

Firebrand 151

Chapter 151: Entrapment

Entrapment

While theory of magic remained one of Martel's favourite classes, he was less enthused by the disturbing topics they had covered lately. Maleficars, leechcraft, curses, and more. Yet he knew it was best to be aware of these matters, rather than close his ears and pretend they did not exist. Especially as he might one day be confronted by such a dark wizard, given what had happened in the copper lanes.

"Today, we will cover a topic I believe I mentioned before," Master Fenrick said. His eyes, as always protected by thick spectacles and heavy brows, glanced over the room. "Tyrian shape changers. While I doubt we shall ever see any in Morcaster, you may encounter them if you travel to the northern provinces, near the border."

He looked briefly at Martel, presumably the only student from Nordmark in the room.

"The most famous example of these shape changers would be the wolf, what we also referred to as a werewolf."

"My papa told me if they bite you, you turn into one," a novice spoke with a dramatic voice.

"Then you really need this lesson," Master Fenrick replied dryly. "This is a specific curse with limitations, used by the seier-wives."

"The witches of the North," Martel added, pleased that he remembered.

"Yes. We do not know their methods, but we know the results. To the Tyrians, there is no separation between body and mind. Even dead, the instincts of a wolf reside in its skin," their teacher explained. "The witches have the power to enchant a wolf's skin, so if a man wears it, he becomes the wolf, body and mind. In fact, I believe they use similar powers to draw the strength of a bear into their berserkers."

Martel had seen wolves a few times. Large beasts, but they shied away from humans. He had heard stories of what they might do if driven by hunger, but he had never experienced anything like that.

"When a man clads himself in such a cursed skin after sunset, his mind is taken over. Until the sun rises and the hide falls from his body, he has only the thoughts of a wolf, he acts like a wolf."

Martel raised a hand. "But why would the witches create something like this?"

Master Fenrick scratched his cheek. "Imagine that enemies invade your lands, your village. Even the gentlest man, who has never held arms, may become a vicious killer for a night. The witches also know how to induce fury and anger, even in animals."

The novice thought about the wolves he had encountered, how he might react if suddenly attacked by such a large beast in the dead of night.

"But the worst use is punishment." Their teacher paused, holding their attention. "Imagine forcing the cursed hide upon a man after sunset, and then you throw him into a pit with his family. When the sun rises and he returns to human form, when he sees what he did as a wolf? I can scarcely think of worse torture."

"That's cruel, barbaric!" exclaimed one of the novices.

Master Fenrick nodded. "It is. And if it makes you fearful, I suggest you never anger a witch of the North. They are capable of even greater cruelty than this."

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After his second lesson, improving his spellpower, which did the same for his appetite, Martel eagerly sat down to eat at the evening meal.

"Nordmark, there you are." Maximilian motioned for some novices to clear the table and give him the seat opposite Martel in the dining hall.

"Looking for me?"

"I was. My father was impressed with you," the viscount beamed.

"That's good." Martel still had no idea why that even mattered.

"In fact, my father bade me personally invite you to be part of his entourage for the annual celebration of the emperor's coronation." Maximilian said all of this with a big smile.

Martel had the opposite expression. "Oh no. Every time I go to one of these celebrations, I end up in a fight or worse."

The mageknight frowned. "I thought you would be pleased. An invitation to the Imperial palace, Martel! Do you understand what an honour this is?"

"That only makes me more nervous!"

"Relax. You will be in the background. I doubt you will come even a hundred paces near the emperor or anyone else of importance," Maximilian declared confidently. "You simply have to stand in the background, drink some wine, so my father can point at you and explain that you are a promising young mage under his wing. That is all."

"Max, I don't want to go." He said each word with conviction.

The mageknight crossed his arms. "Very well, you force my hand. Martel, I ask this of you as a favour. Given what happened at The Broken Crown, or with the Broken Blades, not to mention the berserker, I believe you owe me many times over. I walked into fights for you – the least you can do is attend this party with me."

Martel felt himself deflate. "Fine. When is this?"

"Next fiveday." Maximilian's beaming smile returned. "Be ready at sixth bell. A carriage will pick us up. We cannot afford to be late." He rose from his seat, and Martel only realised now that his friend had not brought any food to eat at the table.

"Wait! Next fiveday, but which day?"

Maximilian laughed. "All of them! This is the emperor's celebration of his coronation, not some wedding in a village."

"You hid that on purpose! You knew I would think it's just one evening!"

"I knew no such thing." The young nobleman almost looked innocent denying the allegation.

"We just had all the harvest games! I never thought I'd say this, but why do we need so many celebrations?"

"Those were for the peasantry," Maximilian explained with a frown. "Who are we to question the emperor if he wishes to celebrate for a fiveday? Calm yourself. I shall inform the overseer to dismiss your classes in the afternoons, and I will have clothes sent to you. You will need to wear something different each evening, naturally." With a final smile, the mageknight departed, leaving Martel feeling trapped.

Chapter 152: Introduction to Etiquette

Introduction to Etiquette

Martel tried to push the thought of the Imperial palace away; nothing he could do about it, so there seemed no point in worrying about it. Solday morning kept him busy assisting Master Jerome and working in the apothecary, and he would try to enjoy his afternoon before tomorrow came, when all his evenings for the whole fiveday would be accounted for.

His plans survived until noon, when he found a message waiting for him in the entrance hall. It briefly read,

Martel,

See me this afternoon

or this evening.

Mistress Juliana

The novice immediately felt guilty, even though he had no clue what this was about. Perhaps a bad sign that he could think of several reasons he might be in trouble. Rather than delay, as his anxiety only rose with each passing moment, he decided to find out. A few minutes later, he knocked on the door to the overseer's chamber.

"Enter."

Martel did so. He found the room same as his previous visits, with lots of missives and papers on the desk. As for the overseer herself, she sat in a soft chair and beckoned for Martel to take his own seat, which he did. "You wanted to see me?"

"Maximilian of Marche informs me you will join him at the Imperial banquet next fiveday."

Frail hope sprouted in Martel's heart. "If it's a problem, if I have to attend class, I will obviously be staying home. Nothing matters more to me than my studies."

"No, it is fine. Several other students will also attend."

Martel's hope withered away.

"I understand you have attended other celebrations among the nobility, but this is the Imperial court. I thought it prudent to warn you."

Oh no. "Warn me about what?"

"Everyone at court is either a player or a pawn in the political games that rule our Empire. I assume you understand which position you have."

Martel could infer it from her words, but her stern gaze made him befuddled. "What kind of games?"

"Every member of the Imperial court is concerned with power. Their own, specifically."

"I thought they were busy ruling the realm," Martel said, suddenly feeling naive. "For the good of everyone."

Mistress Juliana exhaled slowly. "I think you need this conversation more than I realised. Now, while everyone must be assumed to be self-serving, these nobles and courtiers band together in factions for greater influence."

"I don't understand. Why do I need to know this?"

"Patience," she told him. "The most powerful of these factions, with several seats on the High Council, is led by the duke of Cheval. They favour war with Khiva and the continued expansion of the Empire." She narrowed her eyes. "You know who the High Council is?"

"They advise the emperor?"

"More than that, they often make the decisions. Another faction believes our current stalemate with Khiva proves that we are falling behind and must initiate reforms, but I will spare you those details."

"Thanks," he mumbled.

"Mages are rare, Martel, and there are some positions only we may fill. Physician to the emperor, captain of the Praetorian Guard, or most officers in the legions."

"But I'm not a mageknight," he protested. "I'm not even an acolyte!"

"But you show promise, and these people plan years ahead. If they believe you may hold an influential position someday, they will seek to gain you for their side. And if they fear you may strengthen their rivals, they will act swiftly to remove you from the board altogether."

"But what can I do? Can't I just stay away from this banquet?"

She shook her head. "Your name has been added to the guest list, and nobody refuses an invitation to the Imperial palace. Besides, rejecting Count Marche's invitation after you already accepted it will be a grave insult. Exactly what you should avoid doing."

Besides that, he could not disappoint Maximilian, after all the times that the mageknight had come to his aid. "So what should I do?" If Martel had felt trapped before, he could practically feel the noose around his neck by now.

"You stay in the background. Say and do as little as possible. If anyone asks, you have made no commitment to Count Marche. You are simply accompanying his son as a friend," Mistress Juliana impressed upon him. "Avoid attention, especially from anyone who seems influential or powerful."

At least that was simple and straightforward, though to Martel, anyone at a celebration in the Imperial palace would seem influential and powerful. "Mistress, what about Count Marche? What faction does he belong to?"

"None, from what I know. He may be considering which will yield him the most influence, or perhaps he has hopes of leading his own. Regardless, he is unpredictable. Watch every word you tell him."

Martel disliked the notion that he could not trust the intentions of his best friend's father, but he would be a fool to ignore Mistress Juliana's advice. "I'll be careful," he promised. "Thank you."

Something that might resemble a vague smile appeared on her face. "I will see you at the celebration."

~

Martel had barely finished his supper when Maximilian suddenly appeared by his table. "There you are. Come along." Without waiting, the mageknight turned around and began walking away, leaving the novice to hurry after him.

"What's going on?"

"Magic may make the mage, but clothes alone will not suffice to make you presentable. The emperor's feast will involve dancing, and it is high time you learn," Maximilian explained as they left the dining hall.

"Stars, no," Martel exclaimed. "Can't I just say I've got a sprained ankle?"

"Do not be silly. There will be many young noblewomen in need of a dancing partner. They already know you are a great mage, or they will know, but you must also show yourself to be a person of quality," the viscount claimed. He turned right, leaving the corridor to enter the gymnasium.

"Max, I am not taking dance lessons from you." Despite his objections, Martel still followed along.

"I never expected you would." The mageknight stood aside, revealing another person already present on the sands.

Taken by surprise, Martel stopped in his tracks.

In response, Eleanor approached him. "I am doing this as a favour to Maximilian."

Martel understood; she was not going to do him any favours.

"Excellent! I look forward to seeing your prowess," Maximilian declared and left.

She took position next to Martel. "I will teach you the simplest one, and that will have to do, given our lack of time. Watch my feet." She took a step forward, moved her left foot as well, and gathered them both together. As she did, she softly spoke, "And one, and two, and three."

She repeated the motion several times, eventually getting him to copy her.

"Good. Now we try together." She moved in front of him. With firm movements, she placed his hand on her waist and took hold of his other. "When I say one, begin to move." She looked at him.

His hand holding hers felt warm, and he was somehow more nervous than during the entire conversation with Mistress Juliana, but he nodded.

"And one –"

On the first syllable, Martel's foot shot out to hit her shinbone.

"Too eager."

"Sorry!" he said, feeling mortified.

"It did not hurt. I had my shield raised."

Now he felt a little hurt. He had been so nervous, not to mention focusing on his feet, he had not even noticed the faint shimmer of magic surrounding her.

"We will try again. This time, wait for the beat. Ready?" Eleanor waited until he nodded. "And one _"

Chapter 153: The First Starlit Eve

The First Starlit Eve

Maximilian had been busy. Martel's new wardrobe arrived early Pelday afternoon. Besides a few more white shirts – not made from silk but still expensive fabric – his drawer was now filled by several pairs of trousers, shoes, and some doublets. Martel was relieved to see that the latter had an emblem of a green tree upon them. After his conversation with the overseer, he realised that if he wore clothes with the insignia of Marche, that would send the kind of statement he had been told to avoid. Maximilian must have talked with Eleanor about more than dancing, since the tree resembled the emblem on the clothes Martel had once received from her.

Dressed in his new clothes, wondering how they got his measurements so well, Martel stood in the entrance hall when Master Farhad's great clock announced that sixth bell had arrived. As Maximilian joined him, likewise clad in expensive raiment, they walked outside to await the carriage.

"You promise I'll not be expected to do anything?" the novice asked.

"Did the dance lessons go that poorly?"

"Not that," Martel scoffed. "You know, magic. I won't have to fight anyone or get beaten up."

"No, of course not." Maximilian coughed. "Probably."

The novice glared at him. "What are you planning?"

"Nothing, I swear! But if I introduce you as a powerful mage, people will expect to see magic. Just relax, everything will be fine."

Not feeling convinced, Martel followed his friend into the carriage as it arrived to bring them to the celebration.

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Even with four horses pulling, it took them a while to reach their destination. They had to cross the Basilica square and go further north-west than Martel had ever travelled on his own. Eventually, the road sloped gently upwards towards the hill of the emperor's palace.

They had scarcely reached the grounds before the carriage stopped to be inspected. Besides a handful of legionaries from the city guard, two praetorians stood by the great gate. They wore purple cloaks as sign of their high rank, and Martel knew they were mageknights, trained and able

to deal with any threat. Like with inquisitors, he saw two daggers in their belts. One made from steel, and one made from gold.

Although Martel felt a little intimidated, the inspection lasted mere moments; the insignia of Marche upon the carriage, along with the praetorians recognising the son of Count Marche inside, got them through quickly. As they drove past the walls surrounding the palace grounds, Martel could not help but stick his head out the window to watch.

A sight to make the stars fall from the sky met his eyes. Built in white stone and marble, the Imperial palace rose in every direction but behind him. Countless columns greeted every visitor in a semicircle. As they approached, Martel saw chiselled figures winding up every single pillar. Likewise, the gates into the palace itself, which looked to be cast from bronze, had multiple panels retelling stories unknown to him.

Another pair of praetorians flanked the great doors. As they left the carriage, Martel had a better opportunity to take a closer look. While the purple cloak drew the most obvious attention, their armour looked exquisite, and he believed he saw the faint shimmer of magic upon the steel.

By his side, Maximilian laughed and gave him a little push between the shoulder blades, beckoning for him to enter up the stairs.

~

They were not the only guests, of course. Others arrived at the same time, and Martel saw plenty of people as they traversed the wide hallways of the palace. The interior mirrored the exterior, with columns and statues resting upon marble floors. Martel felt dizzy, trying to fathom how many hours of labour had gone into every inch of this place. More than that, the pair of praetorians posted every hundred paces or so made the novice realise the power of the emperor, to have so many mageknights protecting him.

They finally entered a large hall, many times greater than any at the Lyceum. Maximilian gave him a quick jab with the elbow and directed his attention upwards. Looking in that direction, Martel saw that the ceiling consisted of a giant dome, so great it made him wonder how it did not collapse upon them.

His amazement turned to awe as he saw the entire ceiling had been painted like the night sky, but the stars moved. Not only that, but he recognised the positions from his astronomy class. This was an accurate presentation, showing the celestial objects exactly as they would have appeared outside, if the sun had set. Magic had to be involved, but Martel could not fathom the enchantment or complexities involved in making this reality.

"Everyone always marvels at the Dome of Stars," Maximilian grinned.

More guests kept pouring in. Despite his fine clothing, Martel noticed one difference between him and everyone else; they all wore jewellery. Most had rings and necklaces, and some of the women had small tiaras in their hair and gems attached to their ears. Even Maximilian wore his signet ring.

The House of Marche arrived, notably the count, his wife, and other children. Maximilian walked over to join them, his sister giving him a hug around the waist, and Martel trotted after, not knowing what else to do with himself.

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An hour or so later, a set of grand doors opened. To the sound of trumpets, ten praetorians marched in. Martel saw the shimmer of magic as they shielded themselves, and almost like a suit of armour, they surrounded the man that appeared between their ranks. For the first time, Martel laid eyes on the emperor of Aster.

Of average height, he led a comfortable life given his well-nourished state. His beard was short and groomed, and he wore purple robes stitched with silver that almost crackled with magic. Rings adorned his every finger, and he wore a silver crown. From what Martel knew, the emperor did not possess magical gifts, but he wore enchanted objects worth half the city, it seemed.

Parting the crowd, the praetorians carved a path for the emperor to ascend the throne in one end of the hall. While his guards took position around him, a herald stepped forward and began calling out the names of the assembled nobility. One family after the other, the lords and ladies of the Asterian Empire stepped forward to kneel in obeisance towards their ruler.

Martel glanced over the number of people present. "This will take a while," he whispered to Maximilian.

"Indeed."

"What happens afterwards?"

"On the first eve, usually a bard sings in honour of the emperor, his reign, and the victories of the Empire. After that, finally food and drink will be served, and people may talk among themselves. I suggest you eat fast, as you and I will not be staying long," Maximilian explained. "We have class early tomorrow, after all."

Martel looked at him, a little surprised. "Really? And that's all?"

"I told you this would be easy," the viscount replied with an overbearing voice. "Now relax and enjoy yourself. Once the wine arrives, anyway."

~

Elsewhere in the hall, standing far back, the overseer of the Lyceum and its Master of Elements stood, observing the same procession. They exchanged quiet remarks on occasion, otherwise drawing little attention.

Watching as the count of Marche and his family stepped forward to approach the throne, with Martel and other of their attendants detaching to stay behind, Alastair leaned towards Juliana. "Did you tell Martel what to expect?"

She nodded. "I explained the dangers. Hopefully he knows to keep quiet and avoid attention."

"Did you warn him that if he makes a false move, the headmaster will use that to have you ousted from your position?"

"He knows the cost to himself if he is expelled. I saw no need to add another burden by making him feel responsible for me as well." She glanced at him. "After all, teachers are responsible for their students, not the reverse."

"The next five evenings will be long to get through," Alastair predicted, blowing out his breath. "I hope they bring out the wine soon."

Chapter 154: Entanglement

Entanglement

"Morcaster has many wonders. In architecture. My favourite is the Basilica."

Only as Master Basil said the name of the temple did Martel realise the similarity to his teacher's name. The novice considered whether that had influenced the earthmage's choice of favourite, or if perhaps his parents naming him thus had influenced him towards earth magic.

"The stones were hewn and raised with magic. But the towers rest. On their own foundation. Else they might be vulnerable. If someone threw gold at them." Master Basil gave a coughing sound. "If you can imagine someone doing that."

Martel realised that his teacher did not have a problem with his breathing, but instead he was laughing.

They stood at the Basilica square, another trip into the city to demonstrate the uses of earth magic. Given their walking speed, Martel estimated that they would have to leave in a few moments to make it back to the Lyceum in time for next bell.

"The stone comes from a quarry. Two hundred miles away. Mages dig and shape them. Before transport. Oxen handle that, not mages." Another round of raspy sounds from Master Basil. "Let us turn back."

They began walking south towards the Lyceum. The ragged preacher was present again, and he had ordinary people, servants, some nobles, and a few members of the clergy all gathered to hear him.

"Too much sun." Master Basil glanced towards the preacher and his crowd as they slowly passed by. "Lovely baths made from good stone nearby. He should go in the shade. And also wash."

~

As they drove towards the Imperial palace for the second time, Martel felt less anxious. Nothing had been required of him other than being present, and seeing the palace, including the Dome of Stars, had been an experience to treasure. Seeing the emperor, even if from afar, had also been interesting. Martel still found it hard to grasp how much magic he had witnessed, whether it be enchanted objects, buildings, or mageknights. The Lyceum might boast of the same, but being the seat of magic in Aster, that was to be expected.

The difference lay in subtlety, perhaps. At the Lyceum, magic seemed almost dormant, waiting for its residents to use it. Or it was hidden in the walls, used for mundane purposes, such as cleansing and transporting water. Not like the palace, where magic was on display to impress and overwhelm the visitor.

Once they arrived, they gathered in a different hall than last. While curious to see more of the palace, Martel was a little disappointed not to see the Dome of Stars again. While still beautiful and filled with ornaments, the new location looked more like the halls he had seen in the homes of the nobility, except perhaps on a grander scale. In one end stood a throne, and Martel wondered how many the emperor had – one for every room?

After a certain amount of waiting, the man in question made his entrance like yesterday, surrounded by praetorians. Martel noticed that he wore different clothes, but they had the same shimmer of magic as the other set. He thought about the wealth implied in owning so many enchanted garments.

Several musicians entered as well, taking position in the middle of the hall. As they began playing, Martel speculated whether their instruments were also enchanted; the sound carried easily over the noise of people whispering and rustling, and the music was divine. He hoped that he might dream of it tonight, just so he could experience it again.

Caught up in the performance, Martel did not notice when Maximilian left his side. He even closed his eyes for a little while, just to better concentrate on the music. As he opened them again, he quickly had to step backwards to avoid the dancing couples now taking up the inner part of the hall. Almost pressed against the wall, Martel had to compose himself. He felt foolish, though nobody seemed to have noticed; none looked in his direction. Just as he preferred. If the rest of the evening went with music and dance, allowing Martel to stand back and enjoy it all, he would consider forgiving Maximilian for dragging him along.

Eventually, the round of dancing ended, and the mageknight returned to his side. "Surely you do not intend to remain by the wall the entire evening?"

"That is exactly what I intend."

"Martel," his friend said in reproach, "now is your chance to show your graces! Prove that you are more than just a mage. You might even entice some of the lesser nobility to consider you worthy of their daughter."

Martel gave him an incredulous look. "Max, I am sixteen. I have no such thoughts."

The mageknight slowly shook his head. "What a sweet and carefree life you lead, my friend. Regardless, you should consider making the most of this opportunity, as I believe the next dance is the Aquilan step. The very one that Eleanor spent the other night teaching you."

As Maximilian left to seek out a dance partner of his own, Martel looked around. Etiquette dictated that as the man, he made the first move to invite someone. But rank mattered, as Maximilian had explained to him. The son of a count might ask the daughter of a duke, but only the audacious offspring of a baron would dare to do the same. If in doubt, he should stick to those of untitled families, patricians and the like.

Of course, that presumed Martel knew how to tell the difference. Everyone wore insignia explaining their house, but the novice could not recognise any except the few belonging to his friends, and it probably would not work asking Maximilian for a dance. He was the son of a count, after all, far above Martel's station.

Still looking around, he saw the only other insignia he might reliably recognise. He had not noticed Eleanor yesterday, as he had ended up far back in the hall during the audience, crowded by other attendants of lower rank, which had also suited him fine. But he suddenly, for reasons unknown, felt a little guilty that Eleanor had spent an evening helping him if he would not make use of it. His next emotion was annoyance that he did feel guilty. Maximilian had requested her help, not him, and she had decided to end their friendship, not him; Martel did not see why he owed her anything.

But she was the daughter of a legate from a patrician family. And wearing a red dress that flowed around her form, with soft curls to frame her face, she seemed a vision. Clearly, others thought as

well; Martel saw more than one person moving in her direction while the musicians indicated that the next song was about to play.

With a bit of empowered speed in his step, Martel wove through several people to reach Eleanor first. Suddenly unsure about the etiquette and feeling nervous, he gave a bow. "May I dance with you?" he asked.

Eleanor's usual companions, the other girls from the mageknight class, looked at him with scant respect. As for the daughter of Fontaine, she inclined her head. "You may."

Relieved, Martel offered his hand, which she took. He let her onto the floor just in time for the music to begin. Holding his nerve, he waited until the beat arrived and moved his feet. In unison, she moved with him.

"You dance well," she remarked.

"I have a good teacher."

Her expression cracked a little to show the vague shape of a smile. Moving around with confidence, the sound of music filling his ears and Eleanor's touch against his, Martel began to feel grateful that he might experience a night such as this.

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Once the music stopped, and Martel had thanked his partner for the dance, he retreated back to the edge of the hall. One round was enough for him, especially as he would not know any of the next dances. In the break, while the musicians announced what came next, Maximilian came over.

"Not bad, Nordmark!"

"Thanks. I had my doubts when you invited me, but it looks like you knew what you were doing."

"Of course I do! I am only a little insulted that it took you dancing with the prettiest girl here to understand this fact," Maximilian said with mock indignation.

Martel laughed, simply glad that everything had gone well.

The mageknight leaned closer. "Can I entrust you with a secret?"

"Sure, what is it?"

"My father is keeping it quiet until our positions are secure. That I am guaranteed a place in the Praetorian Guard," Maximilian said in a low voice. "But he has decided to accept a union between me and Eleanor."

It took Martel a moment to understand. "Oh. Congratulations. You're very lucky."

"I certainly could do worse! Ah, the musicians are about to start again!" Maximilian hastened away to find a partner for the next dance, leaving Martel on his own.

Chapter 155: Sowing Seeds

Sowing Seeds

"How is your introduction to the Imperial court?" Master Alastair asked as they took a break between exercises.

"The palace is certainly beautiful. I thought I saw you the first night, master, but I lost you again in the crowd," Martel replied. "I did not realise teachers attended the feast."

"They usually don't. The headmaster is invited, of course, as is the overseer, given that she is appointed by the High Council. Since Mistress Juliana and I are old war comrades, I usually join her to back her up, like the old days. Though I prefer fighting Tyrian raiders rather than Asterian courtiers." He chuckled at his own jest. "I hope you fare better than me in that regard."

"Well, so far it's been fine. They haven't given me any trouble."

"Good, though opportunities have also been scarce these first two evenings. Audience one night, dancing the next. If I recall, tonight allows for more conversation. We best be on our toes, both of us." Alastair gave a knowing smile, as if they shared a secret. "Now, ready to give that spell another try?"

Martel extended his hands, letting air stream from one and fire from the other.

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On the third day, they assembled in the same hall as last night. Martel did not know if he was disappointed seeing the same place as yesterday, or relieved that even the Imperial palace seemed to have limits.

As Master Alastair had alluded to, tonight was less formal. A large group of entertainers entered the hall, dancers, jugglers, and acrobats among them. Not too different from those performing on the marketplaces during festivals. They spread out, moving among the hosts while doing their individual acts, sometimes even involving guests that seemed up for it.

Happy to stay in the background as always, Martel hovered near Maximilian and simply enjoyed the performances. The young viscount was busy talking to people, nobles and courtiers, regaling them with tales judging by his animated expressions and movements. At times, he even glanced back at Martel, presumably because the story involved the novice as well. On those occasions, Martel always quickly looked away, awkwardly drinking from his wine.

At length, one of these courtiers approached Martel. Unsure how to act, the novice inclined his head and hoped that would suffice; he did not feel confident on how to bow or when the situation warranted it.

"You are Martel of Engby? Lord Maximilian said you helped him bring down a fearsome Tyrian berserker," the man spoke.

"Yes, that's true." While Martel knew to be careful with his words, he saw no harm in simply confirming the truth. Especially if Maximilian had already spread the word.

"Incredible. He even claimed you were a novice at the time."

"He's right." Perhaps for the best not to point out he was still a novice. It would only lead to more questions explaining why he was not an acolyte yet.

"Fascinating. Did being Tyrian yourself help you? Are you familiar with their weaknesses, how their magic works?"

"No," Martel mumbled, not sure himself which part he was refuting. He could not tell if he was being insulted or if making some heavy-handed correction would cause insult. "I just used what I had learned at the Lyceum," he finally said, hoping that would satisfy.

"Of course. Such a fine institution." The courtier wandered off, leaving Martel to finish his wine and look for his next cup.

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Martel's reprieve did not last long. An attendant wearing a horse as his emblem approached with a brief greeting. "His Lordship the duke of Cheval requests your presence." Without waiting for an answer, the messenger turned around and walked away, leaving Martel to follow.

Refusal did not seem an option, so the novice hurried after. He tried to stay calm, but he felt as if everyone stared at him, crossing the hall. Avoiding the dancers and jugglers, Martel eventually reached a small semicircle of people arranged around the duke of Cheval as the centre. Waiting to be acknowledged, hoping a little that he never would be, Martel stood by the edge.

The nobleman glanced at Martel's head rising behind the others, finished his sentence to polite laughter from his listeners, and turned his back attention on the novice. "Master Martel, it is good to see you again."

Regardless of how awkward it might look, Martel did his best to give a bow. "Thank you, my lord."

"I am told you attend in the company of Count Marche. Am I to understand you seek to enter his employ?"

Martel quickly shook his head. "I am a friend to his son, Maximilian. I am simply attending to keep him company."

The duke gave him an indecipherable look. "I made you a cordial offer if I recall. At the very least, I expect a reply before I see you wearing the colours of another man."

"Of course, my lord. As I am still only a novice, it seems too early for me to decide my future." Martel had little interest in working for someone who seemed as bellicose as the duke of Cheval, but he knew to keep that to himself.

"I can respect playing your cards with deliberation. I am a man of patience, though not without limits." The nobleman inclined his head, and Martel got the impression he had been dismissed.

~

Towards the end of the evening, Alastair and Juliana convened having spent the last few hours talking to people separately. "Anything worthy of note?" she asked.

He raised his glass. "The wine is good."

She raised her own. "Thank you, I am aware. I saw our headmaster flittering around the duchess of Trior."

"You think he is planning his move against you?"

"Sowing the seeds to have the High Council remove me, yes. I think Martel's prowess has taken him by surprise. No doubt, he once expected the boy to fail the examination, giving him his excuse

to move against me," Juliana considered. "Now that no longer seems likely, he has to find alternative means."

"Are you concerned?"

"He has tried to get rid of me since the day I arrived. He is welcome to keep trying."

Alastair raised his glass again. "I'll drink to that."

Chapter 156: Bear Trap

Bear Trap

Martel's first lesson of the day gave him the chance to ask a question that had been on his mind since last Manday, and which yesterday eve's conversation had reminded him of. "Master Fenrick, when you spoke of Tyrian shape changers, you mentioned they did something similar to create berserkers. But how? Berserkers don't turn into bears."

"No, they don't. This is simply my theory. The seier-wives guard the secrets of making berserkers, and I was only able to glean a few things in my time among the tribes. But I believe the method is similar to how they create the cursed wolf skins, fusing the spirit of the bear into the body and mind of man."

"But only to a limited effect, if also permanent," Martel said. "Considering the berserker looks the same and his mind remains his own."

"True, except perhaps the last part. There's a reason that berserkers usually fight alone, or enter the fray without their comrades next to them. Once they draw blood, once the rage fills them, it is said they no longer distinguish between friend and foe, and they will fight until not another living soul remains in their presence." The teacher regarded his inquisitive student under his heavy eyebrows. "Consider yourself lucky that you survived your encounter with one of these warriors. And if you ever come across another, I suggest you turn around."

~

For the fourth day in a row, Martel dressed into expensive clothing, including a new shirt and doublet he had never worn before. He felt uneasy knowing the value of the garments in his drawer, especially since he would have so few occasions to wear them. They were not practical clothes; the white shirts would stain and tear quickly if he wore them day to day or out on the streets, and the intricate stitching on the doublets would fray with frequent use. Perhaps he could give some of them to his brothers, and they might save them for a wedding feast or another such unique event.

The journey was the same as ever; however strange it seemed, Martel had become almost familiar with travelling to the Imperial palace. Their names were quickly checked at the gates as before, the praetorians easily recognising them by now, and they could soon enter the palace itself.

Like previous nights, they gathered in the same hall that clearly served as a general location for such assemblies. Less enthralled by the surroundings, Martel had better time to look at the other guests, some of whom he recognised, having seen them before. He had also begun to understand some of the intricacies of rank on display. Those with landed titles, such as dukes, counts, and barons, wore their house insignia with bold colours and often had daggers with exquisite hilts in gold strapped to their waists. Attendants of lesser rank wore clothes in muted hues and tended to be unarmed.

Tonight, entertainment was provided by the praetorians themselves with a display of martial prowess, both mageknights and ordinary soldiers. They took position opposite each other and began a spectacle of swift combat. Martel was reminded of the solstice celebrations where similar had taken place, twice with his involvement. While he could not imagine any way he could somehow be roped into participating in this fight, he made sure to stand right against the wall and appear as invisible as possible, while keeping his mouth shut.

A servant appeared in red livery with a two-headed eagle in silver as insignia. While all the guests stared at the spectacle of duels in the centre of the hall, the servant nimbly made his way through the crowd at the edge to approach Maximilian. Martel could not help but feel curious; the two-headed eagle was the symbol of the emperor, meaning this servant was not some attendant to one of the guests or a courtier, but someone who directly served the Imperial family – or so Maximilian had explained it while telling Martel to stay out of their way if he saw anyone dressed like that.

The servant spoke quietly into the young viscount's ear, who nodded vigorously and turned around. His eyes searched until they fell upon Martel, upon which Maximilian gestured with his head to come along.

"What is going on?" the novice asked as they moved along the crowd.

"A great honour," Maximilian replied, waiting a moment as they separated to move around some patrician and his family before he spoke again, "His Highness, the emperor's nephew, has requested our presence!"

Martel's heartbeat doubled in speed. "Why?"

"I have been spreading the story of how we defeated a berserker. I figured it might earn us an invitation, and I was right!" Maximilian's entire face smiled.

The fatal flaw in Martel's plan finally revealed itself. He had intended to remain unnoticed and get through this celebration without attracting attention, but he attended in the company of Maximilian, who had the exact opposite intentions. He tried not to look at the middle of the hall, where the praetorians currently displayed their impressive skills for butchering those who displeased the emperor and his family.

~

The servant took them through a short hallway and up the stairs to a balcony overlooking the spectacle. A single person sat inside. From behind, Martel could only see black hair on a thin body. He looked at Maximilian next to him, wondering what to do; apparently, the answer was nothing as the viscount simply stood, quiet.

Finally, a match between two praetorians in the hall ended. The young prince raised one hand to wave them closer. Maximilian went first, walking to the edge of the balcony to stand next to its occupant; Martel followed, keeping one step behind.

The prince turned his pale face towards them, revealing large, dark eyes that stared at them. "You are Maximilian of Marche?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"I have heard that you defeated a Tyrian berserker."

"I did, Your Highness."

"And he is the one who helped?" His great eyes blinked quickly as they turned to stare at Martel.

"Yes, Your Highness."

"We will talk again tomorrow." The Imperial scion turned his attention back to the hall where the next fight was ready to commence.

Relieved at being dismissed, Martel gave half a bow and stepped backwards, almost stumbling, though thankfully outside the prince's field of vision.

He was halfway down the stairs when he remembered what had been said at the end; tomorrow, he would have to come back.

Chapter 157: Cold Counsel and Hot Discussions

Solday morning passed like any other, with an exception towards the end. As Master Jerome dismissed him from his duty in the workshop, he passed on the message that the overseer wanted to speak with the novice. Always feeling a little uncomfortable, worrying about the reason, Martel did not delay but made his way to her chamber straightaway.

"Enter," came the reply to his knocking.

The room looked as always, and Martel took a seat. He placed one hand in his pocket, playing with the rune token that Regnar had given him so long ago, which helped him remain calm.

Mistress Juliana finished writing something, put her feather pen away, and looked at Martel. "How are you navigating the Imperial court?"

"Fine, I suppose. Just one more night, and it's over."

"I heard you spoke to the duke of Cheval. Has he taken an interest in you?"

"He's offered me a position," Martel explained.

"He is a shrewd man with an eye for opportunity. He would certainly make for a powerful patron. Well worth considering," she told him.

Martel hesitated, unsure whether he should reveal the reason for his apprehension. But even if she intimidated him, Mistress Juliana seemed to have his best interests at heart. "I don't want to work for him. I've heard him speak, and you said he leads the faction that wants war." He vividly remembered how the current war caused the riots, spilling onto the streets of Morcaster.

She regarded him for what felt like a long time. "If those are your principles, I will not dissuade you with cold counsel. Though you may find that the Empire is no different as a benefactor."

"There is one thing." Cold or not, Martel could use some counsel. "Tonight, the emperor's nephew wants to see me and Maximilian."

"Prince Flavius?" she asked sharply.

"Could be," he stammered. Nobody had told him the prince's name. "I only heard his title."

"Thin boy, big eyes, little older than you? Probably not quite as tall."

"That sounds like him, yes."

She nodded slowly. "He is the emperor's heir. Tread most carefully, and do not upset him. If possible, give him no reason to remember you."

Martel had a sinking feeling that such depended on Maximilian and what he had planned.

~

Wearing the last set of his fine clothes, Martel joined Maximilian to take yet another ride in the carriage. Once inside the transport and alone, he asked the question that had been on his mind all day. "Max, what's going to happen tonight with the prince?"

"We shall regale him with a tale or two of our exploits, that is all."

"But why have you involved me? I don't have to be present for that."

The viscount shot him a look. "He is our future emperor. I would have thought you thrilled to meet him. Barely anyone at the school has had this honour."

"I'm not like you," Martel mumbled. "Attention just means trouble for me."

"Buckle your breeches, man. I guarantee you, it will all be fine."

The novice did not feel reassured.

~

Entertainment for the final night of the feast came in the form of a play. Martel was reminded of his friends, who had left Morcaster rather hastily; he doubted they would be invited to the Imperial palace to perform. In any case, it did not matter. Even before the play began, Maximilian and Martel were summoned to join Prince Flavius.

The servant sent to fetch them walked a path that led outside. Not the extensive grounds that surrounded the palace, but a smaller garden inside the complex. The weather seemed foreboding with dark clouds on the horizon, and Martel hoped it was not some portent of how the night would develop.

The garden was full of flowers and colours, trees and bushes that spoke of skilled gardeners. Beautifully carved statues adorned different places, and a pavilion stood in the centre. Martel found it difficult to enjoy the surroundings, though, as he recognised the prince standing ahead with others.

Martel did not know them save one; as the son of a duke, it was understandable that Cheval would be part of the prince's circle. Still annoying to see his smirking face. The others were likewise sons of high nobility, Martel guessed. No girls invited to this little gathering, he noticed. It would have made him feel a lot better to have Eleanor present.

Maximilian gave a small bow to the prince, and Martel followed suit. He noticed that Flavius wore heavy golden jewellery, coincidentally keeping him safe from magic.

The prince scrutinised them both, and the novice felt compelled to look away. He pretended to study those present, standing a few paces behind the Imperial heir. Four of them, all around the same age as the prince with brightly embroidered insignias on their chests.

"I am told that Tyrian berserkers are near invincible in combat," Flavius spoke. "A match even for our mageknights."

"Yes, your Highness." Maximilian could not hide the satisfaction from his face.

"And yet the pair of you bested one. Two acolytes." The prince's voice turned cold.

Martel felt alarmed, but he dared not speak; he had no idea what he might say to avert the trouble brewing.

"We did," Maximilian growled.

"That one is not even an acolyte," Cheval interjected with obvious delight. "He is a novice. He has not even studied magic for a year."

Thunder could be heard in the distance, making one of the youths flinch. "Should we go inside?"

"Go hide inside the pavilion if rain frightens you," the prince spoke with derision. Still he scrutinised the two young mages in front of him.

"I was just thinking about the possibility of a lightning strike," came the mumbled reply.

"The pavilion has a lightning rod, coward," another of the group told him.

"It must have been an impressive display of magic when you defeated such a fearsome enemy," Flavius spoke again. Still, he looked at Martel and Maximilian as if calculating their worth.

"It was, Your Highness," the viscount replied. "He wails on me with a great hammer, costing me all my power just to keep him at bay. Meanwhile, Martel took him down with an attack from behind. A classic partnership between a mageknight and an elemental mage."

"Cheval tells me this is impossible. Two acolytes, or rather, one acolyte and the novice, could never have the strength to defeat a real berserker."

"Well we did," Maximilian growled. "In fact, I watched the barbarian defeat a mageknight in a prize fight some months prior. Trust me, his hammer hit as hard as any could, and I took those blows!"

"We used gold," Martel quickly added. "To weaken him."

The prince's big eyes turned from the viscount to the novice. "So he was powerless?"

"Only at the end," Maximilian protested. "I had to take plenty of hits before that. Not to mention, Martel dealt with all his henchmen, sending them into flight."

"You must be powerful mages," Flavius considered, speaking in his monotone voice as he looked back at Maximilian. "If this is true. I do not like being lied to. Prove to me you are as capable as you claim."

"Fine," the viscount assented. "How? I will gladly beat up Cheval as many times as you want."

"No, that would prove little. He is not a good mage," the prince spoke, and despite how anxious Martel felt, he enjoyed hearing that. "I want you to fight each other."

Martel did not enjoy hearing that. "What?" he exclaimed, forgetting himself.

Once again, the prince's eerie gaze turned on the novice. "Show me how powerful you both are. Fight each other until I am convinced."

The novice swallowed, wondering how to get out of this. Next to him, Maximilian slowly turned around to face him.

Chapter 158: Help from Above

Help from Above

Martel looked from the prince to Maximilian. He had sparred against the mageknight on many occasions, and he had no trouble doing that again. But he had the distinct feeling exchanging a few blows under the protection of their magical shields would not impress the prince as demanded.

"Come on. Hit me with the best you got," Maximilian told him. The mageknight raised his fists. "Think of it as a fight in the pit," he muttered.

Feeling like he had no other option, Martel gave an empowered blow straight against his friend's chin. His fist never made impact, held back by Maximilian's shield.

Retaliation came swiftly. Martel barely remembered to raise his own protection, but it held the mageknight's first blow at bay. Just not the second, which came immediately after. A fist planted against his chest sent the novice sprawling on his back.

He heard laughter from the young nobleman, especially Cheval. The prince stood with his passive expression, regarding them with cool eyes.

"Not much of a performance," one of them remarked.

"What can you expect from someone with Tyrian blood in his veins?" Cheval snorted derisively. "Disgraceful that he should be in the presence of us with noble blood."

Anger rising, Martel quickly got on his feet. Without thinking, flames filled his hands. "Your clothes burn the same as mine," he threatened and was rewarded by seeing Cheval flinch.

"That resembles better what I expected to see," Flavius said. "If you are an elemental mage, show us your magic."

Martel turned towards Maximilian, who looked at him with apprehension. Yet he held his fists up and made no sign nor gestured towards surrender, even if he had to know that he might be seriously injured if Martel attacked him with fire.

Martel did so. Yet he kept the intensity low, hurling little more than bolt of magelight against the mageknight. They struck Maximilian in the chest, who simply pushed forward and struck Martel, sending him to the ground again.

"Nothing but feeble attacks," Cheval jeered. "I told you he lacked the power!"

Martel's mind raced, trying to think of what to do. If he poured his magic into his attacks, he might hurt his friend badly. But it seemed nothing less would satisfy the prince, still observing them without any emotion expressed.

He looked at Cheval standing on the steps of the pavilion, clearly enjoying the spectacle. It reminded Martel of the time he had shown that arrogant mageknight his place, so many months ago. But he could not do the same here. Despite the thunder and dark clouds above them, it did not actually rain.

But something else was present. Martel almost felt the energy in the air, waiting to be unleashed. He got on his feet and raised one hand straight up at the clouds. Coils of power flew from his fingertips towards the sky, though only visible to those with the gift of magic. Looking at Cheval, he saw the young nobleman take a step back in surprise at this sudden display of might.

In the clouds above, energy responded to his call. Lightning tore the sky and struck the pavilion in a terrifying display of elemental fury. A start went through all the young nobles, and they turned their eyes from the pavilion towards Martel with varying degrees of respect or fear.

"My attacks are not feeble from lack of power," Martel explained as he looked at Flavius, "but because if I unleash my magic, I might kill my friend. Doing so simply to prove Cheval wrong seems a poor bargain." He held his breath, trying to read any sign of emotion upon the prince's face.

The Imperial scion looked back at him. "I am convinced. You may go," Flavius said in dismissal.

With a deep bow, Martel retreated from the garden, Maximilian by his side.

~

They had barely made it out of sight from the prince and his companions before Martel reached out to grab Maximilian by the shoulder, his legs threatening to buckle under him. More than up to the task, the strong mageknight grabbed hold of him. "Are you all right, mate?"

"I don't know. I suddenly have a pounding headache, and my legs can barely hold me up." The last time Martel had felt anything like this, he had been sick with consumption. But that had shown itself over a couple of days; this hit him with all the subtlety of a brick to the face.

"You exhausted yourself," Maximilian explained. "We all do it sooner or later. Think of it as getting your first hangover after a night out." He helped the novice inside and found a bench in a hallway for him to sit.

"I've been tired before," Martel protested weakly.

"No, no," the mageknight said impatiently. "You are magically exhausted. You went beyond your limits, drained yourself dry and more. You just need a good night's rest. Don't do any magic until then."

Dimly, Martel recalled Master Fenrick explaining the process behind drawing magic from your body and the need to replenish it.

"I must say, I'm almost relieved to see you so fatigued."

"Why?" Not a nice thing to say to someone so afflicted as Martel currently was. Even worse, he realised that his sense of magic seemed gone. He did not detect any heat from Maximilian like he always did from people around him.

"You called down lightning, Nordmark. That is advanced magic, even for acolytes. If you could do that without breaking a sweat, I would be scared of you. Not to mention," he added with a mumble, "so would others."

Martel did not feel scary at all in this moment, rather the reverse. It was like when the Broken Blades had kidnapped him and placed gold around his neck, quelling his magic. Forgetting what Master Fenrick and Maximilian had told him, Martel imagined his magic gone forever, which frightened him more than anything.

Straining himself until his head felt like it would burst apart, he summoned a flame in his hand. A sigh of relief escaped him. His magic was still there.

Next, he threw up in the potted plant by the bench.

"Alright, let us get you home. I think we accomplished all we could tonight anyway."

Chapter 159: Hangovers

Hangovers

Martel went to sleep the moment he returned from the Imperial palace. When he woke the next day, he felt better; apart from a strange soreness throughout his body, his symptoms from last night seemed gone. Most importantly, as he summoned a flame in his hand, it came willingly and without any nausea or the like.

Master Alastair greeted him as usual in the Hall of Elements. "You look a bit more worn than normal. Did you stay late at the feast?"

Martel shook his head. "I exhausted myself last night, for the first time. Not a pleasant experience."

"I daresay. What happened that forced you to deplete your magic to such a degree?"

"I met the prince, together with Maximilian. He demanded a demonstration of my powers, and my first attempts did not impress him."

The Master of Elements looked at him intently. "What did you do?"

"I made use of the thunderstorm. I called down a bolt of lightning to hit the rod on a nearby building."

His teacher stared at him with mixed emotions. "Martel, that was dangerous. You are not ready to wield such power, as evidenced by your exhaustion. Not to mention, if you had lost control, the lightning might easily have chosen you as its conduit and struck you dead, or someone else."

None of that had occurred to Martel last night. "Oh."

"You endangered yourself, your friend, and the prince. Even if I have no particular feelings towards him, I doubt the praetorians would be as calm about it."

"He wore gold," Martel defended himself. "It was just me and the others in danger." He could hear how that did not sound like the most convincing argument.

"Regardless, you must exercise far greater caution in the future. Never leap in this manner from minor spellwork to something requiring such great amounts of power, do you understand?"

"Of course, master. I'm sorry. I didn't think."

"Very well. I assume you felt rather poorly after exhausting yourself."

"I really did."

"That'll suffice to help you remember. I think we will let any spells related to fire rest and focus on your water magic. You'll want to impress Mistress Vana at your examination."

"She'll be present?"

"She will. So let's make sure you impress her."

~

Before he left the class, Master Alastair told him that Mistress Juliana wished to speak with him at his convenience. As ever, Martel could not help but feel worried about the reasons why; even if he

felt that things have gone well at the Imperial palace, he had begun to realise that in the end, his own actions only mattered to a certain extent. As she had warned him, to the members of the imperial court, he was simply a piece to move around, whatever fitted their plans.

So following his usual strategy, he went straight from the Hall of Elements to Mistress Juliana's chamber.

"Enter."

Martel went inside and took the same seat as always. Pushing some papers away from another chair, Mistress Juliana sat down opposite him. "How was your meeting with the prince?"

"It went well... I think. Maybe."

"How about you tell me what happened."

Martel cleared his throat, not keen on getting chastised a second time for his reckless use of magic. Perhaps he could downplay that part of the story. "Me and Maximilian –"

"Maximilian and I."

"... Maximilian and I went to see the prince, and he wanted us to show how good we were at magic. Else he didn't believe we had taken down a berserker."

She looked at him patiently. "And what did you do?"

Even if her gaze felt almost benign, Martel still felt uncomfortable subjected to her scrutinising eyes. "There was already a thunderstorm, so I called down a small bolt of lightning. Against a lightning rod, nothing damaged."

"And how did the prince react?"

"Hard to tell. He did not seem satisfied, nor displeased. He just dismissed us."

She drummed her fingers against her knee, looking pensive. "He learned from an early age to keep his cards close to the vest. As I have heard nothing else, I expect you got through this no worse for wear."

Martel relaxed his shoulders, releasing tension he was not even aware of. "So it's done? I won't have to worry about any of this again?"

"That depends. If you continue to stay in the background from now on, avoid any further attention from these nobles, they may forget about you, and you may pursue your choice of a quieter career with weather or such."

"That sounds good."

"And if you spurn Duke Cheval's offer of employment, that may indeed be your only recourse. As he leads the strongest faction at court, refusing him closes many other doors," Mistress Juliana warned him. "As for the other of the large factions, led by the Duchess of Trior, you will not find employment from them."

Martel tried to remember what he knew about them, which was not a lot. "The ones that want reforms? What do they have against me?"

"One such reform they seek would implement strict control over mages hailing from the outer provinces. Any place beyond the former borders of the old Aquilan empire, such as Nordmark. They would never employ a mage of Tyrian descent at any court, whether the Imperial or their own."

Martel stared at her, dumbfounded. "Why not?"

She returned his gaze with an expression he could not read. "I fear that would be a lesson unto itself to explain. Suffice to say, your ambition to become a weathermage far up in Nordmark suits them fine."

Strange, but at least they would not be a hindrance to him. "Alright, I guess we'll stay out of each other's way."

"That would be my advice. Avoid attention, finish your studies." She gave him a final look. "And do better on the first point than you have so far, where you got into a fight with a berserker three months after your arrival."

Martel sighed. He was never going to live that down.

Chapter 160: An Offer She Can't Refuse

An Offer She Can't Refuse

"Today, we stay at the school. Study its stonework. Learn its secrets." Master Basil looked over his students in the entrance hall with such a placid expression, Martel wondered if the teacher actually registered their presence or simply assumed someone was around to attend his class. At least they were spared any slow-paced trip into the city and back again.

In fact, they barely had to move before reaching the first location for the lesson. Walking to the middle of the entrance hall, their teacher pointed at the floor beneath their feet.

"Notice the symbol." He pointed on the ground, letting some magelight illuminate the pattern. "A rune. From the barbarians in the North."

"What does it do?" asked one of the novices, the one with skill in earth magic. It was the first time any of them had spoken during Master Basil's lessons.

"It delivers a warning. When someone enters who does not reside at the Lyceum. It is only active at night. It alerts Master Jerome," came the slow explanation.

"Who is that?" asked the novice with an aptitude for air magic.

"The master artificer. You've never worked for him in the workshop?" the first novice whispered back.

The other student shrugged. "My parents paid for my education."

Martel had his own considerations while the others chattered; he thought about how often he had arrived home late, and if every time he had woken up the artificer from his sleep. "Does this mean Master Jerome wakes up whenever anybody comes home late?"

An expression and a coughing sound, which charitably could be interpreted as a smile and laughter, respectively, took over Master Basil. "No. The rune for those with the same mark. Look inside your sleeve."

Martel twisted the fabric around to find that a small symbol had been stitched into the cloth. He had never even noticed it before, being placed on the inside of the sleeve.

"This keeps the rune quiet. Like a key to the lock. But do not think that is all. The Lyceum has other defences." Their teacher walked towards the gate that led onto the street.

Martel and the other novices followed, and against expectations, he found his curiosity piqued.

"Place your hand on the stone. Feel the magic."

They all did. Martel was not sure he felt anything, other than perhaps the stone was warmer to the touch than he would have thought. The novice talented in earth magic, on the other hand, widened his eyes.

"Powerful spellwork in these stones. Made by the Archeans. Some of it even beyond our understanding," Master Basil admitted.

"What does it do?" someone asked.

"Many things. Some of it simple. Heating the air to keep cold from entering the castle." Their teacher cracked his attempt at a smile again. "I once saw a man come running with a drawn weapon. Pure magical force knocked him to the ground. The gate to the Lyceum is open. But do not consider that an invitation. If you mean to do harm."

~

They continued around the castle, with Master Basil pointing out the work done in stone and spell long ago when the castle had been raised. Martel had at times wondered at the lack of security, given that the Lyceum contained many valuables. Apart from enchanted objects, the books of the library, the remedies of the apothecary, and many other items of great value dispersed throughout, the place had to be a tempting target for any thief. And Martel knew that Morcaster did not lack those.

But during the tour, it became clear that any attempts of misdeeds would be foolhardy. Protections lay on every entrance, even the windows. It was fascinating to gain a glimpse into all the labours undertaken to safeguard the castle, and Martel found himself with renewed awe of the Arcean wizards. Yet it was also frustrating; every question inquiring into the details of these wards was met with ignorance. The knowledge had been lost.

Coming full circle, the lesson ended back in the entrance hall. Before Martel could leave, he was approached by Henry, the air acolyte working as a clerk. With a sly smile, he approached Martel holding a note between two fingers. "Another message from the copper bird."

With an annoyed look, Martel grabbed the message and walked away, standing under Master Farhad's watch to read it.

Master Martel,

Your presence is requested at your convenience at The Copper Drum.

The matter pertains to your expertise, and your aid would be appreciated.

Respectfully,

The Copper Lady

Previous messages from Kerra had never boded well. The last time, he had been invited to a feast and found himself in a fight. Still, he felt intrigued. He wondered what necessitated a request for his expertise. If something magical was afoot in the copper lanes, where he did have quite a few friends by now, perhaps he was obliged to investigate. At the very least, he would hear Kerra out.

~

The doorman greeted Martel with a smile; the novice recognised the fellow from the night of Tibert's attack.

"Kerra said to send you straight to her study," The guard nodded at the door, signalling for Martel to continue on.

"Oh, I don't think I know the way," Martel admitted.

"Hah, yeah, it's a bit of wind-up. I'll take you." He got up and led the way.

The usual amount of patrons could be seen inside, some of them turning their heads to look at the newcomer, though nobody paid him particular attention. They continued up the stairs and deeper into the labyrinthine part of the building until the guard opened a door, and Martel once more stood in Kerra's chamber. He had a memory flash into his mind of the first time, feeling threatened and trapped. This time, only Kerra was present, and she smiled as she motioned for him to sit down opposite her.

"My thanks for coming here. I have a proposition for you."

A little wary considering the other times he had helped Kerra, Martel felt sceptical. "What is it?"

"In a fiveday or so, it will be a full moon. You remember what happened in the copper lanes at the last full moon, I take it."

Martel had not thought about the maleficar for a while. "I remember."

"I have armed my men with golden weapons – the price still haunts me – but they have no experience fighting mages. I have them on the lookout for anyone suspicious, but whether they can actually take down a dark wizard remains theoretical."

The same would go for Martel, who felt a little awkward. "You mentioned in your note that you needed my expertise, but I have no knowledge of maleficars either. I've never met one."

She looked at him intently. "I want you to train my men. Give them some experience fighting a spellcaster."

Surprised, Martel tried to think of a response. "I've never trained anyone," he stammered. "I wouldn't know what to do."

"Simply attack them. I saw what you did when Tibert and his thugs attacked us. Not to mention, you won several fights in his pit. Do the same here."

"What if they get hurt? Badly?"

"They'll be wearing gold. On that note, I'll pay you ten silver to train them, one bell every night."

Martel's eyebrows shot up. That was more money than working for Master Jerome or any other honest job he might do. Still not as much as winning a fight in the pit of The Broken Crown, but also less risk of expulsion.

Yet something in him felt guilty about accepting coin for this. They were threatened by magic; profiting from that, simply because he also possessed magic, somehow seemed dirty. "I'll do it, but instead of paying me, I'd rather you spent that money helping others. Maybe increase preparations against this maleficar, equip more people to fight him."

Now it was Kerra's turn to look surprised, though she quickly hid her reaction. "More than acceptable to me. Are you able to return tomorrow night, say at last bell? I'll have your recruits ready for you by then."

"I'll be there."

"Then it is agreed, with my thanks."