

Firebrand 131

Chapter 131: Revanche

Revanche

The fist came flying against Martel, bound in metal-reinforced leather to make impact on his chin. He fell on his back, shocked and in pain. Something jangled, hitting the ground, and he hoped it was not one of his teeth.

Even through the haze and agony, he found the wherewithal to respond. He summoned his magical shield to protect himself and sent a blast of wind to throw his attacker away.

The latter had no impact. His assailant moved forward unimpeded to lean down and punch Martel in the face again, straight through his shield, which also accomplished nothing.

While getting the life beaten out of him, Martel nonetheless managed to observe three things. His attacker wore several coins in a string around his neck, glowing yellow in the moonlight. His leather glove similarly had coins glued to the front. Lastly, the man only had one hand.

For a moment, everything became clear in Martel's mind. Leatherfist had returned to take his revenge in the only style suitable for a brute like him. He had made his preparations too, wearing gold around his neck and even gluing it to his glove. Martel could not attack the man nor defend against him. With perfect clarity, the novice knew he was at this killer's mercy, and he could not expect any.

Shadi launched herself at Leatherfist's back, choking him from behind and pulling him away from Martel. "The gold," the novice croaked, "get his chain!"

She did not have the chance to do so, as the brawler pushed her off and gave her a blow straight to the stomach. Wind knocked out of her, she fell to the ground.

Leatherfist towered over her with a menacing expression, full of hate. "I'll show you how we dealt with Khivan bitches in the Tenth!"

Martel's magic could not touch his enemy. Shadi had given him a few moments of respite, but now she stood to pay the price. Everything within Martel's screamed to do something, but with his spells useless, he stood no chance against Leatherfist in an even fight.

He reached out to grab a brick from the ruined house where the brawler had lain in wait for them. Grabbing it, Martel threw it with imbued magic against Leatherfist. It struck him on the shoulder, but either thanks to the gold or any armour worn underneath his clothes, it did not make much difference.

Turning around, the bloodthirsty brawler sneered. "Thirsty for more, you Nether-born bastard?" He raised his fist, clearly relishing the mere thought of smashing Martel to pieces.

Acting quickly, Martel reached out with his magic to take hold of a large piece of debris. Straining, he raised it into the air above Leatherfist and released his hold upon the broken stonework.

The gold protected against magic, but not gravity. Nothing holding up the debris, it fell straight down, striking the one-handed man on the head. He fell to the ground, groaning and trying to get back up. Swiftly, Martel repeated his manoeuvre to raise the rock up, only to let it fall straight down again on the same target.

Seeing that Leatherfist no longer stirred, Martel finally allowed himself to breathe.

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The novice got on his feet, his head still ringing with pain. He looked towards Shadi. "Are you alright?" He approached to help her back on her feet.

"Yeah, I'm alright." She looked shaken and in discomfort, to put it mildly, but if that was the worst of it, Martel would consider them lucky.

He bent down to tear the necklace from Leatherfist's neck. Next, he pried the coins loose from the man's glove.

"Are you – robbing him?"

"The gold protects him from magic. When he wakes up, I don't want him able to do anything against me." A flash of yellow caught Martel's attention; one of the coins had come loose from the glove after hitting him. That was the jangling sound he had heard before. He picked it up.

"Are you sure he will wake up? That's an awfully big stone."

Raising his magical shield just in case, Martel crouched down to grab the brawler by his hair and raise his head up. A low groan came. The novice felt a little relief. It only occurred to him now that he could have killed the man. "Here, take these." He gave the golden coins to Shadi. "Sit on him, make sure he doesn't escape."

She complied, but looked at him with uncertainty. "What now?"

Martel could not kill a man in cold blood, but nor could he let Leatherfist escape and come back to finish the job another day. "I'll summon help." He walked onto the middle of the street and looked towards the nearby harbour district. While nobody patrolled the copper lanes, the port had its fair share of guards. Raising a finger to the sky, Martel led out a stream of light into the air.

~

They waited a little while in silence, only disturbed by Leatherfist's groans turned into mumbblings. Finally, someone came running towards them. They stopped as the peculiar sight became apparent. "What happened here?"

Martel had spent the waiting time rehearsing his story. "This thug attacked me and my companion, no doubt to rob us." He gestured at the brawler on the ground. "Fortunately, I am a mage, and I made him regret his decision before creating the streak of light to summon you."

"All right, let's take a look at the fellow." Two other guards motioned for Shadi to stand aside before they grabbed Leatherfist by the shoulders and pulled him up to stand.

"He attacked me," the fighter wheezed. "He's been doing illegal fights at The Broken Crown, and he tried to silence me because I know the truth!"

"Preposterous," Martel scoffed. "As if the accusations of some bandit matter to a wizard of the Lyceum."

The guards looked at Martel, wearing his doublet and fine shirt. They looked at Leatherfist wearing worn and dirty clothes, missing one hand.

"Sol-damned veterans, learning nothing but trouble in the legions and bringing it back here. Let's go, take him away." One of the guards gestured for the others to escort Leatherfist away; when the latter tried to protest, a slap across his face silenced him. "We'll need you to give a statement for the court," the guard added, directed at Martel.

"Does it have to be tonight? It is already late, this has been quite an ordeal, and I should like to see my companion home without delay." Martel glanced at Shadi, still looking shaken and uncomfortable.

"Not at all, good master. Go to any guard station tomorrow and explain what happened. We'll deal with the rest." The princeps of the patrol gave a short bow to Martel and left after the other guards.

He turned towards Shadi. "Let's go home."

"Yes."

Neither of them spoke as they walked to the Khivan quarter; nor did either say goodbye as Shadi slipped inside her home.

Chapter 132: Adventures in Law Enforcement

Adventures in Law Enforcement

Master Fenrick gave Martel's battered face a second look but refrained from commenting, launching into his lesson instead. "I have spoken briefly about maleficars before, when I remarked upon necromancy, which is one study of magic favoured by these dark wizards, though by no means the only one."

Ignoring the discomfort from his bruises, Martel made sure to pay attention.

"As I may have told you before, maleficar simply means those who do evil. While inquisitors no doubt have a long list of what a wizard might do to earn this title, typically it is applied to mages pursuing one or both of two studies in magic. Necromancy, as mentioned, and leechcraft."

Martel silently mumbled the last word.

"When we cast magic, we draw upon our own lifeforce for power, particularly for more complex spells. This creates a natural limit. Eventually, your strength will run out, and you can no longer cast magic until you have rested." Master Fenrick let his eyes behind his glasses slowly glide over the students. "But what if we could take power from another to fuel our magic? Steal their strength and take it for ours?"

One novice raised her hand. "We could keep casting spells for ever."

Their teacher nodded. "Until our victim died, of course, and we'd have to find another. There are many wizards who are tempted by the promise of power in leechcraft, and you will undoubtedly come across stories and references in your future studies."

Once again, he moved his gaze from one novice to the next, weighing them down with the gravity of his words. None of them spoke.

"So I tell you now, no form of magic is considered more reprehensible. It will twist and scar the soul of those who pursue it. Furthermore, any knowledge of this dark art was lost with the fall of Archen. I have seen a few who despite warnings sought to recover this knowledge, and it has only ever ended in great suffering, for others and themselves."

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When Martel had a bell to spare, he left the school to do as he had promised the princeps of the guard patrol last night. Mindful of the importance of giving the right impression, he changed from his brown robe into his expensive clothes, same as he had worn last night. Fortunately, he had not bled on his white silk shirt.

Last night had been Martel's first interaction with the city guard, and he was unsure how exactly to proceed. But the princeps had said he could make his statement at any station, so he would begin by finding one of those. He knew one lay near the school, just a stone's throw away.

The building looked slightly foreboding in between ordinary houses, having a heavy door and no windows. A sign above showed an axe surrounded by a bundle of staves, declaring who had the right to punish or execute.

Outside, a man wearing the red cloak of the city guard stood posted wielding a staff. "What's your business, citizen?" He asked the question with a cordial tone, almost sounding deferential despite Martel's young age.

"Last night, I was attacked, but the assailant was subdued and arrested. One of the guards said I should go make a statement in the morning," the novice explained.

"Certainly, good master." The guard opened the door. "Go inside, and the princeps on duty will write it all down."

Martel mumbled his thanks and stepped into the building. As could be expected, the room inside was dark, only lit by lamps. He saw a woodstove, not in use at this time of the year. A table in the middle with chairs held three guards in their distinct uniform, and stairs led up to the second floor. Lastly, a small writing desk stood to the side.

The soldiers had been playing cards, but seeing Martel, the oldest of the band stood up. "What's the trouble, good master?"

Martel repeated what he had told the man outside.

The princeps nodded and sat down by the writing desk, preparing paper and foil. "This happened last night?" As Martel confirmed, he wrote down yesterday's date. "Describe the man, and what happened. Not too fast, please." He gave a wry grin. "I don't write that fast."

Martel gave a quick description of Leatherfist, mentioning the missing hand. Once the guard had finished writing and looked up at the novice, he continued explaining the assault and how he had knocked out his assailant.

The other guards, who had seemed to mostly follow the story out of boredom, all widened their eyes at the mention of magic.

"You're a mage, master?" asked the princeps.

Martel nodded. Unsure if he was meant to prove it, he lit a flame in his hand. The guards stared and whispered to each other.

"What's your name, good master?"

"Martel of Engby, though I reside at the Lyceum."

"Of course." The princeps made some final scribbles and show the document to the novice. "If all this looks correct, please sign your name at the bottom."

Martel looked at the paper, straining his eyes to read the handwriting. He brightened the flame in his hand to provide more light. "Oh, I have a witness. My friend, Shadi, she was present and saw the whole thing."

The older guardsmen frowned. "That's a Khivan name, right?"

"Yeah, but her eyes work the same."

"I don't think the judge will be interested in her. The word of a mage will suffice. No need to bother the lass." He stood aside from the writing desk and gestured for Martel to sign it.

Feeling a little weird from the exchange, but also eager to be done, the novice placed the documents against the desk and quickly signed it. "What happens now?" *freeebnovel.com*

"We'll send this to headquarters. Your robber will go before a judge who reads your statement and passes a sentence. If there's any doubt, you might be asked to show up in person at court, but I doubt that'll be needed," the princeps explained.

"Alright. Thanks." Martel handed the paper over to the guard and gave a quick nod before he turned to leave.

"Happy to be of service, good master."

Chapter 133: Time and Harvest

Time and Harvest

Master Jerome raised an eyebrow as Martel appeared in the workshop for his Solday duty of assisting the artificer. "Are you still sparring with that mageknight boy?"

"Maximilian, yeah, I am." Martel did not feel up for explaining that he was attacked last night, as that would inevitably only lead to more questions and more lies. Easier to just use the excuse handed to him.

"One might think you were training for the legions. Or is he using you as his punching bag in preparation for the Golden Harvest? He really should spare your head all those blows."

"No, we're just practising." The novice frowned. "Wait, what's golden harvest?"

"Ah, just the name we use for the festivities this time of year, when the yellow grain is brought in. I guess you call it something else up in Nordmark."

"We just call it harvest." Despite the lack of a fancy name, they certainly celebrated this event back home. Solstice was fun and all, and Father Julius made a big mention of Sol during those times of the year, but harvest determined whether they would have enough to eat during winter or not.

"It begins next Solday, lasting a whole fiveday." Master Jerome scratched his forehead. "Did nobody tell you?"

"Well, I guess I knew that harvest is soon. Why, am I supposed to do something?"

"No, no, not at all. But you do have all classes in the afternoon off so you can attend the festivities."

"What, every afternoon the whole fiveday?"

Master Jerome laughed. "Indeed. Well, I suppose they would have told you when the time comes. You're still a novice. I sometimes forget that, so this part won't matter as much for you. But during the Golden Harvest, there are various games held, where the acolytes of the Lyceum may compete."

"I suppose next year, that'll be relevant for me," Martel considered.

"Could very well be, though I admit, the games are mostly aimed at mageknights to show off their skill." The artificer shrugged. "I guess some mages are more valued than others, even if all they do is destroy rather than create."

He sounded a tad bitter, and Martel thought it best to avoid touching the topic further. "What's my task for today?"

Master Jerome smiled. "Yes, let's get to it." He threw his head in the direction of another chamber. "I already have two students making ink. Go check if they need any supplies."

~

Martel looked for Maximilian in his chamber, but none answered the knock on the door. He had tried in vain yesterday as well to find his friend, in order to tell him about Leatherfist, but had not seen the mageknight at the meals. He knew that Maximilian spent many of his spare bells in the city, but it seemed unusual that he should be busy several days in a row.

By chance, crossing the dining hall, Martel looked out at the courtyard with the arena and found several mageknight acolytes busy exercising. It reminded him of his own evenings spent that way in preparation for his fights at The Broken Crown, and he was only happy to leave that behind. While he could certainly see the advantage of empowerment magic, he felt sufficiently advanced in that skill with his shield and abilities, and he needed to focus on elemental magic instead. Even so, taking an interest in what happened in the arena proved fortunate, as he noticed Maximilian among those training.

Martel approached, careful to stay outside the ring of sand as more than one mageknight practised archery. He picked up a pebble and flung it at Maximilian, using magic to improve his poor aim and hit his friend on the shoulder. The mageknight growled, looked around until he spotted Martel, and approached him.

"You can just walk over and talk to me," Maximilian grumbled.

"I feel better staying back here with all these arrows flying around. Anyway, you won't guess what happened to me the other night," Martel said, almost excited.

"Something to do with those blots on your face? Did you go fighting again?"

"Not so loud," Martel hissed. He glanced around. Nobody looked at them or seemed to have the slightest interest in the conversation. "I didn't go fighting. Well, I did, but not on purpose. Leatherfist ambushed me as I walked home."

"Damn. Optimistic of him. Since you're on both feet, no teeth missing, I presume you showed him the folly of his ways?"

Martel nodded. "I did, only it wasn't so easy. He had a necklace of gold coins to protect himself, and he even glued some to his glove, punching straight through my shield."

The mageknight frowned. "Crafty little bastard. What did you do?"

Martel grinned. "Floated a big rock above his head and let it fall. Gold can't protect him from that."

"Hah, good show!"

The novice looked at the other mageknights still practising. "You're at it late. I thought you guys already trained in the morning?"

"We do, but with the Golden Harvest coming up, we all want to be at our sharpest."

"Isn't it late to hone your skills? If it starts in a fiveday. I don't recall you doing archery before."

Maximilian gave him a look. "I have practised plenty, thank you," he said brusquely. "But if you recall, lately our time spent together was for your benefit, training you, not me."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry." Martel wonder if perhaps he became a little self-absorbed at times and felt guilty.

"Well, you can make up for it. I need someone to help me. Not tonight, I am knackered, but tomorrow night."

"Can we do it the evening after? I ought to visit The Copper Drum and tell the fighters about Leatherfist. Just so they know what happened to him." He also had a letter he needed to deliver in the city.

"Fine," Maximilian grumbled. "But no further delays." He began walking back towards his bow and arrows. "Harvest waits for no man!"

"I thought that was the tide?"

The mageknight shrugged. "Nature is an impatient lady in general."

Chapter 134: From the Tenth

From the Tenth

As no fights were hosted on Peldays in The Copper Drum, Martel managed to get inside the tavern with relative ease. The common room still seemed filled with guests, but he could at least make his way through the crowd. His height also helped him locate his quarry; armed with several mugs of ale, Martel walked over to where Lothar and Oak – Cornelius sat.

"You know how to make yourself welcome, at least," the older veteran growled, seeing what occupied Martel's hands. They moved their chairs a little, making room for the novice to sit down.

"I thought you might like to know that Leatherfist paid me a visit the other night."

"That explains why your face looks like a Sindhian scarf," Cornelius remarked.

"I thought you mages had all these tricks to prevent exactly that." Lothar made a circular motion in the direction of Martel's face.

"He caught me by surprise, got the first punch in," the young wizard said in defence of himself. "I dealt with him, though. Handed him over to the guards, so I assume he'll get his punishment."

"The galleys are too good for that rotten bastard," Cornelius sneered through his wooden teeth. "A pity they won't sentence a cripple like him to pull an oar."

"Not sure what they do with someone like him," Lothar considered. "Not much use in the mines either."

"Either way, we are well rid of him. Loathsome brute," Cornelius muttered.

"Aye. Nothing good comes from the Tenth." The older of the veterans sipped from his mug. "We fight to put on a show, earn some silver, but he did it because he loves the violence."

"He mentioned that when he attacked me. The Tenth, that is. Something about showing how they did it. What did he mean by that?" Martel asked.

"The Tenth Legion. Legio Astra." Cornelius mumbled the words, sucking on his false teeth.

"What's so bad about them? Aren't you all former legionaries?" The novice looked at his companions, who exchanged glances.

Lothar crossed his arms. "Look, respect where it's due. The Tenth has the toughest posting in all the Empire. Stars, we might have lost the war long ago without them."

"What kind of post do they have?"

The old veteran scratched his scar across his eye. "They hold the hills east of the Savena delta. Constant skirmishes with Khivans, sharpshooters hiding behind every tree... Any man who makes it out of the Tenth alive has to be tough as nails. But you can't live through that kind of Nether-cursed ordeal without your mind getting warped."

"That may all be true, but that leather-gloved bastard was born this way, I bet," Cornelius argued. "He only left the legion because they wouldn't have him with one hand. You could see it in his eyes whenever he entered the ring. He'd do it for free just for the chance to hurt someone."

"Especially since he was cheating to always win," Martel remarked.

The two fighters stared at him. "How in Sol's name did you find that out?"

"Oh, I never told you. Lothar, you were right about the alchemist he always visited. He bought this concoction that he poured onto his glove. Once he hit you, and you absorbed it through your skin, it made you slow, tired."

Cornelius scowled. "You sure about this?"

Martel nodded. "It's alchemy. I learn alchemy."

"That mongrel used cheating, and he took my teeth? I'll wring his neck if I get my hands on him!"

"Be a good lad and get us another round, will you?" Lothar asked of Martel, digging up some coins. "I think he's going to need it."

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When Martel was able to return, stocked up on drink, Cornelius had calmed down a bit. He still looked angry as he grabbed his beer, but his mutterings had ceased.

Martel, on the other hand, had remembered that Leatherfist would not be the only man with a score to settle. "Have you heard anything about Tibert?" Mainly, whether he was prone to hide in ruined buildings to ambush young mages on their way home from the copper lanes.

"I haven't been back at The Broken Crown. I've done him no wrong, but he's a man with a temper. Last I heard, he had trouble getting anyone past the doors. He might have bribed the guards to overlook what happened, but nobody wants to drink where riots took place," Lothar considered.

"Plenty of other taverns down the street with better reputation," Cornelius added.

Martel felt calmer hearing this. If Tibert was busy trying to keep his establishment afloat, he had better things to do than track down 'Stallion' looking for revenge.

The novice finished his drink and bid his companions farewell. He could have stayed a while longer, as the night was still young, but he had an errand to run before he could make it home. With a long walk ahead of him, he left The Copper Drum.

~

His errand took Martel to the Khivan enclave. To get there, he had to cross the harbour district, which he did with his hood up. None accosted him; he walked along the docks, some distance from The Broken Crown that lay nearer the market. Still, he was glad once the port lay behind him.

At length, he reached his destination. Crossing the small square with its temple and fountain, Martel found it empty at this late hour. The solitude and light of the half-moon made the place look eerie, reminding him of the aftermath from the riots – the unnerving change from sounds of fighting and screams to sudden quiet after the fighting had ended, and broken bodies scattered across the square.

He hurried onwards, approaching the watchmaker's home. He did not knock or enter, given the time; Master Farhad would not appreciate his presence, Martel guessed. Instead, he slipped a letter in an envelope addressed to Shadi under the door. His errand complete, the novice began the last leg of his journey home to the Lyceum.

Chapter 135: Where the Storm Resides

Where the Storm Resides

For Martel's second class on air magic, he did not have to leave the school. Master Gilbert collected him and the other novices from the entrance hall and led them up a nearby staircase. "For the rest of the month, we shall meet up here. No more trips into the city, that's how the watermages waste their time, but not us!" he loudly declared as he strode up the spiral steps while his students hurried to keep up.

They finally reached the top of the tower, going through a hatch to stand outside. The upper platform was built peculiarly with four pillars in each corner upholding a glass roof with a lightning rod, though nothing but empty air in between the columns.

Master Gilbert took position in the centre. He looked directly north at the open space between two pillars, with the same gap east to his right, west to his left, and south behind him.

"This is the tower of air. Yes, surprising name, but at least none can mistake it for something else." Their teacher extended his arms, and Martel felt the wind pick up. He reached out to support himself against the railing, mindful of the drop down to the courtyard below. "This is where the noble art of air magic is learned."

The wind, hitherto a breeze, came stronger. The students spread out along the edge, allowing them to lean up against a pillar or hold onto the railing like Martel did. By observing their hair, he was able to see that the wind did not come from a single direction. It blew away from the tower in all

four directions, whether north, south, east, or west. The point of origin was Master Gilbert, sending blasts of air against all of them simultaneously.

"Where the wind blows strongest, where the gale howls, the storm is sure to follow!" The wizard raised his hands in the air. Moments before, the sky had been clear, but now the rumblings of thunder could be heard. A bolt of lightning ripped down to strike the metal rod above them, and Martel felt the energy even as he watched it through the glass roof.

The storm passed as quickly as it had arrived. While the smell of lightning lingered, the sky cleared, and the novices relaxed.

"That is air magic." Master Gilbert looked at each of them in turn. "Let us find out if the storm dwells in any of you. Face me and send your strongest gust of wind to knock me down, and we'll see what you got."

~

Despite their best efforts, Master Gilbert remained standing. It did not seem like the storm had taken up residence in Martel; a brisk wind, perhaps. He was not troubled by it, as he did better than the other novices. He imagined that by the end of the month, he would have shown sufficient aptitude for air magic for his future purposes.

He checked for letters in the entrance hall with more interest than usual, and his expectations were rewarded. Rather than wait until he reached his room, Martel opened the message straight away.

Thank you for your letter. I am doing fine.

You don't have to apologise, Morcaster is a dangerous city. I'm glad if he is locked up. Watching the harvest games together sounds fun. Let's do that.

Shadi

Relieved that events with Leatherfist had not ruined everything between him and Shadi, Martel continued with his day.

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In the evening, Martel went to the gymnasium as he had promised Maximilian. Several other mageknights also practised their archery. The novice made sure to walk along the edge of the arena, just in case one of the acolytes did not have complete focus on their arrows. He reached his friend and looked at him questioningly.

"Nordmark, good! I must add some heft to this training."

"How?"

"I need to practice shooting at a moving target." Maximilian smiled at Martel.

"I'm not going to let you stick me full of arrows!"

"Do not be foolish. You are much too big a target to present a challenge." Maximilian pulled out a round metal disc from a bag on the ground, the length of his lower arm in diameter. "For the games,

we aim at these as they float around in the air. I need you to keep the buckler moving around for me to shoot at."

That sounded more benign. Martel took the object from Maximilian and hefted its weight. Nothing worse than what he had dropped on Leatherfist's head. "Sure, I can do that." He took hold of the disc with his magic and began floating it up and away. "How far?"

"Other end of the ring, and keep it moving! Unpredictably, no patterns!" Maximilian instructed, picking up bow and arrow.

Martel made sure to move behind his friend even while keeping the disc floating some hundred paces away, moving it up and down as randomly as he could.

Maximilian shot his first arrow, striking the edge of the plate with a metallic ring. The disc still floating, the mageknight launched several more missiles. Two of them missed entirely; the third struck the edge as before, insufficiently to make it fall to the ground.

"You're hitting the target," Martel said, trying to be encouraging. He had never shot a bow and did not imagine he could hit anything.

"That is of little use unless I can strike it centre," the mageknight exclaimed frustrated. "It only counts if I bring it down."

"Well, the harvest games are still several days away. You got time to practise."

"I have been!"

"What if you took a little more time to aim?" Martel suggested.

Maximilian shot him a look implying that his help was not well received. "It has to be done speedily. The winner is the first to shoot down three."

"Oh. Maybe you'll do better once you are actually competing. The pressure will make your magic react on instinct."

The mageknight gave him an overbearing glance. "That is not how magic works, Nordmark. Never mind. Get the disc floating again."

They continued to practise for the remainder of the bell without success.

Chapter 136: Desecration

Desecration

"Don't lose focus. Keep it going."

In the Hall of Elements, Martel held his hand over a small whirlwind, whipping up dirt from the ground. While keeping the air flowing in circles, he tried to extract the grains of earth, forcing him to use two different kinds of magic at the same type. Master Alastair watched him intently, giving small encouragements or corrections.

Finally, Martel's control over the spell ended, and he felt himself out of breath despite standing still.

"Good. You're making progress," his teacher told him. "Take a few moments to compose yourself, and we'll go again."

The novice nodded, relaxing his shoulders and jaw. "Master Alastair, how was it to be a legionary?"

"Well, mages are not legionaries as such – we use that term for the common soldiery," the wizard explained. "As a battlemage, you have the same rank as cohort prefects. That's not what you asked, but it does mean privileges not afforded to an ordinary legionary."

"Like what?"

"You had your own tent," Master Alastair said with a wry smile. "Shared with my protector, in my case. No hard labour, watch duty, or patrols except in unusual circumstances. I may be the wrong man to ask – battlemages have few duties even compared to mageknight prefects."

"Oh, I see."

"In my cases, most of my years were spent eating food with little taste, drinking diluted wine, and occasionally doing a few demonstrations of power to keep the Tyrians on their side of the river."

"Sounds like some long years."

He nodded. "Yes. A waste of the gift that is magic, if you ask me. Speaking of, let us not waste yours. Ready to try that spell again?"

"Yes, master." Extending his hand, Martel imagined the air flowing in circles underneath until he felt the whirlwind begin to take form.

~

Since his evening was spoken for, thanks to Maximilian, Martel used his spare time in the afternoon to leave the school. He did not have a specific errand, but rather, he was curious about the upcoming harvest games. Nordmark being the other end of the Empire, he had never heard about these before, and if he was attending them with Shadi, he wanted to have a better understanding of how it would all happen. So, he walked north along the main streets towards the temple district.

As on previous visits, the stark difference to places like the copper lanes or the Khivan enclave struck him. Wide and open streets, generally clean, nestled around impressive houses. Scarcely had one guard patrol left his sight before another passed him by. He had to walk along the edges of the road, avoiding carriages and people on horseback taking up the middle. Although he felt out of place, none afforded him a second glance; his clothes, although simple, gave the impression of a clerk or scribe, and plenty of servants likewise dressed in ordinary fashion filled the street as well. As Martel approached the temple to the Sun, he also began encountering many members of the clergy.

Once again, Martel was struck by the splendour of the great sanctum devoted to worship of Sol. The countless pillars flanking the approach and the facade of the building, the elegant spires stretching towards the sky, the numerous statues carved to adorn every niche, all of it overwhelmed him. Yet he turned his attention away, towards the empty square before the temple. Already, stands were being raised, allowing for spectators to watch the games. Most of them consisted of benches, though platforms with chairs were also under construction, no doubt reserved for the highest nobility or perhaps even the Imperial family. Elsewhere, fences stood to keep ordinary people from straying onto the grounds once the games would begin.

Martel drifted around the square, taking care to avoid the workers preparing for Soliday when the archery competition would begin. Just two more days. He considered entering the temple, just to see how it looked inside, but as he had no real purpose other than that, it felt disrespectful. He suddenly

remembered with guilt that he had told his mother he would leave a small offering in memory of his father, yet he had never done so. He would have to correct this oversight at the next opportunity, for the games anyway. That would also give him a reason to see the temple from the inside.

As he turned around to walk home, he noticed people gathering in one corner of the square. Curious, he approached until he saw the reason for the attraction. A man stood, using a crate to rise above the heads of others. He wore ragged clothes, looking out of place. His hair and beard were long and unkempt, and he spoke with a hoarse voice. "How long will you ignore the truth because lies make your lives convenient?"

Wondering what he meant, Martel moved closer.

"You worship Sol with your lips, yet even his temple has been defiled! How can this be holy ground when marked by profane power? Even now, they prepare the grounds for further desecration!"

The novice looked around. Most of those who listen seemed to be servants, though a few nobles could be seen, and a handful of priests and nuns as well.

"The stones of this sanctum were hewn and raised by sorcery! If Man wanted to build a monument to the glory of Sol, he would do so with the sweat on his brow rather than using perverse, unnatural means!"

Martel widened his eyes as he finally understood. He glanced at the other people while trying to remain inconspicuous, just to gauge their reactions. Most people seemed to listen attentively, though he could not determine if that meant they agreed or not. Those who appeared most affected were the priests and nuns; some seemed swayed, nodding along, while others appeared angry at the preacher's words. A few from the latter category stalked away.

"The day of punishment is nigh! And when you turn to Sol for deliverance, how can you hope for salvation when your punishment is by his decree?"

Some of the priests returned, guards in tow. They pointed at the preacher with furious gestures, and the armed men pushed their way through the crowd.

Smelling trouble, Martel backed away. Nothing good would come of getting caught up in this, especially not as a spellcaster. He hurried southwards, not lingering to find out what happened next.

Chapter 137: Point

Point

Martel spent his evening as previously, helping Maximilian practise archery, which distracted him from the affair with the preacher. Yet the next day, as he chopped roots in the apothecary, the ragged man's words returned to haunt him.

"You're quiet this morning," Nora remarked.

"I was at the temple square yesterday," he began to explain.

"Which temple?"

"The big one, you know, up north by all the palaces."

"You mean the Basilica."

"Right," Martel assented. "That one. Anyway, I heard this preacher rail against how magic had been used to build the temple."

Nora rolled her eyes. "There's always people bitter they don't have magic, and so they don't want anyone to have it. Don't pay it any heed."

"I was just surprised to hear it."

"They don't have people afraid of magic up in Nordmark?"

"Sure, nobody in Engby liked me except my own family and the smarter people like Father Julius. But I've seen how magic is used in Morcaster, transporting water all around the city," Martel considered. "I thought people here knew how useful magic is."

"They know, but they don't care. They'd rather be thirsty or starving if it means others must thirst and starve alongside them," Nora remarked darkly.

"That doesn't make sense."

"People usually don't." The apprentice shrugged and resumed her work. Moments later, Martel did the same, though the preacher's words and fury continued to rummage around in his mind.

~

For lunch, Martel sat alone. This was not strictly necessary; the acolytes usually allowed him a seat at their table, and he could always sit with the other novices. But belonging to neither group grew tiresome; the acolytes were ahead of him in years, speaking of matters he did not know, and the novices were younger than him in age, speaking of matters that did not interest him. Accustomed to being alone, Martel simply found it easier to eat in the far corner of the hall.

A heavy hand fell on his shoulder. "Eat up! I need your assistance for a journey to the market."

He looked up at Maximilian. "You need to borrow money?"

"Do not insult me," the mageknight scoffed. "No, believe it or not, I seek you for your knowledge. Come on, eat up!"

Martel stuffed his food into his face. "I have class at sixth bell."

"We shall return long before that. Come, snap to it!"

Still chewing, the novice got on his feet and followed Maximilian out of the hall.

~

"What exactly do you need me for?"

"So, I spoke to some of the other mageknights, and one of them confided in me a method for winning the archery contest," Maximilian explained, his voice swinging between excited and hushed tones.

"What method is that?"

Maximilian looked around as they walked down the street, as if someone might overhear. "A northern fellow has a stall with something interesting for the festival. He sells enchanted arrows."

"Enchanted?"

Maximilian nodded eagerly. "Yes, with runes. He is Tyrian, you see, which is why I asked you along."

"But I don't know anything about runes," Martel said confused, even as he hurried along to keep up.

"I know that," the mageknight replied annoyed. "I need you to tell me if this fellow is legitimate. Is he actually Tyrian or just a man who paints his face?"

"I've not actually met a lot of Tyrians," the novice admitted. "They usually stay north of the river."

"Well, you are the best I have, so do what you can. Ah, this must be the man up ahead." Maximilian steered along the edge of an open square towards a small stall. A scrawny-looking man with dirty blond hair in travel-worn clothes attended the booth. Behind him, a temporary shelf had been pulled up against the house wall, filled with various knickknacks.

The peddler noticed them arrive and gave them a scrutinising glance. "You come to buy arrows from me." He spoke Asterian with an accent.

Maximilian stared at the man with astonishment. "Do you have the gift of foresight?"

"No, you are mageknight. You all dress the same. You are fourth today."

The acolyte looked down at his black tunic. "Oh." Sounding a little disappointed, he continued, "Yes, I heard you sell enchanted arrows that never miss."

The peddler reached down under in his booth and pulled up three arrows, placing them on the desk. "Not enchanted as you know. Rune symbols. True, they will not miss what you aim at, but the power only lasts for one shot. Then runes must be made active again."

The mageknight leaned forward to see the small symbols painted onto the shaft of each arrow. "So how does it work?"

"Simple. For me. I speak word, and runes work. Word lasts until this hour tomorrow or until used once."

"Just once?"

The man nodded. "Yes. Only with knowledge of Tyrian rune can they be active again."

"How much do they cost?"

"Three golden coins for each, and I activate them before you leave."

Maximilian scratched his cheek. He looked at Martel, who could only shrug in ignorance. The seller seemed genuine, but the novice did not have much in way of comparison to make that judgement.

"Fine." The mageknight took out his purse to find the money.

The northerner turned his blue eyes on Martel's, who had the same hue. "You are from Normark, yes? I have something special for you." From a shelf behind him, he took a knife with runes on the hilt and presented it. "Strong blade. Never dull, never need to sharpen. I give you good price since we share blood."

Martel touched the knife in his belt, given to him by Master Jerome. "No thanks."

Maximilian finally counted out the coins and handed them over. The seller carefully placed them underneath the desk and held his hand over the arrows. "Very well. I activate runes now." He

cleared his throat before he whispered a single word. "Visir." As he spoke, the runes glowed. He handed them over. "Keep away from gold in your purse, yes? Rune is small, weak. Power that fades can be stolen by gold."

"Sure." Maximilian picked up the arrows, careful to keep them on the opposite side of his purse hanging by his belt, and they left.

~

"Well, that was a disappointment." Maximilian pushed his way through the crowd at the market.

"But you got the arrows you wanted?"

"Yes, but if the man is a fraud, the arrows will not help. If he is genuine, at least three other mageknights have the same advantage." Maximilian sighed. "Did he seem legitimate to you?"

"I suppose. He looked the part, and he called it Normark, which only Tyrians do." Martel glanced at the arrows in his friend's hand. "Are you going to test them?"

Maximilian shook his head. "If they work, they work. If not, I am no worse off than before, and it is too late to think of something else."

"Well, good luck tomorrow." Martel had a feeling that his friend would need all the luck he could get.

They returned to the castle, and next bell, the novice exhausted himself training his spellpower under Master Fenrick's watchful eyes. He felt drained of magic as he went to sleep that night, dreaming of runes.

Chapter 138: Who's Got the Touch

Who's Got the Touch

Having never attended the Golden Harvest before, Martel did not know what to expect, but he knew that he could hardly wait. The excited conversations about the spectacle, shared by the other students familiar with the games, served to raise his anticipation. The early bells of the day moved at a snail's pace before it finally became noon and he could leave, just as most acolytes and novices at the Lyceum did. They moved like a swarm towards the square of the Basilica, soon mingling with all the other people going to watch the spectacle.

Martel quickly realised that finding Shadi would be a struggle amidst such a crowd, with the middle of the square kept open for the games and everyone else pressed along the sides. He made his way towards a monument for some emperor and jumped onto the pedestal, giving him a better view. His eyes searched the crowds until a brown arm waved at him.

Relieved, he jumped down and pushed through the throng, incurring several angry remarks on his way. Ignoring them, he finally reached Shadi, who greeted him with a smile. "You won't believe how many I had to fend off trying to steal my spot!" She stood by the fence, giving them an excellent view of the square.

"I'm very grateful for your hard work."

She grinned. "Any of your friends participating in the games today?"

He nodded. "Yes, Maximilian is. I've helped him practice, so if he wins, I'm claiming at least a sliver of the glory for myself."

"What of your other friend, what's her name, Eleanor?"

"I don't know. I guess we'll see."

~

More than a hundred mageknights had joined for the archery competition. They would be split into rounds of ten contestants each, and only one would advance from each.

The archers were divided by age, meaning all the participating acolytes of the Lyceum were in the first round. The ten archers took position by their flag in one end of the square with their targets in the other. Martel glanced towards the Basilica, in front of which stood the stands. He wondered if the emperor himself sat in attendance, though at this distance, it was impossible to see.

"Oh, there's Maximilian! So exciting, I've never had reason to cheer for someone in the games before," Shadi said.

Martel watched his friend stick three arrows in the ground for swift retrieval once the contest began. Other archers did likewise, though one of them found time to approach and talk with the other archers. Martel could not be certain of his features, but like with Maximilian, he could recognise the crest on his clothes. Assuming no other noble wore a horse for an emblem, the talkative acolyte had to be Cheval. He bent down to look at Maximilian's arrows before an official ushered him to his own position.

In the other end of the range, thirty discs began rising into the air. Each had been marked with symbols corresponding to the flag behind an archer.

"How exactly is the winner determined? Maximilian was a bit vague."

"Every archer has three arrows and three plates to shoot down. Winner is the one to do it fastest and goes to the next round. You miss, you're out," Shadi explained.

"Let's hope at least one person hits all three, then."

~

"My lords and ladies, gentle people of Morcaster, today the Golden Harvest begins!" The herald's words were met by cheers. "Our gratitude to the Gamblers' Guild for sponsoring the games!" Applause followed. "Without further words, let us begin! Archers at the ready!"

The ten mageknights held their bows, waiting for the signal. In the other end, the many plates swirled up and down in unpredictable patterns.

"Release!"

It happened so fast, Martel's eyes could not keep up. Arrow after arrow whistled through the air, striking the discs with a loud, metallic sound. Those hit mid-centre fell to the ground from the impact.

Martel watched as the first of Maximilian's plates fell. The second followed rapidly. As for the third, the arrow did not even strike close. Disappointment filled him, and he could only imagine how his friend felt.

He looked at the archers, trying to discern their emblems and what had happened. He suddenly recognised one of them to be Eleanor. From the looks of her dejected walk, she had not won either.

The herald answered his question. "As winner of our first round we have Lord Guillaume of Cheval!"

Martel's entire face turned inside out. It had to be him.

"That's a shame about Maximilian. It would have been nice to see him advance," Shadi considered.

"It would."

They watched as a new line of archers filed in, preparing for the next round.

~

It took a few hours for the remainder of the contest to finish, given the number of rounds and contestants. In the end, an old mageknight took the prize; given how the crowds chanted his name, this did not seem a surprising outcome. The spectacle complete, Martel turned towards Shadi.

"That was fun," she said. "Now your priests are going to do some boring rituals to bless the harvest or something. Nothing to do with me." She grinned.

"I guess I should find Maximilian. He must be disappointed."

"Yeah, probably. I think I have some friends from the district around here, I'll go with them. But tomorrow, we can watch the battle?"

He nodded. "Sounds great."

~

Martel found Maximilian at the evening meal. Regardless of anger or disappointment, the mageknight would not let a meal slip by, which the novice completely understood.

As others wisely kept their distance, Martel sat down opposite Maximilian at the otherwise empty table. "I'm sorry you lost," he said tentatively.

"Those damnable arrows failed me!" His outburst attracted stares from the nearest students. "My father gave me that gold because I promised I would win! That blue-eyed bastard swindled me!"

Ignoring the remark, Martel considered what might have happened. "You weren't the only mageknight to buy arrows from him. Considering Cheval won, and I assume he's a terrible shot, do you think he also bought them?"

"I suppose so, but that does not change the fact that one of mine failed," Maximilian growled.

"But it does mean that Cheval would have received the same warning as you. I saw him talking to you and a few others, inspecting your arrows just before. It would not have been difficult to palm a gold coin in his hand and brush up against the haft."

Maximilian narrowed his eyes hearing Martel's words. "That Nether-born bastard!"

"Does it help if I tell you he failed miserably in the final round?"

The mageknight sat for a moment until a smile finally dawned. "It does. A little."

"Are you competing again tomorrow?"

"No, on the second day, the Legio Urbis recreates a famous battle. It changes every year which one. But we can watch the whole affair from my family's stand. "

"Oh," Martel remarked awkwardly. "I told Shadi I'd watch it with her."

Maximilian shrugged. "She hardly takes up much space. Now, are you coming? I need to wash down this disappointment with the strongest stout at The Golden Goose!"

Martel rose. "Ready at your command."

Chapter 139: The Promise of Spectacle

The Promise of Spectacle

"Are you certain it's alright?" Shadi's voice sounded anxious. "I have never been seated on the benches before."

"Maximilian specifically told me so. And he wouldn't go back on his word or be mistaken." Martel pushed his way forward towards the seats surrounding the square on the northern side, Shadi following straight behind.

As they approached, some of the people already seated sent them disdainful glances. Martel ignored them and kept looking for Maximilian. He was starting to feel a little nervous, having promised Shadi a place on the benches, which he could not fulfil without his friend.

With relief, he spotted the mageknight further ahead, waving to gain his attention. Maximilian stood up, motioning for them to join him. "Let them through," he called out. Grudgingly, people made room for Martel and Shadi to pass down the benches and join the young viscount.

"Hullo, Maximilian. Thank you for inviting us to sit with you," Shadi said politely.

The mageknight mumbled and waved his hand around, his attention on the square where ranks of soldiers had begun marching out.

"Today is some kind of battle? Not games, but a spectacle like in theatre?" Martel asked. He looked at the hundreds of legionnaires taking position. About one third wore the red cloak of the legions, which in Morcaster also meant the city guard; the remainder had blue cloaks and carried banners unknown to him.

"Yes, exactly," Shadi replied.

"Aquilan standards! Bold choice from the legate Fontaine," Maximilian considered. "I did not expect to see the battle of liberation today."

"What?" Martel asked confused. "Eleanor's father?"

"Yes, he is the legate for the first legion. You did not know?"

Out on the square, the red cloaks had arrayed themselves in tight ranks, while the blue capes spread out to surround them from several sides. "I guess I knew his title, but I didn't realise what it meant. So Lord Fontaine leads the city guard?"

"Well, you got there in the end," the mageknight remarked.

"You said this is the battle of liberation? I don't know that history," Shadi interjected.

"Yes, it happened hundreds of years ago. During the last days of the Aquilan Empire. Morcaster rebelled, fighting for its independence despite being heavily outnumbered," Maximilian related. "Certainly people will enjoy seeing it, though I wonder why the legate chose it."

"What's strange about it?" Martel asked. He had to raise his voice as the fighting had begun; with loud battle cries, the blue cloaks assaulted those in red from three sides.

"It celebrates the first victory against Aquila, now part of our Empire. Lord Fontaine's family hails from that city, many generations back. I guess he wants to show his loyalty regardless of his family's origin, though I doubt it will make a difference," Maximilian mused.

Every answer only raised more questions to further confuse Martel. He watched as the red cloaks fought on valiantly, though they were slowly being worn down by the superior numbers of their enemies. "Why does he need to prove his loyalty?"

"Perhaps not the right word to use. But certainly he hopes to curry favour from the High Council. While being legate of the first legion is considered an honour, it is mostly a ceremonial role. Certainly a demotion compared to his last posting. Ha, good blow!" Maximilian shouted, seeing a red-cloaked legionary strike down several of the soldiers in blue.

"Where was he posted before?"

"The Tenth. Losing that command was a blow to his prestige. It is why he is pushing for Eleanor to become a prefect and one day legate," Maximilian explained.

"Well, it's an exciting battle for sure," Shadi remarked lightly.

~

It took another half hour before a contingent of riders stormed onto the square, falling into the back lines of the blue cloaks to aid the beleaguered legionaries of Morcaster, with certain defeat turned into sudden victory. Separating from Maximilian, Martel and Shadi strolled around the square, drifting towards the market district. Martel bought food for them both with his dwindling store of silver; his earnings from the fighting pit would soon be gone at this rate, but he would worry about that another time. For now, he simply enjoyed being able to spend without concern.

"I can't watch the games tomorrow," Shadi told him as they watched a man eat fire to the great amusement of the nearby children. "The Khivan quarter has its own little harvest festival, just the one day. My dad is keen on me participating, probably because he doesn't want me wandering all over the city." She gave a half-hearted laughter.

Martel observed the fire eater place the flaming stick in his mouth, appearing unharmed. As he pulled it out, the novice added a bit of magic to make the flames appear grander than possible by natural means, making the children scream in delight, and the fire eater almost dropped his stick in surprise. "All right. See you on Glunday instead? Max is participating again that day, I believe."

"Sounds great." She gave him a hug as farewell, and they separated.

~

When Martel returned to his room in the evening, he found that a note had been pushed under his door. He picked it up to read the flowing script.

Master Martel,

You are cordially invited to join the Golden Harvest celebrations at The Copper Drum.

As a friend to the establishment, food and drink will be provided without limits,
if you arrive between seventh and last bell on the eve of Malday for the meal.

As more friends only make it merrier, the viscount of Marche has also been invited.

Respectfully,

The Copper Lady

Martel had never heard of something like this, a tavern sending out invitations across the city. But he had never spent harvest in Morcaster before either. He walked upstairs to reach Maximilian's room, knocking on the door.

The mageknight open. "What is it? Ah, same invitation as me, I wager." He nodded at the note in Martel's hand.

"Yes. Is this commonplace?"

"It is not strange that a tavern would host a celebration, though I have never been invited to one in this manner. I suppose our presence would lend some glory to the event."

Martel gave him an inquisitive look. "So, are we going? You know that woman is a snake. She's as liable to poison us as she is to feed us."

"Food and drink provided without limits? Poison or not, you bet your Stars we are going!" Maximilian still grinned even as he closed the door.

Chapter 140: For a Few Drinks More

For a Few Drinks More

The games resumed Malday afternoon. Unlike the archery competition, mageknights did not compete. Instead, mounted soldiers and members of the nobility participated in the joust. Like yesterday, Martel watched with Maximilian, who was barred from participating. So they cheered for his older brother, showing the emblem of Marche on the field.

As only two contestants rode at a time, it took three hours to finish the joust. Maximilian's brother was eventually unhorsed after a respectable performance against his first opponents.

"At least he did better than me. Though I doubt my father will be satisfied either way." Maximilian exhaled.

They left the benches and stood on the square as activities wound down and people milled about. There would be no ceremony today and thus no reason to linger. "So, do you want to go back to the school?" Martel asked.

"Let us not bother. We have food and drink waiting for us. I say we advance upon The Copper Drum and make our own joust, spearing roast pigs and any drink within reach!"

"Sound strategy," Martel assented, and they set off towards the copper lanes.

~

Across Morcaster, people celebrated on the streets. Nightfall had yet to arrive, but this did not dampen the merriment. The crowds were in a festive mood, helped by liberal amounts of drink. Making their way through the festivities took some extra time, but the seventh bell had only just rung when Martel and Maximilian reached The Copper Drum.

Already, the place seemed full. Several doormen stood guard, rather than the usual one or two.

"It's five silver to join the feast," one of them said while holding up his hand as a gesture of warning.

"Not these two. Remember what the mistress said," another guard intervened.

"Right, sorry. Go right in." The first doorman stepped aside to let them enter, which they did with satisfied looks on their faces.

They found the common room filled with people busy eating and drinking. A constant stream of patrons moved towards the bar for food or refreshments and back to their tables. From a balcony, Kerra herself looked over the feast; she nodded and gestured towards the bar as she caught Martel's eyes.

Looking in that direction, he saw that Maximilian was already three steps ahead, and he hurried to walk after his friend. The mageknight pushed his way forward, and with a guilty look and mumbled apologies, Martel followed in his wake. They reached the bar and discovered that everyone was served the same. One tankard of ale and a plate with sausages, pickled eggs, wheat bread, beans in stew, and slices of boiled carrots.

Looking over the room, Martel saw the staff fighters of The Copper Drum with spare seats at the table. Both hands occupied, he gave Maximilian an elbow to gain his attention and nodded towards the table before making his way there. He nearly spilled his food when a drunken man suddenly stepped out onto the aisle, but swift evasion added by a bit of magic saved his plate.

He quickly sat down before anything else could happen, nodding in greeting to the men.

"You made it," Butcher remarked with a smile.

"You knew we were coming?" Martel asked. Maximilian sat down opposite with a growl counting as his introduction.

Lothar shot Butcher look. "Kerra told us to save some seats for you, that's all. Your companion, this must be Maximilian of Marche?"

Martel nodded. "Yes, a mageknight and my best friend at the Lyceum."

"Which is not as impressive as it sounds. I am everyone's best friend." Maximilian laughed and took a swig from his ale.

"You guys providing entertainment tonight?" asked the novice.

Cornelius shook his head while Butcher replied, "No, Kerra wanted us fresh. No fighting in the hall tonight."

"You talk a lot for a man always stuffing his face," Lothar growled at the portly man.

In response, Butcher soaked up the last of his stew with his bread, threw it in his mouth, and got up. "I better get another serving while they have them," he mumbled while chewing, grabbing his plate to leave for the bar.

Martel swallowed the last bits of his first sausage. "You can get more servings?"

"As many as you want until last bell rings," Lothar explained. "Same with the ale."

"Never heard of someone doing it that way before," Maximilian remarked before putting a whole egg into his mouth. "Certainly gets people through the doors."

"And once they're here after seventh bell, they'll keep drinking and pay for it," Cornelius added.

"Kerra knows what she is doing," Martel said, which made the fighters at the table glance at each other.

Maximilian emptied his plate and stood up. "Well, I better get another while time permits. Meanwhile, you should ask your friends why they keep giving each other furtive looks," he told Martel before he walked away.

The novice turned his eyes from Cornelius to Lothar. "What's going on?"

The older of the veterans scratched the scar across his eye. "There's a reason Kerra wanted two mages as her guests tonight. But she didn't want us saying anything."

"About what?"

Before he could get his answer, Lothar looked up towards the balcony where Kerra stood. She was waving towards the door, where one of the guards likewise gestured for attention.

"Get Butcher," Lothar told Cornelius. "Get your friend," he added, directed at Martel. "Meet us outside."

"What's happening?" the novice asked. But the fighters gave him no answer as they left the table. Unsure what else to do, Martel made his way through the crowd until he reached Maximilian. He touched him on the shoulder and said, "Something is going on outside."

The mageknight grunted and followed with a plate of food and tankard of drink in his hands. Out on the street, Martel noticed his veteran friends, all armed with a staff, along with several of the guards at the tavern. Looking down the road, he saw a large flock of grizzled men approach. They looked armed, several bore torches, and they were led by Tibert.