

Firebrand 161

Chapter 161: Meeting the Recruits

Meeting the Recruits

Martel spent the walk home from the copper lanes contemplating how he would conduct the training. He had never considered how to fight a mage without any magic of his own, but perhaps he could still draw on some of his own experiences. The encounter with Leatherfist, as uncomfortable as it was to remember, served as one example of how to attack a mage when ungifted.

His lesson next morning proved an opportunity to ask someone possibly more experienced. "Master Alastair, how would you fight a mage?"

His teacher gave him a stern look. "What kind of trouble are you in?"

"Nothing, I swear," Martel quickly said. "I'm just curious."

For a moment, Master Alastair looked sceptical before he replied. "It depends. Do I know their strengths? Weaknesses? A mageknight, I would keep at bay with a wall of fire. An elemental mage, I would avoid surroundings that suited them. See if I could learn their weakest element and use that against them. Assuming I survive long enough," he added with a grin.

"What if you don't have magic yourself?"

Master Alastair looked at him wryly. "An odd question. Do you fear losing your powers, or being attacked by someone without any?"

"I am just wondering. Seeing the praetorians fight, or learning about the school's defences, it made me think."

"Well, for people without magic, I have only one piece of advice. Don't fight mages."

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Master Alastair's counsel did not exactly help Martel as he had hoped. He spent the remaining lesson practising as he should, fearing that any further questioning would make his teacher suspicious. Even if training men from the copper lanes in how to fight mages might not be against the rules, especially since he received no payment for it, Martel imagined that it was frowned upon by the faculty. They seemed to frown on all activities outside of school.

He spent his free hours that afternoon trying to conceive of methods that might be useful to teach Kerra's men. He thought about how he would fight against an attacker, what magic he would employ, and how someone might counter that. A few ideas came to mind, and once he had eaten his supper, he left the school for the slums.

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The Copper Drum looked as it had yesterday. The doorman greeted him, and Martel entered.

"Master mage!" The barkeep waved from across the room, his voice rising above the noise of the customer's busy drinking. "Care for a mug?"

Martel shook his hand in refusal, avoiding having to shout over the clamour.

"Suit yourself! Kerra said your drinks are on the house, so just let me know!"

He would have to take advantage of that at some point tonight. But for now, he had a pressing engagement.

He made his way up the stairs and entered the maze-like hallways on the upper floors. Last night, he had tried to memorise the path to Kerra's chamber and now was a good chance to test his memory.

He did not have the opportunity to finish, as the Copper Lady herself met him in the corridor halfway.

"Fortunate. I was just on my way to the common room, expecting your arrival. Let me take you to your recruits." She beckoned him to follow, and they turned down another path inside the structure, unknown to Martel.

Eventually, they walked down a flight of stairs to reach the ground floor and finally leave the tavern building to reach a courtyard. A score of men waited, milling about or talking to each other. They carry an assortment of arms, from short swords in the style of legionaries to metal knuckles and saps suited for brawlers. Several of them wielded staves, and Martel recognised his friends among them. They nodded at him, Butcher smiling, and he returned the greeting.

"Listen up, you bastards." As Kerra addressed them, Martel noticed that a few were women as well. "You all know Master Martel. At least by reputation. I suggest you listen carefully, since his knowledge might save your sorry hides one day."

They all looked expectantly at Martel. A little flustered, he tried to gather his thoughts. It felt odd to have the attention of so many, most of them more than twice his age. "Alright. Yes. You all know that gold works to stop magic."

Several of the guards hefted their weapons or raised a hand with a golden ring on it.

"But only at a close range." Martel ignited a flame at the tip of his finger and moved his hand towards Kerra. Once he was a few inches away from her earring, the flame dissipated. "A piece of jewellery won't protect you everywhere. Make sure to wear some on different parts of your body, maybe your hands so you can block incoming attacks."

A few of them raised fists, waving them around as if boxing, provoking laughter.

"On your weapons is also good, if you got a weapon for blocking." Martel looked at the staves carried by several; at least he was familiar with that. "A golden ring around the tip of your staff will let you stop a magical attack, and you can also use the same point for attacking."

"Perhaps you can demonstrate?" Kerra asked. "Give them some experience in facing a magical assault."

"Sure." Martel nodded quickly. "Good idea. If you line up, I'll throw some magic at you, and you block with whatever golden implement you got."

"I don't have any," someone muttered as the guards fell into a line. He was the youngest of the bunch, barely older than Martel.

"That's fine," the mage told him. "I'll throw something harmless at you, just so you know how it looks and feels."

Once they all stood ready, Martel summoned a cold flame and let it fly at the man in front. He held up a fist with a golden ring, and the magic evaporated before his face. With a grin, he moved to the back of the line.

The next blocked similarly, wearing metal knuckles of gold on her hand. Cornelius followed with a necklace wrapped around his staff; as he swung against Martel's flame, the piece of jewellery went flying as well. As the others laughed, he retrieved it with a scowl.

Finally, the boy without any gold had his turn. As the harmless mote of fire flew towards him, he shrieked and fell to the ground. Startled, the man behind took the flame against his face, emitting a yelp as he slapped his hands against his cheeks, trying to fend off the fire.

"Lad fancies himself a Night Knife with those moves!" someone laughed.

"I guess dodging works as well," Lothar remarked.

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Two hours later, they finished practice. All of them went inside for a well-earned drink; Martel lagged behind to have a word with Kerra. "It's slow work when it's just me attacking them. They're standing around a lot, waiting for their turn."

"You want to bring in another. Your friend, I take it."

"Yes." He nodded as they passed through the corridors. "Max is much better with empowering magic than me. He can demonstrate a proper magical shield, give them a better challenge."

"He does owe me a lot of coin. I could reduce his debts on the same terms as I offered you," Kerra considered.

"Max won't like it if it sounds like doing work he'll get paid for, but if you throw in a few free drinks, I think I can persuade him."

"I look forward to seeing you both here tomorrow night."

Chapter 162: Taking Charge

Taking Charge

Manday provided the opportunity to ask a pertinent question. "Master Fenrick, how does a maleficar fight?"

The teacher narrowed his eyes. "That is a question for inquisitors, not for a novice."

"We won't always be novices. If you don't teach us now, who will?"

"Well, it's not a topic I am much familiar with. Maleficars use empowering magic, but in a different way than how we train you. We use it on ourselves, to be faster, stronger, and for protection, defensively." Master Fenrick cleared his throat. "Maleficars use it offensively to steal your strength and take it as their own."

Leechcraft, Martel thought, suppressing a shudder. "How do you defend against that?"

"Fortunately, our magical shield that protects against physical attacks also works against such magic. Perhaps because it is the same kind. That is merely a theory I have yet to test, and I am fine if I never get to test it." The teacher smiled behind his thick glasses.

"What if you don't possess magic, if you're exhausted?"

Master Fenrick gave him a look. "You run."

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"Max, I have an exciting opportunity for you." Martel stared at his friend with what he considered his most winning smile.

The mageknight looked up from his plate. "Why do you look constipated?"

Martel's expression turned to a scowl. "Look, you want free drinks? And you can settle some of your debt to Kerra."

"That woman. You should be particularly suspicious when someone comes to you with both whip and carrot to do their bidding." Maximilian stuffed a large piece of bread into his mouth.

On the other side of the table, Martel next wore a look of disappointment. "It's not her asking, it's me."

"Well, what is it?"

"I'm training some of her guards on how to defend themselves against magic. Full moon next fiveday."

Maximilian snorted. "You? Training warriors?"

"You think you can do better?"

The acolyte looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "I am a mageknight, Martel. Of course I can."

"Show me. Maybe you can teach me a thing or two as well."

Squinting, Maximilian finally shook his head. "You should not teach the commoners about magic. They have no business trying to fight a mage, and it is not knowledge you should share. It is beneath you. Certainly, it is beneath a mageknight." He let the other half of his bread follow the first.

Feeling a little hurt at being chastised, Martel remained quiet.

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Alone, Martel reached The Copper Drum and walked straight to the courtyard where the guards waited for him, passing the time like yesterday.

"Kerra won't be here. Said you should just begin," Lothar explained.

"Fine. Listen up!" He shouted the second part, and the guards all turned towards him. "There's a good chance that if you meet a mage like a maleficar, they can conjure a shield. No matter how hard you hit, your blow won't hit." He pointed at Cornelius with his staff. "Give it a try."

Without hesitation, the fighter swung his weapon straight at Martel's head. It touched his hair, but did not cause any harm.

"Now I know how you managed to stay on your feet in the pits," Lothar remarked dryly.

"Yeah. Sorry," Martel mumbled. "So... You want to hit, you need gold on your weapon. Or on your fist. Who has some?"

A woman with a set of metal knuckles in gold stepped forward.

"Hit me. In the chest, not the face, and not too hard," the wizard clarified. "My shield is up."

She did so, and Martel felt almost cold where the yellow metal ripped through his protection to prod him in the chest with enough force that he had to take a step backwards to keep his balance. The woman grinned and pulled back.

"Do not be fooled into thinking this will even the fight," Martel warned them. "An empowered mage is still faster and stronger. Attack me again, with all speed," he told the woman with her knuckles.

She gladly obliged, stepping forward to land a punch. Before it hit, Martel's hand came flying to grab her wrist with an iron grip, avoiding the gold on her fist. She tried to pull her hand free, and he let his magic increase his strength to prevent her. A flash of anger went across her face, which caused laughter, and he let her go.

"A mage is never without tricks," Martel told them, thinking about how he had defeated Leatherfist despite the latter protecting himself with gold. "The fight is not won unless they're dead."

"How do you kill a mage?" asked the woman with the metal knuckles; Martel hoped she did not ask because she still felt angry. Her name was Sigrid, Martel had learned.

"We bleed same as any," the young wizard told her. "You just have to get past our defences. Before we get past yours."

"That's what you did in the pit," Cornelius remarked, sounding perhaps a little annoyed. "Used that protection of yours to take our blows while landing your own."

"Master Martel was in the pit? How come I never saw him fight?" asked Sigrid, her fingers playing with her metal knuckles.

"Not ours. At The Broken Crown," Butcher explained with a smile. "That's how we're friends with him."

"Yeah, we all heard you brag about your wizard mate."

"Now he's friends with all of us, right?" a guard asked. "Aren't you, Master Martel?"

"I guess, though if I'm already drinking for free, I'm not sure what I need you for," the novice replied, making some laugh.

"Before you take advantage of that, can we train like yesterday?" asked Lothar. "I'd be glad to try it again. Still not used to seeing that blast of fire coming straight at me."

They all looked at Martel, waiting for him to decide, which took him aback. He wondered if he would get used to this, tough men and women far older than him yet ready to accept his decision.

"Sure," he replied. "Line up, and we'll do it again."

Chapter 163: The Copper Mage

The Copper Mage

Solday yielded another opportunity to gather information. Working to make ink, Martel waited until Master Jerome stopped by to check on his progress. "Master Jerome, are there any ways to protect yourself against hostile magic?"

"That all depends. You could dress yourself in gold from head to toe, but expenses aside, that would also make it hard for you to wield your own magic." The artificer laughed a little.

"What if you don't have any magic of your own? You're just a normal person."

"I guess that makes gold all the more useful, though of course, it won't protect against anything else. Much too soft for real armour. Inquisitors got it right, I suppose." Master Jerome frowned his brow in thought. "Gold on the bootstraps, belt buckle, cloak clasp, and so on. Not to mention their weapons."

"Is that really enough for protection? The clasp on a cloak isn't big. That leaves a lot unprotected," Martel argued.

"Not as such. If made from pure gold, the effect is much greater than what you might get from coins and such." He chuckled as he spoke again, "By now, I can tell each time the Imperial Mint debase the coins. They tickle less in my fingers."

Martel frowned. "What does that mean, to debase coins?"

"Good question. How do I – wait, let me see if I have one on me." Master Jerome dug out a silver coin from his pocket. "Why is this valuable?" He held it along the edges between his thumb and index finger, letting Martel see the two-headed eagle stamped on one side.

"Well, it's made from silver. That's a valuable metal."

"How do you know it's silver? Maybe you can tell as a mage, but if you were an ordinary peddler at market. How do you know if this is silver and not some lesser, cheaper metal?"

Martel had never considered that. He looked at the coin and its Imperial eagle staring back at him with all four eyes. "The mark? It has the emperor's seal. So it must come from the Imperial Mint."

"Indeed. That is your guarantee that this coin contains silver. But imagine the following situation."

Martel put away his tools for mixing the reagents for the ink and gave the man his undivided attention.

"Imagine you are the emperor. You have enough silver to make a hundred coins. But you require one hundred and ten coins to pay your troops. What do you do?" Master Jerome looked at him with a wry expression, as if he knew something funny that Martel did not.

The novice wrinkled his forehead, having never had such considerations. "I pay my soldiers less? Or send some of them home."

"That is what you and I would do. But the emperor wants as many soldiers as possible. So, he simply mixes some copper into the coins, just a little bit in each until he has ten more coins than the silver could provide," the artificer explained.

Frowning, Martel tried to wrap his head around it. "But that's cheating! The emperor wouldn't do that."

"Wouldn't he? Who is going to stop him? Or punish him?"

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Once his work and improvised lesson in Imperial finances had come to an end, Martel practised his elemental magic for a while, though he also found time to take a nap. It took him nearly two hours to walk to the copper lanes, especially since he still avoided the harbour, leading to a more circuitous route, which in turn meant he always arrived home at the Lyceum rather late.

After he had rested, and once he had eaten his usual fill at the evening meal, Martel made his way to The Copper Drum for the third round of training with Kerra's guards.

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"Magic gives me different advantages against you, which includes range," Martel explained as he stood in the courtyard, more than twenty pairs of eyes on him. "I can throw my magic against you at a distance, while you need to reach me before you can use your gold-touched weapon to land a blow."

"What if I throw this at you? Will that help me overcome your range?" Sigrid hefted her metal knuckles in her hand.

"You might give me a nasty bump on the head, but that leaves you awfully vulnerable to a scorching ray of fire," Martel retorted. He let a few flames flicker up and down his arms just for effect.

"So we have to avoid your attacks while we get close to you, is what you're saying," another guard remarked. He was taller even than Martel and burly of build.

"Yes, but you have to be aware of your surroundings. Everything here is something I can potentially use against you," the wizard explained. "You, run at me. But be ready that you will fall," he told the youth in the group, youngest of everyone present save Martel himself.

After taking a few steps back for extra distance, the boy began running towards him. With a quick stomp of his foot, Martel sent magic through the ground to push one of the cobblestones up for just a moment, long enough to trip the runner, who fell forward.

The others laughed seeing this while the boy got on his feet and dusted himself off.

"Everything around you can be used against you, even the earth you stand on. And if you thought it was funny to watch him fall, maybe the rest of you should try the same, see if you can do better," Martel challenged them.

Before they could continue, he noticed they all stood straighter, looking more serious. Turning around, he saw Kerra joining them.

"Do not let me interrupt," she said. "I am simply here to see that I'm getting my money's worth."

"But you're not paying me anything," Martel replied confused.

She laughed. "All the more reason to be vigilant."

"Wait, you're not being paid? Why in Nether's name not?" Sigrid asked.

"It didn't seem right," the young wizard mumbled. "If one mage is giving you trouble, another should help you out."

"Because he's a good lad, that's why," Lothar chimed in.

"That he is." Kerra looked at him, and for once, there was no hint of a playful smile or mocking undertone in her expression and voice. "He is one of us. Our very own Copper Mage," she added, and the wry smile returned.

"Cheers for the Copper Mage!" someone cried out, and the rest joined in.

Chapter 164: The Pact

The Pact

Pelday morning, Martel did his work in the apothecary as usual, making ingredients ready for use and even mixing a few salves and simple remedies. He had yet to learn any actual magic involving potion-making, what could properly be termed alchemy, but Mistress Rana had promised him that she would begin teaching him once he became an acolyte. Until then, he did not mind doing the simple labour, as every hour spent in the apothecary made him better and better at all the basics. He usually worked alongside Nora, and it occurred to him that maybe she had some insight to share regarding his current pursuit as well.

"Nora, do people use potions in battle?"

She laughed. "Of course! There are elixirs for just about any purpose. Usually, the question is if people can afford them, and if there's anybody skilled enough to make them. Or if they even have the ingredients, of course."

"So it's not something poor people use?"

"Nah, they'd never be able to afford it. Both an alchemist and the necessary reagents are much too expensive. Why? Thinking about joining the harvest games next year?" She laughed again.

"No, just wondering. If there are potions to make you faster or stronger, or maybe make you invulnerable to magic."

Nora stopped her work for a moment, staring into the air in contemplation. "I'm not sure how that would work. We use magic to make potions, so I don't see how you could make one that works against magic. You could try something with flecks of gold, but that would make it impossible to infuse with spellcraft, and you'd probably just get poison from drinking it." She laughed again. "You always ask such funny questions!"

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In the afternoon, when he had some time for himself, Martel ascended the astronomy tower. With the sun still up, it was too early in the day for making celestial observations of any kind; thankfully, others had done so in the preceding centuries and marked it all neatly on a chart. He stopped a few floors shy of the observatory atop the tower and entered the classroom.

Several memories came to mind, making him momentarily forget his purpose. His first lessons had taken place in this chamber, struggling to learn astronomy. He did not miss that, nor the feeling of isolation, being seated among all these acolytes who knew each other, knew magic, and had neither time nor interest for an overgrown novice from the North.

But this was also where he had completed his first course at the Lyceum, despite all his hardships with arithmetic. Here, he had befriended Eleanor, even if their first couple of conversations had suggested enmity.

It struck him how much he missed her. While he had never spent as much time with her as he did with Maximilian – talking most days and sharing both adventures and misfortunes – he knew she meant something special to him. The way she sometimes with a look or well-chosen word could make him feel seen in ways others did not. He wondered if he would one day make another friend who could make him feel the same way.

Pushing such thoughts aside, he returned to his task. On the wall hung a great map detailing the movements of all the important stars and, pertinently for Martel, the moon. It took him numerous attempts of calculation until he felt confident. He could have asked someone, of course, but he felt like he had asked enough questions on this matter already to people around him. It was one thing wondering how one might fight a maleficar. Asking when the next full moon would be, when said wizard could be expected to make an appearance, would raise an alarm bell or two.

At length, Martel felt sure. The night between Solday and next Pelday, one fiveday from now. He and his copper recruits would be ready.

After another night of training Kerra's guards, Martel approached the Copper Lady in her chamber. She looked up as he entered.

"The Copper Mage himself. Something on your mind?"

"Two things. The magic potential of the full moon will reach its height on the night between Solday and Pelday," he told her.

She nodded. "We'll be vigilant. And the other thing?"

"Have you heard anything regarding Tibert since the last time? Just wondering if he is up to anything. You have spies in his place, right?"

"I have his place and the man himself under observation at all times, should he leave. But I think he has accepted his loss for now. He came rather close to breaching the Pact of the Nine Lords with his little performance during the Golden Harvest."

Martel looked at her, confused. "I don't – who?"

"Right. You wouldn't know." Kerra stood up and walked around her desk to approach him. She held up her hand, showing him a signet ring. It had a curious symbol, like an X with a vertical line down the middle. "Morcaster is divided into nine districts. Each has its own chief, running their territory. The Nine Lords. Or Lady." She smiled wryly.

Staring at the ring, he wondered at the exact significance of the symbol. "And what's the Pact?"

"We have sworn to follow two rules. We don't run business on somebody else's territory, and we don't try to kill each other."

"That's surprisingly merciful of you," Martel considered.

Kerra shrugged. "More like practical. Before the Pact, we spent all our time and money trying to murder each other. Food tasters lasted two or three days at most. We used our silver on enchanted

objects and our gold to protect ourselves against magic, melting down coins just to have enough metal. We caused a coinage crisis, or so I like to believe," she added with a smirk.

"But Tibert attacked you, he tried to burn down your tavern!"

"You may not have taken note of it, but he waited until I was outside. Though it was reckless of him nonetheless. Had things gone out of hand, had I died in that altercation, the remaining Lords would have banded together to eliminate him. No excuses, no exceptions. If one of the Nine Lords kills another, they must die as well. It's the only way we can keep each other in check," Kerra explained.

"So you think he's learned his lesson? He won't try again?"

"I hope he will cut his losses. But if not, you will know. You're one of us – the copper lanes protect their own."

Chapter 165: Pillars of Sand

Pillars of Sand

Master Basil collected his students from the entrance hall. "No more tours. Time to test your skill. Follow me." With slow steps, the teacher led them through the dining hall to the northern part of the castle, which held the different rooms for elemental magic teaching. They went down a staircase, not far from the one that led to the Vault of Water, moving below ground.

With only the earthmage's light hovering above to illuminate the hallway, they descended until making a sudden turn. Although darkness surrounded him, Martel could sense they stood in a large space.

He felt a small burst of magic from Master Basil, and torches in each corner lit up. "Welcome to the Chamber of Earth. This is where I teach. Solid dirt beneath us." Their teacher stamped his foot against the ground a few times, as if patting the earth itself.

Martel glanced in every direction. Torches helped to establish the size of the chamber, giving him some sense of how far it stretched, some thirty times thirty feet. Yet he could not actually see the walls as their dark colour simply made them look to be one with the general darkness, and it gave him the eerie sense of standing in the middle of an endless void.

"First. Let me assess your skills. Show me your powers with earth," Master Basil bade them.

One after the other, the novices demonstrated how far they had come practising this element with Master Alastair. The first two both managed to raise small mounds of dirt, but nothing more.

Martel's turn. Unlike with Mistress Rana and Master Gilbert, he did not have to impress this teacher as well. But he wanted to. Holding out his hands, he raised earth from the ground into a smooth, perfectly round pillar, held up only by his magic.

Master Basil made a mumbling sound and nodded to himself. Not particularly impressed, it seemed. As Martel released his spellcraft, the pillar of earth reflected his confidence and collapsed.

One novice left. He also stretched out his hands, palms downwards. But instead of small mounds of dirt or a column, something else entirely rose from the ground. To Martel's amazement, he saw the shape of the building. Quickly, he recognised it. When standing on the Tower of Air, this was the view of the Lyceum.

Martel marvelled at the sight. The representation was crude, lacking details, but miles ahead of what Martel could do. Just the fact that it was so easily recognisable as the school left him astonished.

"Well done," Master Basil mumbled.

With a smile, the novice with an aptitude for earth released his magic and let the ground become smooth again.

They spent the rest of the lesson doing simple exercises, manipulating the earth in different ways. It all came easy to Martel, having already done similarly during Master Alastair's lessons. But he accepted this, knowing he would not be particularly challenged. In a few fivedays, this course would be at an end anyway. Besides, Master Basil already seemed preoccupied with his one student that showed promise, taking him aside from the others to instruct him personally in more complex exercises. Martel felt a little jealous at the attention shown, but given that he received individual lessons from Master Alastair, he could not really complain. Still, feeling a little bored, he was glad once the class ended.

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Like Soldays, Martel had no classes or chores past lunch on Maldays. While he still intended to spend one bell this evening training Kerra's guards, he had another errand in mind that coincided nicely with going to the copper lanes anyway. Since he still had most of the silver given to him by Kerra after his assistance on the night that Tibert attacked The Copper Drum, he could also put some of it to good use.

Leaving the castle, Martel went south to the market district. He walked a familiar path, but just before he reached his destination, he paused. He had forgotten about the incident, but seeing the alley where the old herbalist had his stall made the memories return. The two inquisitors, watching and accosting him over his purchases. Pushing their way into his chamber and interrogating him the day after, and who knew how long they had otherwise kept him under observation.

For a moment, Martel was tempted to simply turn around. But he knew that was silly. Sooner or later, Mistress Rana would require him to fetch more herbs anyway. Besides, letting the inquisitors scare him off from doing his tasks, especially when they were not even present, felt like a defeat, letting their cruel behaviour control him. Resolutely, Martel strolled down the alley towards the herbalist – after looking in every direction for anyone wearing blue uniforms with golden apparel.

"Young Master Martel! Mistress Rana driving you hard?" asked the old herbalist.

"No worse than usual," he replied with a forced smile, still feeling apprehensive. "I am after some different things, all common herbs. As much as these will buy me." He took out four silver birds and began listing the different plants he wanted.

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Continuing to the copper lanes, Martel did not go directly to the tavern. Instead, he went to the intended recipients of his herbal gifts. Last time he visited, it had been rather short. The inquisitors were still combing the slums, making Weasel disinterested in hosting mages as his guest. Hopefully sentiments had changed, especially as Martel came bearing both present and some timely advice.

As a sign that matters had improved, the children spotted him down the street and greeted him as usual. They crowded around him, trying to catch a glimpse of the bundle in his arms. Laughing at their enthusiasm, Martel followed them to their home.

Once inside, he revealed the herbs he had brought, supplying their dwindling stock of remedies. The children continued to surround him, asking about bruises and miscoloured spots, or relating tales of exploits.

It did not take long for Weasel to make his sudden appearance. "The Copper Mage graces us with his presence!"

As always, the small chief talked and acted much older than his years. "You heard about that? I'm surprised anyone outside The Drum knows," Martel expressed.

"Oh yes," Badger confirmed while nodding vigorously. "Kerra's people make sure to spread the word. Everyone in the copper lanes know."

"But does it mean you won't be our friend anymore?" Mouse asked with a sad voice.

"Of course not," Martel assured her. "But I do bring a warning."

The children exchanged looks, some of them already wearing a frightened expression. "What is it?" asked Weasel gruffly.

"The full moon is at its highest between next Solday and Pelday," the mageknight explained. "Be careful, not just on that night, but also the days leading up." He noticed that Sparrow was not in the room, perhaps for the best; she did not need any reminders of the dangers stalking the copper lanes during full moons.

"Fine. We'll take our precautions," Weasel declared.

"Good." Martel hesitated. "You know what today is, right? It's Malday. Three days left."

Weasel just gave him an offended look.

Chapter 166: Safety in Numbers

Safety in Numbers

After visiting his young friends, Martel trained the guards at The Copper Drum as usual and returned home. It already felt like a routine, even though he knew it would be at an end soon. The full moon approached, and with it the opportunity to stop the maleficar. Whether that succeeded or not, Martel did not intend to continue drilling Kerra's people past that point. It was ineffective, him being the sole mage practising with them one at a time, and he could feel the toll on his nightly rest, coming home late every evening. Besides, he doubted he could teach them much more than he had. With those thoughts, he slept those few hours available and rose all too early on the next day.

After an uneventful lesson with Master Alastair, Martel decided to handle another matter he had already postponed a few times; mostly because he kept forgetting to do it. Sitting down in his room, he took his feather pen and dipped it in ink.

Dear mum,

Sorry I haven't written in a while. Things are still great at the school. I'm nearly done with my first year, and I'll be taking the novice's examination in a month or so, and then I'll be an acolyte. My

teachers say good things about my spellcasting, and I am not worried at all about the examination. I look forward to being an acolyte. I'll get a new robe with a colour rather than brown, and people will know I'm a good mage learning my specialisation.

I also have something incredible to tell you. Two fivedays ago, I visited the Imperial palace! My friend Maximilian, or rather his father, invited me. It was the emperor's celebration of his coronation, I think. I saw him from afar, sitting on his throne. I also met his nephew, who will one day be emperor in his stead. He asked about my magic and wanted a demonstration. I think I impressed him.

The palace is so beautiful. I know I already talked about the Basilica, the big temple. Speaking of which, I placed some coins there in father's memory. I did it long ago, I just forgot to tell you. But the palace, mum, everything was so decorated and incredibly done. There is this large hall with a dome, and the ceiling is like the night sky outside, enchanted to show the stars. It was absolutely incredible.

You should have seen me, wearing fine clothes like a noble. You wouldn't have recognised me, especially not when I danced with this girl I know from class. It's a whole different world.

I don't think I'll have any breaks after my examination, but it will only be a year after that until I graduate. I don't know if I'm expected to start my posting right away after that, but maybe I can get it delayed long enough to come visit. Or I will get a post in Nordmark, in which case I imagine I can make it to Engby at some point.

Martel

He closed up the letter and prepared four coppers as payment to the Imperial post.

~

As evening approached, Martel prepared to leave the school yet again. The weather was poor with rain beating down. Fortifying his robe with a cloak and pulling the hood up, Martel steeled himself and walked outside.

Tired of the long walk to the slums, tired of it being longer by avoiding the harbour district, and tired of being out in the rain, Martel decided to go straight south until he began seeing the tall masts of ships on the horizon. He had not been here since his last visit to The Broken Crown, except one morning following Master Gilbert to the lighthouse for that first lesson on air magic. But what was the worst that would happen?

Nothing, as it turned out. The weather kept everyone else hurrying along as well, occupied with their own errands. Sailors on shore leave sat inside the taverns while the dockworkers and day-labourers hauling goods paid Martel no heed. With his hood up, he was barely recognisable anyway, and eventually, he reached the copper lanes undisturbed.

~

Martel demonstrated a few new tricks that evening, namely how air could be used to push someone off their balance. After nearly a bell of making the guards fall over until they learned to break the attack with their golden implements, they retired to the common room for a round or two.

"You coming as well?" asked Cornelius, seeing Martel lag behind.

"I should get home soon, sleep what I can," the novice replied, hesitant.

"Sleep when you're dead!" Sigrid slapped him on the back, pushing him in the same direction as the others.

Unable to find fault in her argument, Martel followed along. Soon, they all sat around a few tables in the busy common room, enjoying the best on tap – which did not mean a lot.

Relaxing and enjoying himself in this company of people who respected and looked up to him, Martel did not notice at first as the mood became silent. He only became aware as he turned to look in the same direction as everyone else.

Two inquisitors, easily recognisable in their dark-blue robes, stood in the doorway. Kerra rose, and her guards followed her as she approached them. Thinking it best to avoid attention, Martel walked after them rather than sit alone at a table, but kept himself in the background.

"We're looking for a mage," one of the inquisitors said.

"We got ale, food, and most kinds of entertainment. But no mages," Kerra replied with a light-hearted tone.

"Really? Because we hear you got yourself a pet wizard. The Copper Mage."

"Certainly, a friend to the establishment. But she's not on tap," came the smiling reply.

"We're not playing around," growled the inquisitor. "Where is she?"

"She's not here. Right, folks?" Kerra looked over her shoulder.

"No mages here."

"I haven't seen her all day."

"Don't even know who we're talking about." Several of the guards hefted their weapons.

"Where does she live?" While one inquisitor continued asking, the other walked around from table to table. Martel did his best to avoid her line of sight.

"I never asked. Not my business." Kerra shrugged. "Why do you look for her?"

"Not your business either. But I'd think even copper slum could figure out why we're looking for mages in the lanes after what happened down here."

"I'll be sure to let her know of your interest. Meanwhile, this is my place of business, and your presence does little to inspire revelry among my clientele."

"You understand if we have to come back, we'll bring a dozen more and tear this place apart to find our quarry," the inquisitor warned. "And we'll haul in anybody we want on charges of heresy. Punishable by execution."

"You do what you must," the Copper Lady told him.

His partner returned, looking dissatisfied. "Tell the mageling to report to the office of the Inquisition. Don't make us come back in force." Their threats made, the pair left.

"Well, if they can't even figure out they're looking for a man, I see little reason to conduct their investigations for them," Kerra declared. "It was a waste of time to ever involve them in the first

place." She sighed. "Go make sure the road is clear out the back," she told one of her guards. "You better take the small alleys home." The last comment was directed at Martel, who nodded.

"Thanks for not telling them about me," the mage said.

"We don't rat on our own."

Chapter 167: Keeping Time with Friends

Keeping Time with Friends

"Max, I have an opportunity for you." It was only breakfast, but Martel did not wish to delay. In part because Maximilian might make other arrangements; in part because lunch was usually crowded, and he preferred if others did not overhear.

The mageknight raised his eyes from his porridge to give the novice a tired look. "Again? What is it this time?"

"An opportunity for glory. To be the knight who captured the maleficar that has terrorised Morcaster," Martel explained.

Maximilian squinted. "You know how to find him?"

"Not exactly, but we know he will be active soon when the full moon comes. And Kerra has men on the streets keeping watch, looking for any sign of him. But obviously, they would defer to a pair of wizards taking him captive."

The mageknight's sceptical expression deepened. "The copper lanes are huge. The chances of finding this fellow are impossibly low. All you accomplish is wasting a night searching for him."

"That may be. But considering that capturing a berserker got you an audience with the emperor's nephew, imagine what capturing a maleficar would do? In addition, I did you a favour attending the emperor's feast and impressing his nephew for you. It seems only reasonable you do this favour for me," Martel argued.

Maximilian ran his spoon through his porridge, watching it drip down the wooden utensil. "Fine. If you must twist my arm. When is it?"

Martel smiled. "Tomorrow night."

~

Everything settled with Maximilian, Martel felt ready for the night of the full moon. He had agreed with Kerra that he would be posted at The Copper Drum, now with the mageknight as well. Her guards would walk the streets, keeping an eye out for anything suspicious as best they could; should that happen, they would return to The Drum and fetch the wizards for assistance rather than go alone.

Practical matters taken care of, Martel only had one other thing he wanted to do before the night in question. As he had classes in the afternoon, he had to wait until evening; he had already informed Kerra that he would not be conducting any further training of her people, trusting that they had learned enough. Instead, he steered towards the Khivan enclave.

He drifted across the square in front of their local temple, where he had once been lucky enough to catch Shadi. The same did not repeat; he would have to find her at her home. He felt a little

apprehensive, as he feared that her father would not approve of his visit, perhaps not even allow him inside. But if so, he still at least wanted to warn her and just speak with her briefly.

Approaching the watchmaker's workshop, Martel knocked on the door and waited.

He heard the shuffling of feet before his knocking was answered, and Master Farhad stood in the doorway, looking at him. For a moment, no words were exchanged. As Martel struggled to formulate the reason for his presence, the old Khivan man simply took a step back. "Get inside. Before everyone sees you standing there." The watchmaker turned his head over his shoulder. "Shadi! Boy is here to see you."

"Thanks," Martel mumbled, stepping past the threshold.

As Master Farhad retreated to the inner room of his workshop, muttering to himself, Shadi appeared down the stairs with a bright smile. "I'm so glad you're here! I've been meaning to find you."

"Looks like I found you first," Martel replied with an attempt of laughter, immediately feeling silly about his choice of words.

"Take a seat." Shadi waved at the chairs around the table and found some cups along with a pitcher of what turned out to be apple cider.

"Thanks," Martel said as he accepted his drink. "I actually came to tell you something important." He glanced through the open door that showed the inner room where Master Farhad sat working. "I have a few other things to tell as well if there's time."

Shadi smiled again. "Don't worry, nobody is throwing you out. But actually, let me go first."

"Yes?"

"Wait, I'm doing it wrong. Let me get it first." Shadi entered the back room and exchanged some words with her father, leaving Martel feeling both curious and awkward.

A few moments later, she returned with a curious object in her hands. It was a small wooden box, but with twelve numbers written in a circle on the front. Furthermore, a pair of thin sticks sat attached to the middle, pointing out at the numbers along the edge. Martel stared, wondering why the contraption looked familiar when he felt sure he had never seen anything like it. Finally, he realised why; the great watch built by Master Farhad, now sitting in the entrance hall of the Lyceum, likewise had these little sticks pointing at the numbers along the circle.

"It's a watch!"

Shadi grinned. "Quite possibly the smallest ever made. Certainly my dad has never made anything so small before."

"But the one in the entrance hall is so big! How can you make it so small?" He marvelled at the thought. He had at times seen Master Farhad working on the mechanical parts for the great clock that he built for the Lyceum. He could not understand how it could be made so small and yet work.

"Well, it's a simple one. This one only tells the time. The one at your school also knows when the sun rises and sets, the phases of the moon, and so on. Also, this one doesn't show twenty-four hours, but twelve hours instead," she explained.

"Are you going to sell it? Or has someone already bought it?"

"No, people who can afford clocks want big ones, with lots of uses. My dad made this one as a gift. For you." She looked at him expectantly.

He stared back in surprise. "What? For me?"

She nodded eagerly. "My dad found out that I never had a job, and that the money came from you. " She lowered her voice. "It didn't sit well with him, so he decided to make you this. That way, it isn't charity. You got something in return for your money."

Martel stared at the clock. One of the little sticks moved, catching him by surprise, and he laughed at his own reaction. No other student at the school had something like this, he was sure of that.

"Thanks! Should I say thanks to your dad as well?"

"He'd probably just feel awkward about it. I'll let him know of your gratitude later. Anyway, what did you want to say?"

Martel's good mood took a slight tumble, though he still felt almost elated at his gift. "You heard about the maleficar? Last month."

"Everyone has. What about him?"

"He's active around full moon. I just wanted you to know, so you're careful especially around these days."

"Alright, though don't worry. I'm pretty sure we'd find out quickly if some stranger prowled the Khivan quarter. They tend to stick out among us," Shadi pointed out.

"Well, just be careful. With that out of the way, if we have time –" Martel shot another look at Master Farhad in the back room. "Guess who saw the emperor, at the Imperial Palace."

"No! You didn't! Tell me everything!"

Martel did.

Chapter 168: Friendly Secrets

Friendly Secrets

By now, Martel was no stranger to waking up with anxious excitement, or perhaps excited anxiety. He had felt it on every morning of a fight night in The Broken Crown, and on the days of going to the Imperial palace. He wondered if today would also be memorable. If so, hopefully for a benign reason; considering what had happened a month ago at the last full moon, a malign reason was certainly possible.

He looked over at his drawer, where the Khivan clock happily ticked away. He had never noticed that these mechanical contraptions made a constant noise. Usually, the sounds of people moving and talking around the entrance hall masked the sounds of the astronomical watch. Luckily, growing up in a house with a single room and lots of siblings had taught Martel how to sleep even when surrounded by sounds.

The sticks on the clockface, which Shadi had told him were called hands, pointed at twenty minutes past six. She had taught him that as well, that an hour could be divided into sixty parts, each called a minute. He had never known timekeeping was so complicated. But it had its uses; it told him that it was too soon to get up and go to the dining hall for breakfast, so he might as well enjoy lying in bed a little while longer.

~

An acolyte and a novice walked to a familiar route to The Copper Drum. "What is the plan?" asked Maximilian. "Are we to spend every hour of the night scouring the streets of the dispossessed?"

"No, don't worry. You and me, we have to be easy to find in case we're needed," Martel explained. "We'll set up a post at The Drum. Kerra's people will look for signs of the maleficar. If they find any, they'll know where to fetch us."

"As good a plan as any, I suppose. At least we are posted where the ale is."

"You can't get drunk," the novice warned his friend. "We need you in condition to fight."

"Well I cannot sit dry for hours either. Besides, emptying a cask will probably be our only accomplishment tonight."

Shaking his head, Martel let the conversation slide, and they continued with few words until the tavern came in sight. Soon after, they sat by a table near the door, waiting in case anyone had need of them.

~

An hour passed. The mood at The Copper Drum was the same as always; Martel wondered if anything might ever convince people to cease carousing and gambling for one night. It felt odd, sitting at a small table, nipping at his mug, a small knot of tension in his stomach, always glancing towards the doors should one of the guards come storming in, all the while people laughed and shouted throughout the common room.

Maximilian seemed his usual self, making jests and remarking on the people in the room. Martel paid him little heed, giving distracted answers.

"Something has been on my mind," the mageknight said.

"Yeah?" From his pocket, Martel withdrew his small rune token and let it play between his fingers.

"At the Imperial celebration, you brought that lightning down. That is advanced magic," Maximilian considered. "Probably no other novice could have done that."

"Master Alastair was mad at me for doing it," Martel remarked, laughing a little.

"When the fight broke out at The Broken Crown, you made that wall of fire. That is complicated spellcraft too, I would say."

"I guess." Martel's eyes turned back on the entrance, wondering when someone might come rushing through in need of aid from a mage.

"Stars, last time we were here, you set fire to Tibert."

"Right." The novice added a bit of laughter to his reply, still looking at the doors.

"Martel, are you gifted with fire?"

As the implications of the question cut through Martel's distractions, he turned his head to find Maximilian staring at him. "Master Alastair's just been teaching me," he replied haltingly.

"I have noticed that when things are most pressed, or when you act on instinct, you always turn to fire. Which is the last skill that a weathermage would need."

Martel felt the mageknight's eyes spearing him. What could he say to deflect the truth?

"It is alright. I understand why you keep it secret," Maximilian continued. "We all hide something."

Unable to think of anything to say that would help, Martel remained silent.

"Here. I will show you." The mageknight drew his dagger and casually stabbed his fingertip.

Eyes wide, the novice stared at the bloody steel, really unsure where this was headed.

Quickly putting his finger into his mouth to remove the blood, Maximilian showed it to Martel afterwards. Where it should be nicked, where skin had been pierced to produce blood, nothing could be seen. The fingertip looked whole.

"You have done Master Kelsos' little examination? I had to exhaust myself of magic in order to fail it. It is not on purpose that I heal myself of these little scratches," Maximilian explained. "It just happens. In fact, that is how my gift of magic was discovered. I always healed rapidly from cuts and bruises, and finally, one of my tutors guessed the truth."

Martel could not hide his shock. "Max, you're a healer. You have the rarest gift of all." A bolt of jealousy struck him.

"I guess. I can do a little, anyway. It is certainly nice to know if I get wounded, I will need less bedrest," the mageknight remarked with half a smile.

Anger began to stir in Martel. His own particular talent was useless; it did nothing but endanger his ambitions by making him an enticing prey for the legions. Meanwhile, Maximilian had the most powerful gift of all, and he squandered it entirely. If Martel could heal, all his problems would be solved. "How can you just throw it away?"

Maximilian raised an eyebrow. "I could say the same of you. Why are you going to be a weathermage and not a battlemage?"

"The Empire has enough people who knows how to kill. It barely has anyone with your gift! You could accomplish so much that few others can do!"

"I have my reasons. I do not need to explain myself to you." The mageknight crossed his arms. "I would have thought someone with his own secret would understand."

"But why in Nether's name don't you want to heal?"

Maximilian exhaled. "My father, alright? He has plans for me."

"What better plans could there possibly be?"

"Look, I am the only mage in the House of Marche. My father was overjoyed when he found out. But he needs a mageknight, not anything else."

Martel emptied his mug, mostly to keep himself from shouting.

"Never mind. Your life is simple. You would not understand." Maximilian emptied his as well.

"Let's give it a try. Tell me, why would your father rather have a mageknight, so common there must be hundreds of them, instead of a healer, the rarest kind of mage that is?"

The young viscount took a deep breath. "Only a mageknight can become captain of the Praetorian Guard. And the captain of the Praetorian Guard has a seat on the High Council."

"But a healer must have lots of influence too! Doesn't the emperor have his own physician?"

"The High Council are the true masters of the land. My father lacks the influence to gain a seat by himself, but if I can become captain, I will gain one, and it will pave the way for him as well. He has spent ten years preparing for me to eventually take that position." Maximilian drummed his fingers against the table. "Nothing can get in the way."

"I guess you're right, I don't really understand. But I suppose if you keep my secret, I'll keep yours."

"Alright. Another round?" Maximilian held up his tankard.

"Yeah. We have a long night ahead of us."

Chapter 169: Wasted Hours

Wasted Hours

Hours later, with sunrise not far off, two young mages staggered towards the Lyceum. Their gait came mostly from feeling drowsy; Maximilian had shown uncharacteristic restraint, and neither of them had been drinking much.

"I can't believe nothing happened," the novice muttered as they approached the castle. He should perhaps be happy that they had avoided danger and nobody had been hurt, yet he felt disappointed all the same.

"Honestly, Martel, the copper lanes are huge. Thousands upon thousands of people live there. Finding someone we know nothing about, not his age, face, or intentions, it was a doomed prospect."

Hearing Maximilian lay it out, Martel found it difficult to argue otherwise. Still, he made a few grumbling sounds. He wondered if Kerra had thought the same – she more than anything would know how difficult it would be to find someone in the copper lanes, and how many people it would require to effectively search the district. But perhaps she had done her best, and the maleficar had simply left after his last victim one month ago.

"We tried, I guess." Still, Martel intended to talk to Kerra. Just to make sure enough efforts had been put into this search. It made quite a difference if the maleficar had evaded discovery because he had gone elsewhere or because they had not tried hard enough to find him.

"Stars, I hate living on the top floor of the tower," Maximilian declared as they passed through the gate. The astronomical clock greeted them with its constant whirring sound.

"I'm sure that big room is a real burden to you."

"Lack of sleep does not make you disposed towards cordiality, I see."

They dragged themselves up the stairs of their dormitory tower, muttering a drowsy farewell as each sought his own chamber.

~

Fortunately, Martel did not have kitchen duty for breakfast on Peldays, allowing him to remain in bed a while longer in the morning. Falling back asleep, he only woke as he heard the bell ring. Confused, he looked at his Khivan clock and saw it pointed at eight, not six. He had missed breakfast, sleeping through the entire first bell. Getting up, splashing water into his face, putting on

his robe and shoes, Martel quickly went through the motions and staggered towards the apothecary to work his shift.

Next bell was lesson in elemental magic. Martel figured there was something he should admit.

"Master Alastair, the other night – Maximilian told me that he guessed the truth about me. That I'm fire-touched."

The teacher gave him a sharp look. "What else did he say?"

"Nothing more." No reason to reveal Maximilian's secret as well. "He promised to keep it between us." Given that the mageknight had freely admitted his healing gift, Martel had no reason to doubt him.

"Well, be thankful that his loyalty as a friend supersedes any loyalty he feels to the Empire."

"I am."

"How did he know?"

"Just from seeing me use fire magic. We spend a lot of time together, after all."

"That should be a lesson to you," Master Alastair said sternly. "You got lucky. Don't press your fortunes twice by letting another discover the truth about you unless you want to wear a prefect's surcoat."

"Yes, master."

~

Sleeping another bell in the afternoon took the worst of the sting from being out last night. While Martel did not exactly feel thrilled at the prospect of walking all the way to the slums and back yet again, it still bothered him that nothing had come of their preparations to find the maleficar.

Affirming his decision from this morning to speak with Kerra, just to make sure nothing had been overlooked, Martel trod the beaten path to the copper lanes.

Reaching The Copper Drum, Martel noticed the place was busier than usual. Of course – Pelday was a fight night. He heard the cheers and shouts from the great chamber next to the common room and wondered if any of his friends were in the ring. But he had come for another purpose and would not be distracted.

Pushing his way through the many customers, he made his way up the stairs to walk deeper into the building. Wolfram, one of the guards he had trained, stood watch by the hallway and greeted him in a friendly manner. "Master Martel."

Martel nodded in response. "Is Kerra in her study? I'd like to speak with her."

Wolfram shook his head. "Trouble at one of the other locations. No idea when she is back, but it could be a long while."

Great. A wasted trip. Well, he could get a free ale for his troubles, at least, before he drudged the two hours back to the Lyceum.

"You can go see a fight before you leave," the burly guard suggested, perhaps sensing Martel's disappointment. "It's not like anyone here would charge you for a ticket."

"Thanks. I doubt I'll stay that long. How about you, you ever fight in the ring?" Given the man's size, and what Martel had seen of him during their training sessions, Wolfram would be a contender whether with staff or fists.

"Hah, I did enough of that as a Night Knife. Now I'm content earning my coin standing around, weapon in its sheath. Most evenings, anyway." He gave a wry smile.

"Wait, what knife?"

"Night Knife." The guard slowly pronounced each word. "A mercenary company out of Aquila. Well, that makes it sound more respectable than it is. They work both sides of the law. The chiefs here in Morcaster make use of them sometimes when they need outside muscle they can trust, no conflicting loyalties. Sometimes to guard shipments and the like, sometimes for... less savoury work. That's how I ended up here."

"You will have to tell me about that, some other night." Forget the free drink; Martel was just going to get a full night's sleep and consider that his only gain. "When you see Kerra, though, tell her I won't be around much. Just until the inquisitors get tired of looking around the lanes."

"Will do. You have a good night, Master Martel."

"Same to you, Master Wolfram."

Chapter 170: Sight in the Dark

Sight in the Dark

After the other night's excitement, or lack thereof, class with Master Basil felt like the complete opposite. At least, Martel could not think of anything that induced less emotions in him. He made his way towards the northern corridor, around which the different elemental chambers lay. A handful of novices came up the stairs from the Chamber of Earth, having finished their lesson. Martel also spotted the three novices with whom he had class, waiting by the top of staircase. Even as the hallway cleared and the path down was empty, however, they remained standing. One shifted his weight from leg to leg, and the other two also seemed apprehensive.

"Something wrong?" Martel asked.

"Just waiting for you," one of them replied quickly. "After you."

A little perplexed, the tall novice walked towards the stairs leading down into the dark. Without thinking, he summoned a globe of light to hover in front of him, letting him see the steps. As the other novices fell in behind him, Martel realised the reason for their hesitation. Unless any of them were gifted in fire, they probably could not summon even something weak like magelight. None of them had wanted to brave the dark.

They soon reached the Chamber of Earth. Ahead, Martel could vaguely make out Master Basil in the middle of the room; for some reason, the torches were unlit.

"Disperse yourselves. One in each corner," their teacher told them.

The novices did so, walking and fumbling as they moved away from Martel's light.

"Remove your shoes. And your socks."

This was certainly new. Wondering where this would lead, Martel complied.

"Extinguish your light."

The cold flame flickering in the air disappeared, plunging the room into darkness.

"A good mage uses magic as his primary sense. Feel the earth beneath your feet."

Martel tried to do so. Yet he encountered the same issue as when he tried to affect lots of water at the same time. His magic seemed to dissipate into the material, becoming so diluted that he lost touch.

"If connected, you should feel this." Master Basil made some kind of movement, though in the dark, none of them could see what it was. They could only feel the effect.

The ground beneath their feet shook and cracked, knocking all of them down.

"Well. I suppose you would all like another try." Apparently, the lack of light did not hinder their teacher in knowing how the novices fared against his challenge.

They all got on their feet and waited. Once again, Master Basil stomped his foot and dispersed magic along the floor. This time, a small mound of earth rose up to push Martel off his balance. Judging by the surprised yelps, the others did not fare better.

"Well. If you root your magic into the ground. It will warn you of the change." Another tremor from the teacher pushed through the ground, just as Martel had regained his footing.

~

For the rest of the lesson, Master Basil continued to test them, trying to teach them how to send their magic through the earth without getting lost. Martel never succeeded, ending up on the ground countless times. Finally, the teacher took pity on them and ignited the torches to let them collect their shoes and leave.

Walking up the stairs, Martel in front with his magelight, the novices chatted happily, comparing their many attempts.

"You did well, didn't you," Martel said to the novice right behind him. As the one student in the group with the skill for earth, he had the natural advantage during this course. His name was Lawrence, as Martel had finally discovered after months of classes together.

"I guess. Still fell like a dozen times. My clothes looked like I've been bathing in dust. It's weird also to think that I'll spend my acolyte years down there, underground, being trained by Master Basil."

Martel did not envy him. "I saw what you did last fiveday. That model you made of the school. That was really great."

"Thanks. It looks nice, but it's not much useful. They'll probably just make me a stonemage, and I'll spend my life putting together rocks to build walls and whatnot, probably living in an army camp."

"Well, they need lots of stonemages in the cities, don't they? You can probably get a position there."

They reached the top of the stairs, filing into the hallway, which led Martel see as Lawrence shrugged his shoulders. "I don't mind. My eldest brother is a legionary. If I get assigned to the same legion as him, as a mage, I will get better paid than him. And while he has to dig latrines, I'll relax in my tent." The boy laughed, though he fell silent as he stared down the hallway.

Martel turned to look in the same direction, and he understood the boy's reaction. A pair of inquisitors came walking towards them at a brisk pace. He considered if he could run away or hide, but he had clearly been spotted. He pulled himself together. He had done nothing wrong. If they came to harass him, that was all they could do.

"You Lawrence?" asked one of the inquisitors. Stunned, they all looked at the novice, which seemed like sufficient confirmation. "We have questions for you. Come with us." Each of them placing a hand on the shoulders of the hapless student, they led him towards a nearby classroom.

~

At lunch, Martel found Maximilian. The other acolytes at the table gave him annoyed looks as he sat down, but none objected. Martel was too preoccupied to take note of them anyway. "This boy I have class with, he's thirteen maybe, the inquisitors just came to interrogate him. They can't seriously believe someone that young is a maleficar?"

"At this point, I do not think that is their goal anymore." Maximilian cut his asparagus into pieces.

"What could it be instead?"

"Control. They want us to know who is in charge. That they can grab us and push us around, put us on trial if they want."

Martel frowned. "But if nobody has done anything wrong, they have no reason to put us on trial."

"I am sure they can find one. I imagine they are determined to continue until they do. You should probably be careful," Maximilian warned him as he stabbed his asparagus with his fork.

"Me? I've done absolutely nothing."

"Sure, but you are a boy from Nordmark with no patron among the nobility. If the inquisitors go after you, who will defend you?"

Martel liked to think that several people would, but he understood Maximilian's meaning. Of those willing to protest his innocence, none of them had the influence to make the Faith of the Sun listen. He sighed. He already intended to lay low, as he had told Wolfram yesterday at The Copper Drum; he had not realised it would mean even at the Lyceum.