

Firebrand 171

Chapter 171: Hung Up

Hung Up

Over the next days, inquisitors in the hallways of the Lyceum became more common. Plenty of rumours accompanied them, especially if someone disliked was pulled in for interrogation by them. Someone could usually be found willing to speculate and cast aspersions on the person being questioned; so far, nothing actually seemed to come of it. The inquisitors never seemed to go beyond making interrogations. As time went on, Martel grew accustomed to the sight of their blue uniforms and stopped paying them much heed.

When next Malday arrived, it signalled the last lesson of his introductory course to earth magic. While Martel had found it interesting to have classes in the chamber underground, especially trying to rely on his magic to the exclusion of all other senses, he did not mind reaching the end of the course. Partly because he did not foresee that he would have much need of earth magic in the future, but also because it irritated him that he had never managed to grasp the technique of pushing his magic into the earth without losing control of it.

As he arrived in the Chamber of Earth with the other novices, Master Basil waited for them with the torches lit. His final lesson would not be taught in the darkness, at least.

"My last lesson with you. Unless you become an acolyte." Everyone's eyes flickered towards Lawrence, the only suitable candidate. Master Basil continued. "If you wish to be one. This is your chance to prove it. My final task is simple. Simply repeat what I do."

The teacher held out his hand – more for their benefit, Martel suspected, as the Master of Earth probably did not need to make gestures to help visualise his magic. From the ground, a perfectly round pillar rose up until it reached his fingertips.

All the novices copied him, creating a pillar with varying degrees of skill.

Master Basil released his magic, letting the dirt sink back to the ground, only to raise it up in the shape of a many-pointed star. In fact, in the dim light, Martel could not count the number of tips, as they sat too close. More than ten. Regardless, he did his best to replicate, creating a star with as many points as he could.

The challenges continued. The shapes became increasingly more complex, and eventually, Master Basil added another at the same time. And another. Martel began to sweat, no longer able to simply keep up using his magic at will; he began to draw on his spellpower, pouring magic into the earth before him.

Finally, he failed. Behind Master Basil rose a wall, seven feet tall, looking very solid. Trying to do the same, Martel overextended his abilities. His magic could not control such a large amount of earth at the same time; the same problem that had plagued him before.

As expected, Lawrence lasted longer than anybody else. Eventually, Master Basil declared himself satisfied and dismissed them. They bowed their heads to their teacher as thanks for this final lesson and left.

Leaving the dining hall before he turned towards his dormitory, he happened to glance down the hallway in the other direction. Seeing a pair of inquisitors no longer fazed him. But he was surprised to recognise the shape that walked between them. Tall, looking stern even from the back with her hair tied up, Mistress Juliana accompanied the zealots of the Faith deeper into the castle.

"They are interrogating even members of the faculty now." Eleanor appeared next to him.

"I am surprised they dare. When Mistress Juliana looks at me, it makes me want to say as little as possible, never mind asking questions."

"They just want us to know they can." She glanced at him. "Maximilian told me of your night in the copper lanes. I am surprised you dared to do that."

"Nothing happened. And I don't actually think it was dangerous in the first place."

"How do you figure?" She turned to look at him properly.

"Remember the story Sparrow told us? The little girl who got away from the maleficar. Said she bit his hand or something."

"What about it?"

Martel returned her gaze. "If I wanted to stop someone from running away, I can think of several methods. Push up earth to trip them. Blast of air in the back to knock them down. Raise a wall to block their path. This supposedly dangerous wizard couldn't stop a little girl from getting away."

She nodded a little. "You could be right. But that is not what I meant. Rather, I am surprised you would spend a night in the copper lanes during a full moon when the inquisitors above all would be on the search for wayward mages."

"Even if we had come across them, what would they do? So far, all I've ever seen these inquisitors do is ask questions. Sure, their manners are lacking, but it seems all they do is make threats." The more that Martel had seen their blue uniforms over the past fiveday, the more this sentiment had grown in him. All the other mages at the school worried about these militant priests, but he had begun to feel inured towards them. "What are they actually going to do?"

She arched an eyebrow. "You haven't been to the market in a while. I'm surprised nobody told you."

Well, if Maximilian had not told him, probably nobody would. Certainly Martel's teachers were not keen on sharing information that might distract him from his studies. "What?" he elected to simply say, rather than admit how few people spoke to him.

"The city guard found victims of poisoning in the bridge district. They called in the inquisitors, who discovered the poisoner. An alchemist. At least they claim to have irrefutable proof," Eleanor explained, not sounding convinced herself. "Only members of the Faith are present for such a trial involving the Inquisition."

"What happened?"

"Go to the market. The square with the statue of Emperor Lucius. His body hangs in the gibbet." With those words, she left him.

Chapter 172: The Iron Coin

The Iron Coin

Eleanor's words about the executed alchemist rumbled around Martel's mind for the rest of the day. When he woke the next morning, the thought soon returned. Given that he studied alchemy himself, everything about it felt disconcerting. Hoping to learn more, he took the opportunity to make inquiries during his first lesson. "Master Alastair, is it true the inquisitors executed an alchemist?"

His teacher regarded him carefully. "That is the short of it, though there is more to the story. The man was Sindhian, which made it easy for him to claim to be a trained alchemist when in reality, his elixirs were harmless at best, harmful at worst."

"How do you know? I thought only clergymen witnessed the trial."

"Mistress Rana was summoned as a witness, and she shared a few details," Master Alastair explained. "She questioned the man and searched his workshop, revealing him to be a fraud. She also testified that given the fate some of his customers suffered, it was likely his potions had made them feel worse if not outright caused their death."

That was more information than Martel had hoped to gain, but it also left him confused. He did not know what to think of the inquisitors anymore. "So it wasn't just because they wanted to make an example of him? Or because being Sindhian, he was an easy target?"

Master Alastair slowly shook his head. "I would not say so, no. He worked in the copper lanes, exploiting those too desperate to go elsewhere and too powerless to seek restitution. And in a strange turn of events, his misdeeds only came to light because the inquisitors scoured the district looking for the maleficar."

"That's good, I guess." Truthfully, Martel did not know how to feel about this.

"I think that's enough of a break. Come, show me how far you got in Master Basil's challenges."

~

Back in his room later that day, Martel continued his exercises on his own as usual. This time, he focused on the water lying in the bowl on his drawer, raising all of it into the air to practice manipulating an entire mass of liquid. He had moved his Khivan clock to his writing desk, just in case he lost control.

A knock on the door interrupted him, making the water sway dangerously in the air, though he kept his concentration and returned the liquid to the bowl. Opening the door, he was a little surprised to see Eleanor outside. "What's going on?" he asked, trying to sound casual and indifferent only to regret it, fearing that he sounded curt.

"I was wondering if you might be willing to help me with something. It should be pretty simple and not take much of your time."

How he remembered it, Martel did not owe her any favours. But he could not reject a direct plea for help. "What do you need?"

"Do you happen to speak Tyrian? Just enough to know how it should be pronounced."

"I don't really speak it, no, but I guess I know how it sounds. I can say a couple of phrases and such," he clarified.

"Better than me. I have been looking into Tyrian runes, but since they require you to speak Tyrian words, I'm having trouble with them. I thought maybe you could be of assistance." She looked up at him with her brown eyes, and even if Martel doubted that he could help, he would at least try.

"Alright. When should we do it? Now?"

"Oh no, I only have scattered notes. I do not wish to waste your time. I need to go to the library and copy down all the runes I am interested in along with their explanations."

"Couldn't I just go with you to the library? If it's in a book, we can look at it together," Martel suggested.

She gave an apprehensive smile. "It is on the upper floor."

Where only acolytes had access. Martel was really looking forward to his examination; every time he was reminded of his status as a novice, he felt juvenile. "Alright. We'll do it another day. Let me know when."

"I shall. Thank you." A cautious smile followed her previous one.

"Don't mention it."

~

A man wearing a bright patchwork of clothes, missing only the hat to look the part of a court jester, made his way through The Copper Drum. He drew some stares, but given the amount of people in the common room, including many others likewise dressed in an odd manner, nobody accosted him. He reached the flight of stairs leading deeper into the building and ascended. When a guard stopped him, he pulled out a strange-looking coin made of iron, granting him passage.

Soon, clearly knowing the way, he reached Kerra's study. As he was admitted, she looked up from her desk and immediately had a calculating expression upon seeing him. "I can guess what brings the Keeper of the Pact around."

Her visitor gave a flourishing bow. "The Nine Lords are summoned in nine days."

"By whose will?"

He placed the coin upon her desk. Picking it up, Kerra gave it a closer look. On one side, it had the symbol of a X with a vertical line straight through; on the other, a ship with unfurled sails.

She returned the iron coin. "What is the reason?"

"He has levied an accusation of attempted murder against you, my lady. To that end, he demands you bring the Copper Mage with you as witness."

"Expect to see me there."

The Keeper gave another bow with more intricate hand gestures than necessary. "The only expectation I would ever have." He left.

Waiting until the sounds of footsteps had disappeared, Kerra stuck her head out of her study. "Get me Vernon," she told the guard outside.

As he went off to carry out her order, Kerra paced around her office.

Eventually, a short man with a thin beard running along his jawline entered. "You have need of me?"

"The Nine Lords meet. Tibert is making his next move. Given his demand, I think I have his plan figured out," she explained.

"Any way we can be sure?"

"The Night Knives do not accept contracts on the Nine Lords," Kerra considered. "If any of them arrive or have arrived from Aquila to act as his muscle, my suspicions concerning our Copper Mage should be confirmed. Get in touch with our spies at the docks."

"I will."

"Also, we must arrange matters within his fold. Who is the most ambitious of his lieutenants?"

"The one called Vitus, from what our spies tell. He is the most likely candidate amenable to our suggestions," Vernon said.

"Get in touch. Let's get our pieces into position." Kerra smiled. "Nine days."

Chapter 173: Court Summons

Court Summons

Still unsure what to think of the inquisitors in light of what he had learned, Martel decided to ask someone else. Manday gave him the chance to solicit one such often source of knowledge. "Master Fenrick, are the inquisitors our friends or enemies?"

The other novices glanced at him, some of them looking disturbed by the question.

"That depends on your viewpoint," the teacher replied. "Do you believe the threat from maleficars and the abominations spawned by necromancy matter more than our ability to practice our magical gifts without the constant burden of suspicion, oft followed by unjust accusations?"

"I don't know," Martel replied confused. "What do you think?"

"I think that is a question all mages should answer for themselves."

~

A message was delivered by a smirking air acolyte to Martel as he crossed the entrance hall. Moving over to stand in the shadow of the astronomical clock, Martel quickly read the note.

Master Martel,

A matter of some importance has arisen involving you.

Your presence on our premises within the next days would be most appreciated.

Respectfully as always,

The Copper Lady

He stared at the words. He was not enthused at the thought of going to The Copper Drum. After the wasted night of the full moon, and his last trip to the place also being fruitless, Martel felt a little foolish going there again. But, looking past the flourishing language, he detected a note of urgency

and perhaps even concern in Kerra's words. Feeling a little worried himself about the cause for the message, Martel decided to simply get it over with and go this evening.

~

Martel almost regretted his decision on the way there, walking for more than an hour just to reach The Copper Drum, especially since he would spend the same amount of time going home. He could have practised a bit more, played some cards with Maximilian in the common room, or found an interesting book at the library. Instead, he walked the streets of Morcaster; this late in the harvest season, he had his hood up and his hands hidden inside his pockets for warmth.

The guards nodded and let him walk directly through the compound until he reached Kerra's study. She looked up as he entered with a smile. "Master Martel, good of you to come."

"Your message sounded important?"

"Indeed." She motioned for him to take a seat, which he did. "The Nine Lords are gathering. Tibert has called us together, making accusations against me."

"What's he accusing you of?"

"Attempting to murder him." Kerra smiled sardonically. "He's just trying to cause trouble. But as you have been involved in my recent dealings with him, I could use you as a witness."

"A witness, like at a trial?" Martel frowned. He had imagined a handful of cutthroat rogues meeting in a shadowy place, not judges in a courtroom.

"You could call it that. Would you be willing to come with me? I only need you to tell the truth, nothing more, and you may return home afterwards," Kerra promised.

For once, something in Martel resisted. Travelling to some unknown place where the crime lords of Morcaster gathered did not sound like a place he should be found. Especially not if he was under scrutiny by inquisitors. "Where's the meeting taking place?"

She gave a sly smile. "The only place in the city that we consider neutral ground. The Undercroft."

"What's that?" Martel had never heard of the place, which did not reassure him.

"Below the city, the old ruins of what lay before stretches on for miles. It is an intriguing place, full of history. Certainly a mage would find it fascinating," she told him with temptation in her voice.

At another time, in other surroundings, that might have excited him to hear more about. Currently, it only made Martel feel uneasy. "I don't think I should. I'm a student at the Lyceum, I have my examination, and I shouldn't be at such meetings. And the inquisitors are watching us all like hawks. I went into The Broken Crown on your behalf, and it ended in a riot. Not to mention, Leatherfist attacked me one night, and I barely fended him off. And then you invited me to the harvest feast, just so I could help fight against Tibert, who came straight after me," he rambled on, finally taking a deep breath as he finished.

As Kerra regarded him silently, his nervous energy dissipated, which left him just feeling nervous. When she finally spoke, her words came slowly, sounding thought-through. "You're right. The manner of our first meeting did little to build trust between us, and I sent you on a task like a tool to be discarded after use. But you changed my mind with your willingness to help us. You are not

called the Copper Mage for idle reason. The time you spent training my people to fight the threat that haunts our district has not been forgotten."

While Martel appreciated that, his actions had been to aid the common people, not for Kerra's sake. Going to this meeting, mingling with crime lords felt like a great risk to him solely for her benefit.

Sensing his reticence, she continued, "I will of course compensate you however much you deem fitting."

While Kerra was right that they lacked trust, she was wrong to think it could be bought with coin. "May I think about it?" Martel was already inclined to reject her request, but he felt a little uncomfortable telling her directly to her face deep inside her stronghold. She was fond of sending him letters; one in return seemed suitable.

She held his gaze. "Of course," she replied, a moment too late to make her seem comfortable with the prospect despite her words. "The meeting is in eight days. You have plenty of time to consider."

"Great. I better head home." He got up, gave an awkward nod in farewell, and left the chamber. Behind her desk, Kerra stared pensively in the direction where he had gone.

Chapter 174: Bitter Winds Blowing

Bitter Winds Blowing

Martel had a meeting on Solday as well, and unlike yesterday, he looked forward to it; spending an afternoon with Shadi would be a welcome reprieve from inquisitors and crime lords. While they had spent the harvest festival together, it had happened without her father's knowledge. Today, they would not have to worry about that; Master Farhad had given up his reservations. The riots of the summer seemed distant with the war going into hibernation for winter, reducing tensions between Asterians and Khivans; Martel's gift of fifty silvers had probably also made the old watchmaker feel more lenient towards his daughter's friendship with a mage, even if other Khivans disapproved.

But first, he had his regular duties in the workshop. As he arrived, he discovered a strange stench hanging in the air. That in itself was not unusual; given that this place produced almost everything needed by the Lyceum, mundane or magical, the smells of metals on the forge, alchemical reagents, tanned leather, and the like pervaded the area. Martel only found it peculiar because he had never noticed this particular odour before.

Curiously, it grew stronger as Master Jerome entered the main floor of the workshop to put his novices at work. "Yes, I know. I smell. There is a strange block in the waterways of the Lyceum, and trying to untangle it has led to many discoveries, none of which I am keen to dwell on." He rattled off work assignments to the students, who dispersed.

Martel remained, as a question had come to mind. "Master Jerome, will we at some point learn about crafting from you?" While he already studied alchemy under Mistress Rana, or rather apothecary work with the promise that he would also learn alchemy, Martel was intrigued at the thought of enchanting objects or even creating artefacts. It could not hurt to ask, at least.

"Eager, are we? That'll be a while for you. Not until you are an acolyte."

"But my examination is in a month or so," Martel pointed out.

The artificer frowned. "Really? You haven't already been here for two years, have you?"

"Oh no, just the one. But they are letting me take the examination after one year."

Master Jerome scratched his beard. "I see. Well, that means next year you will at least learn about enchanting from me. As for other crafts, that depends. Some mages have the gift to work with metal, and other acolytes show a gift for working with fabric or leather. If you show promise in any such regard, you'll get to learn, I promise."

That sounded fair. "Thanks, master."

"No need to thank me, it's my duty after all. And yours is in the laboratory. We got parchment to make."

~

The wind howled as Martel crossed Morcaster. He wore a scarf to ward himself from the worst of the cold, but he should have brought gloves and a cap as well. His hood did its best to protect his face, but the wind constantly threatened to blow it down, making for an uncomfortable experience. Martel tried to use some magic to counter this, pushing air against the gale. His efforts amounted to nothing; nature proved far stronger than some novice. Accepting defeat, Martel avoided the bigger streets and walked through the alleys south-east where the buildings could shield him from the worst.

This cost him some extra time, but as he had plenty of it, it did not bother him. At length, he reached the Khivan enclave. Few people were on the streets; the locals did not enjoy the weather any more than he did, apparently. He made his way down the main road to reach the watchmaker's workshop.

Shortly after he knocked, Shadi opened the door. Giving him a quick smile, she grabbed her coat and warm clothing, conveniently ready nearby. "I'm leaving, dad!" she yelled back into the house before going outside. A gust of wind immediately made her shiver, and she hurried to bundle up. "Where to?" she asked, looking at him.

"Well, the weather doesn't encourage strolling around. What about a cup of something warm to drink? We could go somewhere for spiced wine," Martel suggested.

"That sounds nice. If I remembered to bring any coin." She patted her pockets.

"Oh, don't worry, I have a few birds." Martel stuck one hand inside his robe just to check that he did indeed have some silver pieces on him.

"Birds," she grinned. "You sound more and more like someone born in Morcaster. Oh, have you ever had Khivan tea?"

"No, I haven't."

"There is a good place not far from here. I can't believe I've never taken you before." She began walking, leading the way. "Let's go, wizard boy!"

~

Fifteen minutes later, they sat in a small tavern of the sort that sold mostly food and a small selection of drinks, including hot tea. "They used to brew tea actually grown in Khiva," Shadi explained. "But obviously, that's been impossible to get since the war. I haven't had any for years. Go on, have a taste."

Martel had tried tea before, usually when sick and his mother would give him some kind of herbal extract. It usually tasted terrible. Cautiously, though he tried to look casual about it, he tasted the warm drink. It had a strange flavour, but he kept his face expressionless and nodded. "I like it," he claimed.

"It comes from Sindhu. Only place they can get tea from these days."

"It's nice." He wondered if that would not make it Sindhian tea rather than Khivan tea, but he kept that observation to himself. Martel took another sip and decided to change topic. "I'm very happy with my clock, by the way. I must be the only person in the entire school who has one."

Shadi grinned. "I'm glad! I think dad really enjoyed the challenge of making it so small. Well, if anyone is envious of you, just tell them where they can get their own."

"I will," he promised with a slight laughter. "Does your father need more work?"

Her expression betrayed her for a brief moment before her words could salvage anything. "He's got some. He's doing fine."

Martel fiddled with his cup. "I don't mind helping if you need."

"No." Her reply came resolutely. "We can't depend on others month after month. Besides, people have been leaving the district over the last few months. Maybe we can find somewhere cheaper to live."

"What about the copper lanes?" While Martel did not like the thought of it, he did have a connection he could make use of if need be.

She gave him a mirthless smile. "Khivans aren't allowed to live in the other districts. There's a reason we are all holed up in this one."

Guess he would not need that connection after all. "That's strange. What a dumb law."

"That's life." She shrugged. "Don't forget to drink your tea before it gets cold."

He hurried to take another sip.

Chapter 175: Expanded Curriculum

Expanded Curriculum

In the afternoon, as Martel checked for messages, his diligence was rewarded. He felt a flash of discomfort as the short missive was put into his hand, thinking it came from Kerra who might be demanding a reply already. Quickly, he let his eyes glance over the text.

Martel,

Please see me sometime today.

Mistress Juliana

A message from the overseer always felt a little ominous, but Martel could not think of any reason to feel worried. Having a spare bell between lunch and his second lesson with Master Alastair, he went towards the wing of the castle housing the faculty.

"Enter."

He found Mistress Juliana at work among a multitude of papers on her desk as usual, though she put her quill aside to take a seat opposite him.

"I asked you here to discuss your schedule."

"Anything wrong?"

She shook her head. "No. But when I first put together a plan for all your courses, I excluded all those that did not deal with magic. Normally, novices also learn writing, arithmetic, history, geography, and so on. Useful subjects for anyone to know. However, since you are here for only half the time, I figured it best to let you focus on magical studies."

Martel nodded a little, wondering where this would lead.

"You have just about finished all of the courses expected for a novice to complete. That leaves you with no courses left for Maldays until you become an acolyte. Rather than spend that time idle, and since Master Alastair tells me you do not require extra lessons, I have decided to use them on those aforementioned, neglected subjects."

Already, he felt a little lost. "Sorry, what does that mean?"

"It means for the next month or so, until you become an acolyte, you will have one lesson every Malday with Father Andrew, who teaches our courses without magic. You will not go through the full number, obviously, but he will make sure you have a fundamental understanding of the most important topics. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, I suppose."

"Good. Second bell on Maldays. His classroom is next to the entrance to the library staircase. That is all."

~

Martel returned to his room, writing down the change to his schedule. With that out of the way, he considered which exercise to practice. While creating rainclouds was highly advanced magic and not nearly required of him yet, it would be something he needed to learn eventually. Perhaps he ought to expend his efforts towards that. Making a cloud of steam was easy; he simply combined fire and water. But a genuine cloud that might bring rain consisted of water and air primarily, and Martel's mastery of either was too lacking that he could produce this effect. Yet.

He had not gotten far when someone knocked on his door. Opening it, he saw Eleanor. It took him a moment to remember that she had requested his help some days ago, and he noticed a bundle of parchment in her hands.

"Do you have time to go through these with me?" she asked. .c(o)m

"Sure. Where should we do it?" He glanced over his shoulder back into his room with its sparse furniture.

"There is a classroom next to the girls' tower, on the first floor. It is usually empty for this bell," Eleanor suggested.

"Sounds good." Martel closed and locked his chamber door behind him and followed her.

They walked in silence from the boys' tower down the hallway past the quartermaster, through the girls' common room, and finally reached the aforementioned empty space. Entering first, Eleanor placed her parchment on the nearest table and began spreading some of them out.

Martel cast a look at them. He saw a variety of symbols, none of which had any meaning to him. All of them had writing in Asterian letters next to them, usually a single word, which did not necessarily enlighten him.

"I copied all these from a book in the library. These are all active runes, mind you, and I wrote down the activating word as well."

Martel was not certain he understood, but he kept his ignorance to himself.

"The trouble is that obviously, all these activating words are Tyrian. And the book did not explain how pronunciation might differ from how we would say such a word," Eleanor explained. "This is a rune of warning." She slid a particular piece of parchment closer to herself, and Martel looked at the strange symbol with its many angles. "You can see what happens when I try to use it." She cleared her throat. "*Vara*."

A white shimmer of magic appeared around her hand, but Martel also noticed an expression of discomfort on her face. As for the rune itself, nothing happened.

"Either the book is wrong, or I am saying it wrong. I was hoping you might have an idea as to which it is?" she asked.

"Well, I don't speak Tyrian as such. But I know how it sounds, sort of. They roll their R's."

Eleanor gave the rune another try, though with the same effect or lack thereof. Her eyes clenched together as before, but nothing else happened.

"What is this rune supposed to do?"

"A symbol of warning, though as I have yet to use it, I cannot say how it works."

"Why – who do you need to be warned against?"

She laughed a little. "None in particular. But I saw Master Fenrick use this symbol on our trip to the Stone of Archen, if you recall. I thought it might be easier to begin with this one, as I have seen it before."

"You know, Master Fenrick is probably the right person to ask for help instead of me."

Eleanor gave a guilty smile. "I asked him. He told me that I would learn the runes next year and that patience is an important virtue for wizards."

"That sounds like him."

"Let me try some of the others. Let me know if you think I am saying it wrong."

"Certainly."

They continued for a while until Eleanor announced herself to be fatigued, bringing an end to their time together.

Chapter 176: Passive Relations

Passive Relations

Martel did not know what to expect for his first lesson with Father Andrew. But since it did not involve magic, he did not feel too concerned. Even if he did poorly, this could hardly influence his examination or future studies at the Lyceum. And he had enjoyed himself back in Engby, learning his letters with Father Julius. Perhaps this would prove to be a pleasant break from his more challenging classes.

Martel entered the classroom to find an old man wearing the white robe of the clergy. Bald except for a crown of grey hair, Father Andrew shuffled around the room to look in his direction. "You're the new student," the priest spoke with a creaking voice.

"Yes, master."

"Father Andrew," he said in correction. "I'm not some mage." He took a deep breath, which came slightly wheezing. "I am told to run you through the different subjects of knowledge and rectify where you are deficient."

Martel nodded a little.

"Sit down."

Having free choice, the novice sat down at the nearest table.

"Not there."

With no further directions, Martel chose another in the middle of the classroom.

"I thought we should start with geography. Tell me, boy, where are you from?"

"I'm from Engby."

The priest scoffed. "Not the name of some insignificant village. What province?"

"Nordmark."

"Then you should know this. What is the river that divides Aster from Tyria?"

"Frosten," Martel replied hurriedly.

"What of the river that separates Aster from Khiva?"

That one was tougher. He felt that he knew the answer, but nothing came to mind.

"Savena," the priest said impatiently. "Given that it may very well determine the outcome of our current war, you should know it."

"How does a river determine that?" Martel asked, his interest piqued.

"We might as well start there," Father Andrew mumbled and shuffled over to a bookshelf. He retrieved a large scroll and returned, unfurling it on the table. It showed a map of the northern continent, dominated by the Asterian Empire. "The Savena River flows here, with its wellspring in the mountains near cursed Archen and all the way south to the Emerald Sea." The priest traced his gnarled finger along a blue line on the parchment. "And here lies Nahavand, under siege by our legions." He tapped at a city lying by the river, halfway up the line from the sea.

"How does the Savena matter?"

"To reinforce our troops at the siege, we must sail supplies up the river." Father Andrew ran his finger from the sea and up the blue line all the way to the city. "That is why the Tenth Legion defends the delta. If the Khivans take control of the eastern hills, they may position their cannons to blow our ships out of the water."

Martel stared at the map, feeling fascinated in spite of the gruesome topic.

"You planning to join the legions, boy?"

"No, Father Andrew," came the swift reply.

"In that case, let's move on. What lies south of the Emerald Sea?"

"Sindhu."

"Good. Let me find the map..." Once again, old feet shuffled across the floor.

~

His lessons done, Martel had a bit of time before lunch. Sticking one hand inside his pocket to play with the rune token, he was reminded of a thought that came to him last night. He had possessed the small pebble with its symbols for many months now, yet he had no clue what it might do. In fact, it might have been a jest on Regnar's part gifting it to him; Martel would not put it past the hedge mage. But if Eleanor had begun looking into these symbols, maybe she would know.

He crossed the school to reach the girls' dormitory, going up the stairs to reach her chamber. Once he had knocked, she opened the door. "Martel. Something amiss?"

"No, not at all. I merely wondered, with your newfound knowledge, if you might know what this is?" Martel presented the rune token to her. It was basically a small stone, but with numerous sides like a die for some complex game of chance. Instead of the usual symbols for elements, crown, or a jester's hat, each of the sides showed a small Tyrian rune.

Eleanor picked it up and gave it an inspecting look. "I am not that well-versed in these symbols yet. I cannot readily give you much of an answer, but I can compare with my notes or take it to the library."

"Sure, as you prefer. It's not like I have need of it. I'm just curious."

"How did you acquire it?"

"Do you remember Regnar? The hedge mage who travelled with the actors' troupe."

"That rings a bell. He did seem like a fellow full of unexpected tricks."

Some less benign than others, Martel thought with annoyance, remembering how Regnar had tricked him into giving a performance while the street children robbed the audience. "By the way, what is your interest in runes? You never told me."

She gave a half-hearted smile. "Just looking for ways to get better at magic. These runes look like the passive sort," she continued, holding up the token between two fingers.

"Passive?"

"Roughly, runes can be divided into two kinds. At least, as far as we know. Some are active or rather activated, meaning their power lies latent until brought to life by the right word. Until then,

they are just scribbles. Passive runes are imbued with magic at the moment of creation, on the other hand, and their power is constantly in effect," Eleanor explained.

"Regnar said something about this would protect me," Martel remembered.

She nodded. "That goes well with these being passive runes. Besides, it would be a worthless gift if the symbols required activation and he never told you the relevant words." She examined the token once more. "Though this might actually be one symbol that can be activated. Let me try." She mumbled a word that Martel did not recognise. Nothing happened with the pebble, and Eleanor grimaced.

"You alright?"

"Yes. Trying to use unfamiliar magic causes some mild discomfort, that is all. I had a bit of a headache after yesterday," she admitted with a wry expression.

"You shouldn't push yourself in that case," Martel cautioned her, remembering how it had felt when he had exhausted his magic at the Imperial palace.

"I will be fine. The lunch bell has already rung, right? You should go before all the fresh bread is taken. I will give this a closer look." She held up the rune token as she spoke the final sentence.

Feeling dismissed, with the implication that they would not be eating together or even walk to the dining hall together, Martel gave half a nod and left.

Chapter 177: Lessons Outside of School

Lessons Outside of School

Despite their recent interactions, it appeared to Martel that his friendship with Eleanor remained buried. They had helped each other a few times, but that was it. She held firm to her decision, it seemed, disappointed with him over his reckless behaviour. Martel knew the sensible thing would be to simply accept this and move on; trying to force friendship upon an unwilling recipient was hardly a winning strategy.

Yet he could not help but think of ways to mend fences between them, especially since she had approached him out of the blue for help. He had not been able to provide much aid given his lack of knowledge concerning Tyrian runes, but perhaps he could do something else for her; something reminiscent of the way their friendship had begun months ago when Eleanor provided him with balm for his pain and discomfort.

Hearing about the unpleasant reaction she suffered from trying to learn the magic behind the runes had given Martel the idea. The apothecary had small vials of liquid pain relief, whose efficacy Martel had tried himself. Unfortunately, he had spent most of his silver and could not afford to buy one, nor did he know the recipe for making them. But the latter he could learn with a little guidance from the right person.

Thus, next morning as he arrived in the apothecary, he smiled at seeing Nora.

"Someone is in a good mood," she laughed.

"Today is a good day," he replied. "At least, I hope so. You know that elixir that relieves pain? I was hoping to make one of those today, for the first time."

The apprentice frowned. "Did you agree this with Mistress Rana? She didn't tell me."

"She told me I was ready," he said. It was true, from a certain viewpoint. Some fivedays ago, she had mumbled something to that effect, that he would soon be ready to learn this recipe; given how many days had passed since then, Martel interpreted that as permission. "Besides, if it is under your supervision, it can hardly go wrong."

"I guess so. I do have lots to take care of this morning, though, so I may not have time."

"That's fine. I was hoping to keep the potion afterwards anyway, so I figured I would get the ingredients myself from the market." Stretching the truth was one thing; Martel was not going to use the apothecary's supplies for his own purpose. He should have a silver piece squirreled away in his desk somewhere, and if not, maybe the herbalist would accept payment at a late date, given that he knew Martel. "And maybe we can do it later today?"

Nora chewed on her lip, considering his words. "Alright, yeah, that sounds fine. Later today. For now, let's get to work. The infirmary needs more of blood salve - two bands of former legionaries got into a fight last night over whose legion is toughest, so it's been busy."

~

When he had a spare bell, Martel went to market. He had located his last silver coin and a few coppers, which he hoped would be enough to fetch everything on the list that Nora had made for him. The weather was gentler compared to his last outing, and he walked leisurely down the street. As much as he enjoyed living at the Lyceum, especially with its heated bath during wintertime, it was also nice to get out of the castle and experience the hustle and bustle of the common folk, just like his hometown.

He avoided the square with the statue of Emperor Lucius; he did not need to see the corpse hanging in the gibbet. Instead, he strolled through some of the stalls, casting idle looks at their wares. With winter approaching, many peddlers had left the city, usually departing for Sindhu, and the district felt quieter than usual.

Eventually, he reached the old herbalist. "Master Martel! What will it be today?"

The novice handed over the scrap of paper listing the reagents for the pain remedy.

The vendor mumbled a few sounds to himself as he glanced over the note. "Should all be fine, nothing much to it. Well, you'll be clearing out my last willow bark. I thought your mistress had plenty of it? Her other apprentice came by just the other morning to buy lots of it."

"This is just for me," Martel admitted. "Trying a new recipe today. Thought I would only waste my own money."

The old man gave a scratching laughter as he assembled the items. "Speaking of which, one silver and five coppers, if you please."

Martel took out his coins. "I only have the three. Can I pay you the other two later?"

"Alright, but don't you forget," he grumbled, accepting the one silver and three copper coins. He handed over the herbs. "Sol bless you, Master Martel."

"You as well."

With his purchases, Martel turned back through the alley, walking towards the nearby square to make his way back to the Lyceum. Just as he reached the open area, two rough-looking men approached him. They wore workmen's clothes with unkempt beards and grim expressions.

"What's this then here?"

"What you got there, boy?"

"Just some herbs." Either of the men looked to be twice his size, which probably emboldened them. But Martel was not in the mood to be cowed. He stared at them defiantly. "Let me pass."

"Oh yeah? You some kind of poison mixer? Like that fellow they strung up?"

Already, people's attention was drawn towards their exchange as the thugs spoke with loud voices. "Look at this lad," one of them practically yelled, making sure that everybody definitely looked in their direction. "We got ourselves a little alchemist, making and selling poison!"

As others approached to stand by the ruffians, Martel finally felt concerned. He had no idea why they singled him out or leapt to conclusions; plenty of people bought herbs as little remedies for various ills. He was not afraid to fight, given the advantage that magic conferred upon him. But he felt angry or suspicious looks from several directions, and he remembered how the crowd had turned into a mob months ago, turning on the Khivan quarter. "I'm a mage at the Lyceum," he protested, igniting flames around his open hand. "Back off!"

It did not have the intended effect. Egged on by the thugs, nearly a score of people now stood grouped together, perhaps feeling secure in numbers, or simply angrier than they were afraid.

"He's a filthy spellcaster!"

"Like the maleficar who killed those children in the copper lanes!" yelled one of the workmen.

"He's going to set the city on fire!" added the other.

Martel stepped back, feeling cornered. He had no spells to deal with this many people at once. He could not create the wall of fire either, as people had already begun to move around him, able to get at him from several angles. Fighting did not seem the best option. Instead, closing his eyes, he conjured the brightest magelight within his power. As the people suddenly squinted, raising their hands to shield their eyes, he turned around and ran down the alley.

"He's running!"

"Where? I can't see a damn thing!"

"This way!"

"Which way is that?" .com

Martel did not look back. He continued down the entire length of the alley, past the old herbalist who already hurried to assemble all his wares and pack them away. Emerging onto the street in the other end, Martel glanced in either direction to determine the best escape route.

"Master Martel! This way!" To his right, twenty paces down, a man waved for his attention, standing by the entrance to another alley.

Confused, fearful, but also in need of making an immediate decision, Martel decided to trust someone who knew his name. He ran to his right, turning into the alley where the man had already gone ahead.

"Come along!" Martel's unknown helper gestured for him to continue their hectic run.

They did so and advanced around various corners, moving deeper into the alleyways, constantly changing direction in the labyrinthine alleys of the district.

Only after several minutes did the man stop. "Alright, I think we lost them."

Catching his breath, Martel also collected his wits. "Who are you?" Now that he had time to think, he could not help but question what had just happened.

The man gave a broad smile. "My name doesn't matter. But you're the Copper Mage, and Kerra sent me to look out for you."

"She did? Since when?"

"Ever since you pledged to help us out down in the copper lanes. I've just been hanging around your school, keeping an eye out in case that Tibert might show up. I didn't expect this to happen, though."

"Me neither," Martel admitted, feeling relief settle over him. He had been a little worried that his escape had been the preamble to a trap.

"I must say, I'm glad you chose to run. I was thinking about how to best jump in, but you made that unnecessary." The man pulled out his sap, slapping the heavy leather pouch against the palm of his empty hand.

"Well, it's good to know I wouldn't have been alone."

The man grinned again. "Of course! We take care of our own."

Perhaps Martel had judged Kerra too harshly. And he also had his own to take care of. Even if Shadi was too proud to ask for help, Martel had a feeling she would need it. "Can you get a message to Kerra?"

"Sure, what is it?"

"Tell her that I'll go with her to the meeting. She'll know what I mean. But I'll need payment of fifty birds."

"Will do, Master Martel."

~

As Martel made his way back to the Lyceum, Kerra's man turned around to stay in the market district. He walked the crooked alleys, occasionally checking that nobody followed him, until he reached a small, unassuming waterhole. A handful of people sat in the open room, shielding themselves from the cold of the street with cloaks and ale. Among the patrons were two rough-looking men, wearing workmen's clothes.

Kerra's man approached them, dumping ten pieces of silver onto the table between them. "Nice work."

The thugs eagerly seized their coins. "You never told us why you wanted to put the fright in that boy."

"He just needed to learn a lesson."

Chapter 178: Pawns in Play

Pawns in Play

"There you are." Eleanor approached Martel at the breakfast table, giving Maximilian on the other side a nod. "I went through all of the symbols." She placed the rune token on the table next to Martel's meal.

"Any luck?" asked the novice, pushing his bowl of porridge to the side to better look at the pebble.

"A little, though I cannot say much. Since the Tyrians do not view magic or humans the way we do, I worry that the explanation in the book might not accurately translate what was meant originally," she admitted, looking consternated.

"It's fine. I figured it would be difficult. Maybe I'll solve it when I take the course in runes myself." Martel picked up the token, looking at its strange markings. He wondered if even Regnar knew what they meant, or under which circumstances he had acquired the stone.

"I did glean something. All of the symbols seem to be wards of some sort, so I do not think the old hedge mage lied to you." Eleanor pointed at the different sides of the token in Martel's hand. "The question is what they protect against. Evil of some kind, probably sinister magic, but who knows what that means to a Tyrian?"

Martel thought about the witches of the North and their curses. While he could not imagine ever encountering one in Morcaster, at least he was prepared for the situation. He suddenly remembered his whole ordeal yesterday, being chased by the crowd with accusations of evil magic as well. He pulled out a small vial from his pocket, the fruit of yesterday's labour and exertions; he had kept the flacon on him after completing the elixir, waiting for when he might run into Eleanor.

"This is for you. As thanks for looking into my pebble." He smiled at his own words as he placed the vial in her hand.

"What is this?"

"Pain remedy. In case looking at those symbols for me gave you a headache. Made it myself."

"That was thoughtful of you to make," she said with a faint smile, clutching the small bottle.

"It was no trouble at all." Granted, getting the ingredients had been troublesome, but making the potion had been easy. And now Martel could add a new recipe to his repertoire.

"I am glad you are learning alchemy. Helping people."

"He is a regular saint," Maximilian snorted, scraping his bowl for the last spoonful of porridge.

Shaking her head at the mageknight, Eleanor turned to leave. "I will see you around."

~

For his first class with Master Fenrick, Martel had as usual a question. Seeing the novice raised his hand, the teacher stared through his thick glasses before he finally relented. "Yes, Martel?"

"Master, have you heard about the Undercroft?"

"I have. The question is, how did you hear of this place?"

"I just heard people talking about it in town. But they didn't know much, so I figured there was only one person to ask." Adding a little flattery to his appeal never hurt, Martel figured.

"Did you now." Master Fenrick made some grumbling sounds while Martel waited for him to continue. None of the other novices seemed interested, but they had no reason to interfere. "The Undercroft is old. A testament to its builders that it has not crumbled to dust long ago. Certainly older than the Aquilan Empire, though nobody knows what caused the city to sink into the ground. I have never read of any plausible theories."

"There is a path from the Lyceum to the sewers," Martel mentioned, remembering his trip with Mistress Vana when learning about the waterways of the school in the city. "Does it lead there as well? Mistress Vana warned us of how the sewers connected to a larger area underneath the city."

"Why? Looking for a way to the Undercroft?"

"No, master. Just wondering at what lies beneath our feet." Martel already knew a path to this vaunted place, and he had agreed to go there as well. But any kind of warning of what to expect would be nice. The name alone sounded foreboding.

"Nothing friendly. A general rule for things that hide in the dark, underneath the earth and away from sunlight. I suggest you turn your attention to practising your spellpower this afternoon. I imagine you still have potential to unlock." His teacher gave him a stern look.

Martel bowed his head, ceasing his questions while Master Fenrick continued his lesson on how certain conjunctions of the stars might amplify magical power under very specific circumstances. When the time came for his second lesson that day, he did as told and practised his spellpower to the fullest of his ability.

~

Kerra sat in her study with a handful of golden coins and different gems on her desk when someone knocked on her door. "Wait," she commanded, sweeping the gems into her hand. She loosened a floorboard nearby and let the precious stones drop down. With those hidden and the floorboard back in place, she cleared the coins into a drawer in her desk. "Enter."

Her lieutenant, Vernon, stepped inside. "I've heard from Vitus. He is ready. If things go as planned with Tibert."

"Any chance he will betray us?"

The bald man shrugged. "It's certainly in his character, since he'll either betray us or his master. But I think we have made the right appeal to his ambition."

Kerra nodded. "Good. With confirmation of four Night Knives in play, I feel confident we have read him right. The only question will be how many to bring to the meeting."

"Wolfram and Sigrid are the best choices," Vernon suggested. "I'd say two more. With you and the mage boy, that makes six. Have you heard from him?"

"He is coming along. In fact, I better write him back." Kerra grabbed a scrap of parchment and took hold of her quill, dipping it in ink.

"Very good, my lady." Vernon bowed his head.

She smiled. "All our pieces are in play."

Chapter 179: Unexpected Encounters

Unexpected Encounters

Solday morning, Martel made his way to the workshops as usual. He stood with the other novices on the main floor, waiting for Master Jerome to appear and give them their assignments. When the artificer finally arrived, he looked frustrated rather than his usual jovial self. He muttered some quick instructions to the others but gestured for Martel to stay. "You've been with Mistress Vana around the castle, yeah? She took you to the sewers below."

Martel did not have fond memories of the place, and he was a little concerned where this line of questioning would lead, but he would not lie. "Yes, she did."

"She mentioned you were good with water. I have need of that for a particular task. Follow me."

Master Jerome turned around and went down a path that Martel unfortunately recognised; it led to the sewers. As the hatch became opened, Martel could smell it immediately.

The artificer placed a key in his hand. "For the grate door. I need you to follow the tunnel until you reach the pipes. Try to examine if any of them are blocked, move water up and down or whatever your powers allow you to do. If you cannot remove the blockage, tell me exactly which pipe has problems. Meanwhile, I'll be working from this end to figure out what is causing this damn issue."

Breathing through his mouth, resigned to his fate, Martel went down the hatch. He followed the tunnel until he reached the door, unlocked its padlock, and continued beyond. Already, the smell felt unbearable. Martel had doubts whether this many people living together could truly be a good idea when it necessitated something so awful as these sewers. Certainly nothing in Engby had ever had such a stench.

Summoning plenty of light, he walked carefully on the ledge while the water ran next to him, balancing his need for caution with his desire to get this over with.

Finally, he reached the area in question. Various bridges crossed the flowing waters, granting access to the tunnels that led deeper underground. Presumably the Undercroft, though Martel had no wish to go that route; he would see it soon enough. Instead, he turned his attention to the variety of pipes mounted on the wall. All of them had water slowly discharging except one. Obviously, the one furthest away.

Sighing, which he immediately regretted because it made him inhale deeply, Martel crossed some of the bridges to get to the pipe. He tried not to think about the water that ran underneath his feet until he could step onto the ledge on the other side. Not eager to touch anything, Martel crouched down and summoned some light that he might look up at the inside of the pipe.

He caught glimpses of different colours, though he could not readily recognise what he saw. Hoping to handle this without getting his hands dirty, Martel used his magic to seize hold of whatever lay up in the pipe before pulling it down. It fell down willingly, and the young mage was only too happy that touching something with magic did not convey sensory information the same way touching it with his fingers would.

As the blockage landed down in the water, Martel could see that it was simply a bunch of rags pressed together, rancid and heavy with water. He wondered which moron had stuffed this down the grates of the Lyceum; no wonder the pipe had been blocked.

His relief at completing the task lasted briefly, as the sound of movement reached him. Pivoting, he summoned light before him to stare down at the nearest tunnel. His mind filled with thoughts of what terrible creatures lurked in the sewers or beyond. Besides the Undercroft, Mistress Vana had spoken of catacombs – vast burial grounds filled with dead people.

"Someone there?" Martel asked, feeling silly as he said it. Whether a monster from the Undercroft, some undead being from the catacombs, or just a rat from the sewer, he was unlikely to get a response.

Ahead of him, something moved again. He thought that he saw the outline of a shape, smaller than himself though certainly too large for anything that might conceivably live in a sewer.

"Are you a wizard?"

Martel nearly lost control of his bodily functions. Reminding himself that he was indeed a powerful mage, the novice got a hold of himself. "Yes I am. With powerful magic. Who are you?"

"You're not with the inquisitors then?" The voice sounded young, struggling to pronounce the word with four syllables.

Frowning, Martel wondered why that mattered. "I'm not. I ask again, who are you?"

The other person stepped forward from the niche where they had been hiding, entering his magelight. In its glow, he saw a young girl, maybe twelve years of age, wearing rags and looking malnourished. "I'm Julia. Who are you?"

"I'm Martel. A student of the Lyceum. You know what that is?"

She nodded. "It's a school."

"What are you doing down here?"

"I'm hiding. From the people in blue clothes."

"Why do you hide from the inquisitors?" She could not be a mage, could she? At her age, Martel would have imagined her enrolled at the Lyceum. Though, he himself was an example that such could not be certain.

"They came for my mama and papa. Took them away. I ran and hid, but they never came back."

Judging by the state of her appearance, this had happened a while ago. He wondered if she had been hiding all this time in the sewers. "Where do you find food?" Martel was almost afraid to know the answer, but he felt it necessary to ask.

"I go up at night," Julia explained. "Lots of things are thrown out. Living down here, I have learned to follow the trail back. Sometimes I find something to eat that's still good, when I go up on the streets."

Martel felt nauseated, and not from the smell. He had no coins left, but upstairs in the Lyceum, a wealth of food lay. Except, he would not have access to any of it until lunch, and he would not be able to return this way later through the locked grate door. And he could not explain to a member of

the faculty that he was stealing food and needed to borrow the key to deliver it. "When you go up on the streets, where do you go exactly in the city?"

"The market. Best chance of finding food."

"Where? A particular square?"

"Yes, with a statue."

That narrowed it down. "Who does the statue show?"

"I don't know his name. He wears clothes like a soldier, but not simple like the guards. He looks important."

The statue of Legate – whatever his name was. "Can you go there tonight? When it's really dark, and the moon is high in the sky."

She looked at him with doubt. "Why?"

"I'll bring you all the food I can. Trust me, it'll be better than whatever you could find."

"You're a mage, so you won't hand me over to the inquisitors, right?"

"It would never cross my mind. I just want to help."

"Alright. I'll be there."

~

At lunch, Martel stashed as much bread as he could. While hauling his hoard back to his chamber, he was intercepted by Henry in the entrance hall, handing over a note with a knowing smile. One hand clutching the bread to stay inside his robe, Martel snatched the message and hurried away. He glanced down, reading it as he walked.

Master Martel,

I appreciate confirmation of your participation.

Your terms are acceptable.

Please join me Malday evening after last bell.

Come alone.

The Copper Lady

Martel had already forgotten about that, engrossed in his new venture. Well, that was in two days. Plenty of time to take care of this matter first.

~

Supper provided an opportunity to grab various vegetables and some strips of meat. Uniting it with his haul from dinner, Martel waited until the moon stood high against the night sky. He realised that using the moon as a time marker was not ideal when arranging a meeting with someone living underground, but he doubted the sewers had any Khivan clocks floating around. He would just have to wait if he arrived first.

Bundling all the food inside his scarf and placing it under his robe, which gave him an unflattering belly, Martel finally left the school two hours after last bell, according to the watch on his desk. He made his way to the square with the statue of the legate. Few people were around. The peddlers had gone home, the stalls were closed, and nobody fetched water at this hour. Nor did he see any sign of Julia.

Sitting down on the steps below the statue, Martel held his bundle in his hands and waited. He realised that if she never showed, he might wait quite a while. He would have to give up at some point unless he wanted to spend a cold night outside.

Caught up in his own thoughts, he almost missed the sound of a hiss meant to draw his attention. Looking around, he saw a small hand waving at him from within the shadows by a closed booth.

He glanced around as if someone might be observing him, aiming to interfere with his nefarious intentions of giving food to a homeless child. As could be expected, nobody seemed to care of the few people shuffling around the square. Crossing the empty space, Martel reached the girl hiding by an alleyway. He quickly opened his scarf to show her the promised bounty.

"You weren't lying, this is good." She snatched it all up.

"If you come back tomorrow, same time, I'll try to have more."

"I don't like being up here," Julia admitted. "But I guess if you bring me more, it's worth it. But now I have to go down. I've already been up too long." With no further words, she hurried down the nearby alley and disappeared into the darkness.

Chapter 180: On Quiet Feet

On Quiet Feet

Martel could think of several things that Julia needed. First on that list would be a home above ground. While Martel did not have one of those available, the solution seemed simple enough. Weasel and his gang should have room; considering everything Martel had done for them, including inadvertently getting them the house where they now lived, he expected they would accept his request to let Julia live with them.

It might still be a hard sell though given her current state. Not just her clothes, ragged even by the standards of homeless children; Martel wondered how she would survive winter without freezing to death. Also, a life in the sewers left a mark that any nose would notice. But that could also be dealt with. It just required money. And Martel had spent his very last coins when buying the ingredients for the pain remedy he had made for Eleanor. Fortunately, he had a solution for that as well.

"Max, can I borrow some money?"

The mageknight looked up from his game of cards in the common room of the boys' tower. He gave a grunt and untied his purse, throwing it on the table. "Take what you need."

"Thanks!" Martel helped himself to several pieces of silver. If only every problem could be helped so easily.

Across the table, Maximilian's opponent looked at the novice. Putting down her cards, Eleanor adopted a suspicious expression. "Urgent need of money, and you have been taking food from the dining hall. What are you up to now?"

Of all the people in the Lyceum, being interrogated by Eleanor felt particularly galling. What was she doing, watching him like some inquisitor trying to catch him in the act? If she did not wish to be his friend, she had no right nor reason to ask him about his intentions or whereabouts. "I'm opening a tavern." As Maximilian gave a snort, the novice strode away.

~

In his eagerness to carry out his plans, Martel had left the castle and walked for fifteen minutes into the market district before he remembered his last shopping trip. For some days, it had felt like things were simmering down. The inquisitors had become a rare sight around the Lyceum, and mentions of maleficars had grown scarce. The anger towards magic had dissipated, or so Martel had thought until his encounter with the angry crowd, riled up just because he bought some herbs to make a simple concoction.

Stopping in his tracks, Martel looked around. Nobody seemed to pay him any heed. People moved around him at their own pace, having their own errands. Men and women, a few children, buying food, clothing, different items for their household, and so on. Everything seemed normal, but that had also been the case last time. It was impossible to tell when suddenly these people might become irate and turn on him. All he could do was try to be inconspicuous.

Taking a deep breath, as his eyes darted in every direction, Martel continued until he reached the next square where he might find the things he needed. Most importantly, a simple woollen dress that provided some warmth along with socks of the same material and leather sandals. Shoes or boots would have been better, but too expensive; he should have taken more money from Maximilian, but Martel had never bought most of these items before, and he had underestimated how costly everything would be. He also got soap, a small piece of washing cloth, and a brush. With all his purchases done, he had exactly two coppers left; it had taken him some haggling to ensure that. Keeping a sharp eye on his surroundings, he hurried down the alley to find the herbalist, pay the money that he owed him, and hasten away with the old man's mumbled thanks in his ears.

~

Martel waited until past nightfall before he left the castle again, carrying his newly purchased items and more food pilfered from the dining hall. With stolen glances, just to make sure nobody followed him, he walked towards the square of Emperor Lucius. This time, he did not wait by the statue, but instead sat down by the alley where Julia had appeared the last time. Keeping to the shadows with his hood up, he probably looked like a vagrant, and he doubted anybody would take notice of him.

After a while, his magic told him that something warm had appeared down the alley. Even with this knowledge, he did not see or hear her approach until she made herself known. "Hullo again, Julia," he said.

She made a little wave with her small fingers.

"I have more food and some other things. Clothes, soap, cloth for washing. You can find some clean water somewhere, I hope." He opened up the bundle in his lap to show the items.

She reached out and grabbed a loaf of bread, quickly devouring it. No stranger to hunger, Martel knew exactly how she felt. "This is all for me?" she asked, sounding a little suspicious. He imagined she had not encountered a lot of kindness lately.

"Yes. The dress is not my size, so you'll have to use it," he jested with a vague smile. She did not reciprocate but simply continued to eat. "Listen, I know of a place where you can stay."

"No."

"You don't even know what I'm suggesting. It's a nice house with other children your age."

"I lived in a nice house with my parents. I'm never going back to that. Not anywhere that the inquisitors can come for me."

Martel wanted to ask more, both curious to understand who her parents might have been, but also to assess whether there was any actual danger for Julia. Even though he had no knowledge of her parentage, he could not imagine the Inquisition would be on the hunt for a young girl who could not possibly have violated any of their tenets. But such questions could wait; what mattered most was getting her out of her filthy hideout and somewhere safe, fitting for habitation. "I promise you, this place is in the copper lanes. The inquisitors won't ever think to look for you there, if they are even searching. And you'll live with several other children you can hide among."

Julia finished the food. "I'm not going." She looked at the items in his lap, as if considering whether to grab them and bolt.

"Will you at least consider it? I can't return tomorrow, as I have somewhere I need to be. But the night after that, I'll be back, and I can take you to a place with a proper bed that doesn't smell of sewer water. I'll bring more food as well."

"Alright. I'll think about it."

Hoping that her common sense would defeat her fears, Martel handed over the clothes and other items he had bought for her. Once she had everything in her small grasp, she disappeared down the alley without making any noise.