel kept his eyes locked on her, wondering at her reaction.

"Anything you can tell me about this evil wizard?"

"Not much. He disguised himself, tried to lure the girl inside an empty house. I don't know his plans, but he struck during a full moon, so I suggest you are mindful around that time of the month."

"I shall take your words to heart." The sly smile had gone from Kerra's expression, and her voice sounded only serious. "I'll have the maid bring you an ale as thanks for the warning."

She disappeared, leaving the three fighters to look at Martel with different degrees of alarm or concern. "I've heard of evil sorcerers, but I never imagined any would run around these parts," Cornelius muttered.

"Just the one," Martel remarked.

"I thought inquisitors took care of such people?" Butcher questioned.

"They have to find them first," Lothar said darkly.

Martel emptied his mug. "Sorry for spoiling the mood. I'll get another round."

~

After an hour at The Copper Drum, Martel made his farewells. Apart from the brief interlude with Kerra and talks of maleficars, it had been an evening well spent in good company. After the first few rounds, the fighters either forgot or forgave their grievance against Martel, and they were happy to share war stories, either from the ring or their time in the legions. The novice had not imagined he would enjoy himself this way in the company of three men remote from him in age, experience, and background, yet he had laughed merrily and gladly spent his silver buying more rounds. Since the coin came from winning fights against them, it seemed only fair.

His mind all wrapped in thoughts about the evening, Martel never noticed the one-handed man who stalked after him on the streets of the copper lanes, all the way to the heart of the city, where the dark stranger watched as the novice walked through the gate of the Lyceum.

Chapter 129: The Eye of the Storm

The Eye of the Storm .com

His introduction to water magic at an end, Martel waited with the other novices in the entrance hall for his new teacher. Soon, a man wearing a purple robe with white patterns approached with such forceful steps, it almost felt like he was trying to cause a collision.

His movement came to an abrupt halt one pace away from the novices. "You must be my newest victims! I am Master Gilbert, Master of Air. With me!" He turned around and strode out of the entrance hall, leaving his students to run after him.

Out on the streets, their teacher steered directly south along the main street, setting the same brisk pace as before. All the while, he talked without pause.

"Unlike Mistress Vana, I will not be dragging you all over the city lesson after lesson. But there is one point of interest to visit where air magic is concerned. Should one of you young folks join our esteemed company, you may find yourselves working in just this place."

Passing through the market district, more people filled the streets, and the novices struggled to evade traffic while keeping up with their teacher. He did not appear to have any such trouble as walkers-by almost seemed to part before him, making Martel wonder if the mage used magic to simply push people aside.

"Now, any air acolyte can aspire to three different positions. Windmage, seamage, or stormmage. The names explain themselves I imagine, and the latter two regrettably do require a certain skill in water as well. Keep that in mind when you consider the wondrous opportunities that air magic offers you."

The teacher's next words were lost in the noise of a donkey braying while men unloaded goods from its back; forced to walk around, Martel could only find Master Gilbert thanks to his long hair flowing in every direction as if a whirlwind of its own.

They moved from the market district to the harbour, and Martel felt a sudden spike of anxiety. If they continued down this road, it would lead them straight past The Broken Crown. He tried to calm himself; he had been masked during his fights, nobody had any reason to be looking for him at this hour, and if anyone tried anything, a master of the Lyceum accompanied him. Assuming Martel could keep up. He pulled up the hood of his robe, dragging up what little anonymity he could from it, and hurried after his teacher.

~

Once they had traversed the harbour district without incident, reaching the docks, Martel breathed a little easier and pulled down his hood. Their destination soon became apparent. A small promontory extended further south, protecting the port from storms. Upon it was built a lighthouse, guiding ships to safety.

Master Gilbert unlocked the door and turned around suddenly, looking at his students. "Everyone here? How many did we start with?"

"Four of us, master," Martel replied.

The teacher pointed his finger at each of them, counting loudly until he reached four. "Excellent. Follow me!"

They began ascending the many steps of the lighthouse.

"Now, windmages serve a handful of different positions throughout the Empire. Quite a lot of windmills in this land. But every harbour of size will have one windmage stationed, usually by its lighthouse, serving a specific function."

They reached the top of the tower. In the middle stood a great lantern, ready to light the way when night fell; for now, it remained dark. Next to it stood a young mage wearing a white robe. He glanced at them with little interest, nodding at Master Gilbert.

"Do not mind him, he's just tired of having harbour duty." Their teacher beckoned for them to join him at the parapet. As Martel looked down, he felt queasy. They had to be at least a hundred feet up in the air. Below even the grandest of ships looked small, sailing in and out of the harbour.

This high up, Martel felt the constant push of the wind blowing through his hair. Even so, the windmage in their company was busy, constantly making small movements and presumably controlling the flow of air far below them.

"On a busy day, scores of ships will arrive or depart from Morcaster. The bigger vessels will have their own seamage, but the smaller ones don't," Master Gilbert explained. "To ensure everything runs smoothly, a wind mage will control traffic in and out of the port."

Interesting, even if Martel did not himself wish for such a task. Standing up here all day, rain or sun, cold or warm, staring down at the small ships did not seem enviable work. Yet he did feel impressed by the mage next to them, able to overlook the whole harbour and control the flow of traffic with all its challenges.

"Of course, if you have an aptitude for both air and water, other opportunities lie ahead of you," Master Gilbert continued. "Look at the three mast ship just now gliding out past the cape. A vessel of that size will surely have a seamage aboard, probably crossing the ocean to reach Sindhu."

"It's *The Green Petal*," muttered the wind mage without removing his eyes from the harbour below. "It's going to Aquila."

"Yes, yes, whatever. Point is, if you wish to sail to distant lands, see the most magnificent sights, becoming a seamage is the choice for you!"

Martel did wish for that. His time spent in the Vault of Water with Mistress Vana had made him feel convinced that becoming a weathermage was actually the choice for him, but the dream of setting sail and travelling even beyond the continent still had its hooks in him. Perhaps he could delay his choice; weather or sea, both required him to study water and air.

"Finally, I direct your attention to the galley on the second pier. A ship of war, which may very well have a stormmage aboard."

"It doesn't," mumbled the windmage.

"Well, it could have," Master Gilbert sniffed. "As the name suggests, becoming a stormmage is not for the faint of heart. Our friend here, for instance, suffers dreadfully from seasickness, which explains why his feet are on solid ground rather than on a vessel." He sent a smug look at the windmage, who simply scoffed.

"What does a stormmage do?" asked one of the novices.

"He summons the storm, obviously! Imagine a foreign vessel, approaching ours to do battle! Suddenly, lightning strikes to set their sails aflame!" The wind blowing Master Gilbert's long hair in every direction served well to underline his words. "The sea roars and thrashes against the wooden planks of their ship. They run out their oars to escape, but a terrible maelstrom grips and rips them to shreds!"

The conjured image did sound magnificent, but also dreadful. Martel disliked the idea of having a wondrous gift like magic, only to use it for pure destruction. It was easier to destroy than build, after all.

"I was a stormmage for twenty years," their teacher remarked. "Who knows? Maybe one of you has what it takes. For now, back to the school!"

~

Leaving the lighthouse to walk back through the harbour, Martel got an idea. He wondered if he should ask for permission, but Master Gilbert already strode ahead with little regard for who did or did not follow him. Making a quick decision, Martel turn east and headed towards the Khivan enclave.

Luck favoured him; he found Shadi at the small temple square, enjoying the sun. They both smiled, and he waved as he approached. "That's fortunate, running into you here."

She laughed a little. "I am working, so to say. Spending some hours away from the house so my dad doesn't wonder how I earn silver if I'm home all the time."

"Right, yeah. Listen, tomorrow, some of my friends are doing a prize fight in the copper lanes. Would you like to see it with me? Like a proper night out. I'll take you out, I mean," he explained awkwardly.

"That sounds exciting," she replied, though her expression looked doubtful. "But the copper lanes, that's far from home, and not so safe after dark."

"I'll walk with you both ways," he promised. "You don't have to worry if you're with me."

"Alright." She smiled at him. "Tomorrow. Let's just meet here, by the fountain. When?"

"I'll be here at seventh bell."

"Great. See you then."

He gave Shadi a quick goodbye and hurried away to make it home to the Lyceum before his next class, already looking forward to tomorrow evening.

Chapter 130: Gathering Clouds

Gathering Clouds

In his haste at arranging a fun evening with Shadi, Martel had forgotten that on Glunday, he had class at sixth bell, making it impossible for him to reach the Khivan enclave by seven. Fortunately, Master Alastair was willing to let him skip the class and make up for it by doing his exercises at another time; it paid to be in the teacher's good graces.

When the seventh bell rang from all the temples across Morcaster, Martel stood at the fountain by the square in the Khivan quarter in the doublet and shirt once given to him by Maximilian. Shadi joined him moments later, wearing a dress rather than her usual practical clothes.

"Let's get something to eat first. We got time. My treat." Martel still had a solid chunk of silver left from his own fights, and he could not think of a better way to spend them.

"That sounds good. Where should we go? We can find something by the harbour on the way."

"Let's find something here. I'm in the mood for a Khivan meal." He was really in the mood for avoiding the harbour, but this explanation sounded better.

Shadi made no objections, and they went to a local tavern, serving spiced lamb with onions, tomatoes, and certain vegetables that Martel had never heard about before coming to Morcaster. All in all, a delightful meal made only better by the presence of his companion.

~

As could be predicted, The Copper Drum was full on a fight night. Even though they arrived in good time, they had to swiftly make their way to the hall and find a balcony while they still had a chance. The waiting time became a little awkward, as the close proximity of other people made it hard to relax or carry a conversation, but finally, two fighters entered the pit.

"The big fellow is called Butcher. I don't know the other guy, he must be new." Even though they stood next to each other, Martel almost had to shout to be heard over the clamour.

"He sounds gruesome," Shadi remarked as they watched the two men pick up their staves and attack each other.

"He's really nice once you get to know him," Martel considered, making her laugh.

"The other guy is fast, he keeps getting hits in."

"He does, but they don't make much impact on a guy like Butcher. He's slow, but tough to crack, and he hits really hard."

"You know a lot about him, do you often watch fights in this place?"

"No, this is my second time. But I fought Butcher once, so I know what it's like," Martel explained.

She raised her eyes from the match to look at him in surprise. "I thought you did your fights in the harbour?"

"I did. Well, it's complicated. Oh, look!" Down in the pit, Butcher smashed his staff against his opponent's head, finishing the tussle. The crowd reacted as could be expected, enjoying the spectacle.

"He won! That was more exciting than I would have guessed. I wasn't sure I enjoy something like this."

"Want to go meet the victor?" Martel asked. Around them, people began leaving, alleviating the pressure keeping them penned in.

Her eyes widened a little. "You think we can?"

"As long as I promise to buy him a round of ale, I'm confident we can," he laughed.

~

With a tankard in his hand, Butcher smiled as he looked from Martel to Shadi. "Are you one of them mages also?"

"No, not at all," she replied with a trace of laughter. "No, I leave that to him."

"That's probably for the best, one of them is more than enough."

"Hey," Martel protested, "I'm the one plying you with drinks."

"Where did you learn to fight, Master Butcher?" Shadi asked.

"In the legions, same as every fighter here. In between all the marching, or building roads to march on," he laughed and took a heavy sip from his mug. "The clever ones got better work. Everyone who could write, for instance, spent their time in camp as clerks. The grunts like me, we did all the hard labour. If I never have to swing a pickaxe in my life again, I'll die a happy man."

"Life in the legions sounds tough," Martel remarked.

Butcher nodded. "But you got a talent, lad, and a future." He winked at Shadi. "Stick to this one."

She laughed. "I intend to."

~

Once night fell, they decided to break up for the evening. Shadi's father expected her home, and Martel had promised to walk her back, which meant he would be home at the Lyceum even later. Leaving the jovial fighter and The Copper Drum behind, the pair ventured outside.

Summer rain fell quietly on the streets, and neither had clothes particularly suited against precipitation, but it did not dampen the mood. Despite the weather, they walked in a carefree fashion, almost making a game of jumping around on the cobbled stones to avoid the small puddles forming on the ground.

Martel laughed and made easy conversation, but inside, his nerves were making their presence known. He had asked Maximilian for advice on how to proceed in these matters, long ago, and he did not quite remember everything the young viscount had told him. He did recall one suggestion that it was best to try for a kiss just before saying goodbye; in case the request was rejected, he had a ready excuse for leaving anyway rather than be stuck in an awkward situation. While this felt a bit like planning for failure, Martel had no better idea. Thus, with every step through the copper lanes towards the Khivan quarter, his nerves grew worse.

They were barely halfway, not quite yet at the harbour district, when they passed by one of the derelict buildings that could be found throughout the slums. Distracted by his companion, Martel did not notice the shadow that appeared from inside the debris.

He only realised they were not alone as a leather glove reinforced with metal punched him in the face.