

Firebrand 181

Chapter 181: Delving into the Old

Delving into the Old

Martel liked knowledge, and he liked acquiring it. Some of his best memories of childhood had been at the small temple in Engby, learning from Father Julius. Only when he came to the Lyceum and encountered teachers of different mettle had Martel understood that much of his enjoyment of learning was owed to the young priest back home, patient with questions and always quick with a kind word.

Father Andrew bore little resemblance to Father Julius, whether in appearance, age, or disposition towards students. But the old clergyman was not cruel, nor did he harshly berate Martel for his ignorance; at worst, he muttered and shook his head before undertaking his task of teaching Martel what every educated member of Asterian society ought to know.

"Given your spotty knowledge of history, I suppose that gives us free rein to start where we please. An overview of the Asterian Empire seems apt. If we have time, perhaps we can return and expand upon it."

"Yes, Father Andrew."

"Some eight hundred years ago, our corner of the continent fell under Aquilan rule. For the next five hundred years – are you writing this down?"

The priest had some notion that writing things down made them easier to remember. Martel did not see how, but he was not in any position to refuse. He grabbed his quill and began jotting down notes.

Satisfied, Father Andrew continued. "The Aquilan Empire lasted for five hundred years until struck by the ramifications of the fall of Archen, though historians will argue that this particular empire already suffered from many fractures, and the destruction from Archen's fall only hastened the inevitable demise."

Writing like mad, Martel did his best to keep up.

"Despite the Archean outpost known today as the Lyceum, Morcaster did not suffer as other cities did. In fact, using the Lyceum, the city was able to continue traditions of magic lost elsewhere in Aquilan territory. Less than a decade after Archen's fall, Morcaster declared itself an independent city and defeated the Aquilan legions sent to force it back to the fold."

The battle of liberation, Martel thought, thinking back on the spectacle during the harvest festival made by the Legio Urbis.

"Thanks to mageknights and battlemages, Morcaster easily carried the day, and Corvinus the First took the title as Lord of the City. Other cities quickly rebelled as well, tearing the Aquilan Empire apart. Two decades of rapid expansion followed where Morcaster took dominion over the former Aquilan possessions until Corvinus' son was crowned Emperor Lucius the First at the great temple of Luna in Aquila, soon after his armies had conquered the city. Subsequent emperors have been crowned at the Basilica. Now, the Asterian Empire rules as far north as the Frosten and as far east as the Savena."

Martel made sure to note the names and the dates.

"Got that? Good. Let us move to more recent events..."

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Martel tried to sleep during the afternoon; both because he had been up a bit late, but also because he knew not to expect much sleep tonight. Unfortunately, his head was filled with thoughts about his journey through the Undercroft to the meeting of the Nine Lords – the same reason that he wanted to rest as much as possible while he could – and he did not manage to sleep much. At supper, he ate even more than usual, making sure to fill up. He dearly wanted to ask Maximilian to join him; having the mageknight at his side would make Martel feel so much better at the whole prospect. But even if his friend somehow accepted to accompany him to a meeting of crime lords, Martel knew that Kerra would not allow it. Her message had been clear if brief.

Not sure what to expect, Martel put on his leather armour meant for combat training. It fit underneath his robe, no outer sign showing that he felt he needed protection. With a woollen cap on his head to ward against the cold, he left his room. Passing through the entrance hall, he glanced towards his right at the dining hall where many of the other students still ate their evening meal. Somehow, it felt foreboding leaving the Lyceum; he had no idea what awaited him in the Undercroft or the meeting. But he could not tell anyone. To them, this was a night as any other. Steeling himself, Martel left the castle.

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When he reached The Copper Drum, the noisy atmosphere felt like a stark contrast to his subdued mood. He made his way to Kerra's study, having received no other instructions. The guard outside in the hallway nodded as the young wizard approached, cracked the door open, and quickly said, "The Copper Mage is here."

"Let him through."

The guard opened the door wide and stood aside. Passing by, Martel entered Kerra's study. It looked the same, but the woman did not. She wore a broad-brimmed hat with a colourful feather, a bright greatcoat covering what appeared to be a dress judging by the edge sticking out by her ankles, and heavy golden jewellery in her ears, around her neck, and on her fingers. For a woman who usually wore practical clothes, it made quite the difference. "Forgive my attire," she said with a coy smile. "A meeting like the one tonight is like a flock of birds gathering to compare their plumage." She slapped the feather on her hat with a wink.

"It looks nice," Martel replied, not really knowing what else to say.

She got up from her desk. "I have something for you. Just to create a bit of mystery. Not to mention, it might keep you safe down there."

"Safe from what?" he asked.

She did not reply but simply took out a scarf. It had a slight glow, and Martel pulled back on instinct as Kerra tried to put it on him. "Trust me."

"What does it do?"

"Similar to your shield spell if I understood right," she explained, and he allowed her to arrange it around his face to serve as a mask. "There. Bit of magical protection for my favourite mage, and no reason for the Nine Lords to see your face when you speak."

"Thanks."

She winked. "The others should be ready. Let's join them." Walking over to Martel, she took hold of his arm and led him out into the hallway. "Unless you have muscles of stone, I notice a change in wardrobe for you as well." She squeezed the leather tunic underneath his robe.

"It felt prudent."

"No argument from me." They continued down the corridors, going into parts of the complex where Martel had never been before. "We will be a small party travelling together," she explained. "We don't wish to attract too much attention travelling through the Undercroft. It also helps to keep these meetings short." She laughed a little.

At length, they moved down a flight of spiral stairs to reach a basement or the like. Four others waited for them. Martel recognised all of them as someone he had trained those fivedays ago, though he had only really spoken with Wolfram and Sigrid. All of them wore full armour, including chain shirts with surcoats and helmets. Sigrid had her knuckles in the left hand for once along with a buckler strapped to the wrist, leaving her right hand open to draw the short sword by her side. She grinned seeing Martel while Wolfram nodded in greeting; the latter stood armed with an axe and a round shield.

Sigrid took a staff leaning against the wall and threw it to Martel. "The others say you are quite handy with one of these."

He caught it, hefting it in his hands. "Good enough, anyway."

Kerra smiled and turned her attention to a hatch on the floor. "Shall we? The Undercroft awaits."

Chapter 182: The Undercroft

The Undercroft

They walked down a narrow staircase into the dark. One guard in front held a torch, as did Kerra walking in the middle. Sigrid brought up the rear and had one as well. Although unnecessary, Martel had ignited magelight around the tip of his staff, mostly as a statement of his powers and that he did not require light from anyone else.

The stairway itself was curious, hewn rather than built. It was also narrow, allowing only one person at a time, and Martel had to angle his staff rather than hold it straight, or else it would constantly hit against the ceiling. He wondered if it had been built this way for defensive purposes or simply because of how consuming it had to be, carving out each of these steps.

Finally, they reached the bottom of the stairs and could crowd a small entrance space before a large door. It looked to be made from iron rather than wood. Besides that, Martel saw something golden glisten along the hinges, the lock, and other parts, making it impervious to magic.

Kerra dug out a key and unlocked it. It swung open with a creaking sound, and the small party of six people filed through the entrance. She locked the door behind them before stepping forward to stand next to Martel. "Welcome to the Undercroft."

Martel had not known what to expect, but he certainly had not imagined anything like this. Before him stretched a great cavern, whose size he could only guess at, given the darkness. He knew it could not be that tall, considering the length of the passage behind him; yet it seemed to stretch on in every direction ahead, any indication of where it ended impossible to see in the dark.

Furthermore, he saw a multitude of buildings as the light would allow him to observe. They looked like ordinary houses, except the majority were carved in stone rather than built from wood or brick. It made Martel wonder if the entire cave was artificial, painstakingly hewn with one strike of the chisel at a time. Impossible to imagine, at least if done purely by hands – but if magic were involved, perhaps not so far-fetched an idea.

The small band set into motion again, walking down what had to be described as the street. Despite having more space, they followed roughly the same pattern as in the corridor with one guard taking the front and Sigrid in the back. Martel fell in next to Wolfram, taking some reassurance from his well-armed presence.

"Quite a sight, isn't it." Walking next to the young mage, Wolfram smiled.

"It is so eerie. Like a city of the dead. Have you seen it before?" asked Martel.

"Only once, some years ago. The Nine Lords rarely meet."

Martel glanced at the axe in his companion's hand. "Are there dangers down here?"

"Well, you never know. Though I haven't heard of anything as such. We usually move in and out without making much of a fuss."

The mage looked up. The light did not allow him to see the roof of the cave, but he wondered what lay above them on the surface. "I wonder where we are, if we walked on the streets of Morcaster."

"Still in the copper lanes, I reckon," came Kerra's voice behind him. "We haven't moved that far yet."

Martel was tempted to look inside the houses as they passed them, if nothing else to see whether anything had been left behind. It felt so deeply unsettling not to see any sign of habitation, as if the entire population of the city had simply left, taking everything with them. "Where is the meeting taking place?"

"Underneath the market district, closest to the middle. Not too far from your school," Kerra explained, and he thought he detected a smirk in her words. freeweb novel. com

He wondered if he could find a path from here straight to the Lyceum, though he did not feel tempted to try. With each step into the silent city, Martel knew the living had no business down here.

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As they continued their march in silence, Martel eventually noticed changes or details in the surroundings. Shards of pottery on the streets or a bent nail, strangely mundane signs of the people who had once lived in this place. Larger buildings that spoke of other purposes than simple

dwellings. All the houses simply had the grey colour of the stone, but they passed a larger structure clad with tiles to create patterns. He wondered if it might have been a temple of some sort, or maybe a guildhall.

What struck him as strangest was what could best be described as a tower, perhaps reaching all the way to touch the ceiling of the cavern. Why had it been built? Had it been a place for wizards to gather and discuss arcane matters, or just a convenient way of storing grain where rats could not get to it?

His inability to properly sense the scale of the cave also unsettled Martel. He had to fight the urge to pour his magic into the magelight flickering around his staff in a vain attempt to illuminate the entire space. He found himself constantly listening for the sound of something cracking, as if the roof might tumble down on them in this moment after having stood for a thousand years.

He reached out with his magic trying to sense any living creatures around him, but he felt no heat other than his companions. That had to be expected, probably; the stone buildings would block him from feeling much other than within his immediate vicinity on the empty street.

As they continued, Martel finally realised why he felt so uncomfortable looking up. It felt like staring at the night sky, except it was entirely black. Not a single star or the comforting light of the moon.

The street began to widen. In the distance ahead, Martel noticed lights. Presumably, so had his companions, and none of them reacted in alarm, which led him to assume they knew what lay ahead. He killed the magelight on his staff, just to make himself less obvious, and he adjusted the scarf around his face.

The road beneath their feet came to an end, meeting several others in a town square. From the other approaches, small bands of people similar to their own appeared. "We're here," Kerra said softly.

Chapter 183: The Nine Lords

The Nine Lords

Martel glanced around at the gathering place of the Nine Lords. It looked like an ordinary town square, except placed in an eerie city that felt like a crypt. In the middle stood a pedestal that might once have held a statue or something like it; now, it was empty. Not even shards nearby gave any sign of what might have once adorned the spot, nor did Martel see any inscription. A pity; he would have been curious as to the language and alphabet of such letters, even if foreign to him.

The assembled people were of greater interest. Everyone had brought torches that cast flickering light and shadow across the space, only making it seem more ominous. Nine groups, including Martel's own. All of them had four to six people, most of them looking like warriors or servants, and one person who clearly stood out in their clothing or appearance. He recognised Tibert, surrounded by four rough-looking types. As for the man himself, he wore a silk shirt in bright colours, a belt with a large golden buckle, and heavy boots. In one ear, a big, golden ring sat. Tibert caught his eyes and glared in return. Even under the scarf masking his face, Martel felt uncomfortable and looked away.

The atmosphere felt tense in general. Nobody moved from one group to another; everyone stayed with their own, exchanging nothing but looks. Nobody wanted to be here, Martel surmised, and everyone looked forward to when they might leave. Himself included.

A man strolled into the centre of the square, taking position atop the empty pedestal. He wore a bright assortment of clothes; lots of colours seemed to be the theme for this lot. He reminded Martel of the jugglers and acrobats performing at the market during festivals, dressed like that to attract attention.

"The Nine Lords gather!" exclaimed the man dressed as a patchwork. He paused, letting his gaze sweep over the assembly.

"The Keeper of The Pact," Kerra spoke quietly by his side. "Little more than a glorified messenger boy, who likes the sound of his own voice. Unfortunately, we all swore not to kill him as part of making our little system work."

The Keeper turned towards each of the chiefs, one after the other, extending a hand towards them as he called out their names.

"From the Imperial palace, the Paladin!" Martel did not know that word, but he saw an old man dressed like a peacock with a painted face.

"From the holy temples, the Friar!" A monk stood, surrounded by several others. Yet his robe looked to be made from velvet rather than wool, and the other clergymen had impressive forearms that would rival any smith's.

"From the noble mansions, the Comtesse!" A woman in an exquisite dress and wearing heeled boots, which had to make walking across the cobblestones seem like a punishment. She gave a coquette smile, her fingers idly playing at the gem-studded necklace resting on her chest.

"From the silver-shining market, Ironside!" A tall man dressed in full armour, looking anything but a trader, glared in every direction. He even made his own guards look gentle in comparison, as if he protected them rather than the reverse.

"From the merchant shops, Yellowtooth!" Looking like an alderman, he had a green robe with a golden chain across his bulging stomach. He sat on a chair that his servants must have dragged all the way here. Martel could guess at the reason for his nickname, even if he kept his mouth closed.

"From the river's oyster, Lady Pearl!" A voluptuous woman wearing fine clothes and furs with several daggers strapped to her belt. Her most striking feature, along with bright red lips, had to be her entirely shaved head. Curiously, her retinue seemed to be all women, as far as Martel could judge when looking across the square, though they all had their hair.

"From the azure harbour, Tempest!" Tibert gave a sneer, and Martel avoided looking in his direction. He did notice, with some relief, that the angry master of the harbour had not brought more people than Kerra had.

"From the stranger's enclave, the Fire Eater!" A short man with thick, black curls and a beard to match, all of it looking oiled and groomed. Dark lines had been drawn around his eyes, reinforcing his coal-black irises. He and his attendants wore the traditional Khivan garb that Martel had sometimes seen in that district.

"From the red lanes, the Copper Lady!" All eyes turned towards their band, and Martel involuntarily shrank backwards, even if he knew they looked at Kerra rather than him.

"Introductions are done, everyone is here, it's the same people as last," Tibert interjected impatiently. "Can we get to business?"

A few others of the chiefs nodded in agreement, and the Comtesse laughed. Looking momentarily annoyed, the Keeper inclined his head. "The master of the harbour has a grievance he wishes to put before the Nine Lords."

As the patchwork man relinquished his position in the middle of the square, Tibert strode forward with what could best be described as angry steps to take his place. "I won't waste your time," he declared. "In direct violation of our Pact, Kerra of the copper lanes attempted to murder me." His words made the gathered people murmur and whisper with several looking towards the aforementioned woman, who simply smiled. "She engaged a mage to enter my tavern and set it ablaze after earning my trust! I only escaped through luck and wit."

"What do you demand of this council?" asked the Keeper, raising his voice to cut through the clamour.

"Retribution and justice!" Tibert's fiery voice had no trouble being heard. "I want recompense as suitable from Kerra. And to deter other such attempts, for it may well be one of you under assault next time, I demand fitting punishment." His gaze, which had moved across the other lords, became fixed on Martel, and he raised one hand to point at the boy. "I demand that the mage is put to death!"

Chapter 184: His Day in Court

His Day in Court

As Tibert's words rang across the clearing, demanding Martel's head on a stake, Kerra's laughter came in response. Heart beating in his chest like a drum, Martel did not find anything amusing about this, but he hoped Kerra's response indicated how he should feel about this demand.

"Allow me to reply," the Copper Lady said, stepping forward to approach the middle. Tibert remained where he was, staring down at her. "I freely admit that a mage of my acquaintance entered the fights at The Broken Crown. You all know how that went."

The people laughed and smiled; apparently, the story had spread. Tibert only looked more infuriated, if possible, but although Martel expected him to interject, he remained silent.

"But I never told him to hurt Tibert or cause any destruction. The fact that Tibert stands before us unharmed, and his tavern is in one piece, should be ample proof that I made no attempt against him. Even the shoddiest arsonist should be able to burn down a wooden building if armed by magic," she declared.

"Only because he was interrupted," Tibert shouted, finally giving his retort. "He was revealed to be a mage before he could properly set to work, but he still gave it a good try, setting my fighting hall on fire."

"We can ask the mage himself what happened," Kerra suggested. "If you don't mind relinquishing your little platform."

"Let's hear from the wizard and be done with this," demanded Ironside, the stern master of the market.

Growling, Tibert jumped down and stepped aside while Kerra turned and motioned for Martel to come forward. As the novice approached the pedestal, adjusting the scarf around his face, Tibert glared daggers at him.

"Tell the council what occurred," the Keeper instructed Martel as the latter stepped onto the platform.

Looking around, Martel felt the eyes of all Nine Lords upon him. It was intimidating, to say the least; especially with the empty stone buildings and the surrounding darkness, only disrupted by weak torchlight. He had little doubt that if they desired it, they could easily learn his identity regardless of the mask on his face. He felt angry at Kerra as well, who had claimed he faced no danger from these people. He wondered if she had known from the start that Tibert would demand his death.

Regardless, he had already considered his chances of escape. Nobody here seemed a mage; although Martel had caught a few glimpses of magical shimmer, it had been from objects, not any person. With empowering magic, he imagined he could outrun anyone here – as long as he could find his way back to the entrance and get through the door. Probably best if it did not come to that.

Clearing his throat, Martel began to speak. "I joined the fights at The Broken Crown. It's true that Kerra sent me there, but she gave me no task other than to win my fights. During the last one, someone threw Sindhian powder at me. As the crowd found out about my magic, they went into a frenzy. I raised a wall of fire to get people to move back and give me an escape route, but that was it. The flames weren't even hot enough to hurt anyone, let alone start an actual fire. I swear."

His eyes had wandered while he spoke, trying to ascertain the opinions of the people who apparently held his fate in their hands. Both Lady Pearl and the Comtesse smiled at him, though he could not tell if they did so out of cordiality or because they looked on him like cats watching a mouse in the open. Ironside wore a blank expression; the Paladin yawned. The others did not seem inclined one way or the other either.

"I believe that is all you need to hear, in addition to this," Kerra said, motioning for Martel to step down. He gladly did so, hurrying over to stand next to Wolfram. "During the Golden Harvest, Tibert attacked my residence with his dogs, throwing torches. Now unlike him, I am not so easily spooked, and nothing happened. But I would say he has more than had his opportunity for retribution, and it is frankly ridiculous that he forces us all to gather like this, simply to make his complaints."

"Copper bitch," Tibert sneered, but he made no other argument.

"I have heard enough," declared the Friar. "While Kerra should not have meddled in the fights at The Broken Crown, our good master of the harbour already had his chance to settle the score. The fact that he failed has nothing to do with us."

"I agree," said Lady Pearl. "It seems a waste to sacrifice this wizard, young and sweet by the sound of his voice, simply to appease a man who gets angry when he puts his socks on the wrong way."

The others laughed and voiced their agreement. Nobody favoured Tibert's demand.

"The council has spoken," proclaimed the Keeper. "No action will be taken."

Martel expected for Tibert to protest, or perhaps simply draw weapons and run straight at him. Yet he did nothing other than turn on his heel and march away. Already, the other groups began to make their departure as well. Nobody had an interest in staying in this place longer than necessary. The council of the Nine Lords had ended; Martel exhaled in relief.

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Kerra's band did not hang around either, but began their journey back. They walked in the same formation as before. Everyone moved in silence, perhaps feeling oppressed by their sinister surroundings; Martel was the exception, feeling too relieved at the outcome of the gathering to stay quiet. "That went well," he remarked to Kerra, who walked by his side. He still felt annoyed at her, but any frustration was eclipsed by his good mood at the moment. "It seems like Tibert didn't know what to do at all. He barely had any arguments." He ignited magelight at the tip of his staff, dispelling the nearest darkness around him.

"I agree, which is why I doubt this was the full extent of his plan," Kerra considered.

He glanced at her. "What do you mean?"

"You've met the man. Does he seem like the sort who goes to court for revenge?"

"But why else would he drag us all out here?" Martel asked.

"Because now he knows where we are and when. In an isolated place, undisturbed, far from my stronghold with only a handful of guards."

The implications hit Martel like an arrow. "You think he's going to attack us?"

"That would be his style. Keep your eyes open. We are not safe until we are back at The Copper Drum."

"But I thought the Pact forbade him from attacking you?"

"There are other ways of getting revenge besides killing someone," Kerra muttered. "Now I suggest you keep your magic ready at a moment's notice."

They continued down the cobbled streets of the dead city. Before, the place had already felt foreboding and ominous. Now, Martel imagined death lurking within every shadow. He gripped his staff tighter, looking at his companions. All four of Kerra's guards walked with tense expressions, apparently having the same thoughts as she did.

Martel wanted to shout. He wanted to grab Kerra by the shoulders and shake her, yelling into her face and ask why she had allowed them to be this vulnerable. Distracted by these thoughts, he only noticed the ambush as it happened.

Chapter 185: It's a Trap

It's a Trap

Several things took place at once. A rope came flying through the air, coiled itself around Kerra's ankle where she did not wear any gold, and dragged her backwards and away from the rest of the group. As soon as any distance had been created, a wall of earth rose straight up to block the entire street, separating Kerra from the others and preventing them from going back.

"Kill them, the boy first!"

Martel stared at where Kerra had stood. As he turned towards the voice, recognising it as Tibert's, he barely noticed the arrow that came flying straight against his face. He did not have time to react, the deadly projectile already whistling through the air. As he looked his fate in the face, the scarf around his neck glowed. The arrow managed to scratch his cheek but nothing more, and it fell to the ground. The shimmer of the cloth faded away – the magic was spent.

Understanding that other arrows were sure to follow, Martel scrambled to take cover. The place of the ambush was well chosen; the houses stood directly next to each other, leaving no alley in between where he might escape. The wall raised behind them had turned the street into a dead end, emphasis on dead. No other choice, Martel jumped through a window to get inside the nearest building, still carrying his staff with its magelight.

A trap within the trap. A warrior waited for him inside, dressed in a dark surcoat and well-armed. All his clothing had golden threads throughout, creating the outline of a knife upon his chest. In his hand, he carried an actual short sword and a shield in the other.

Reacting on instinct, Martel shot out a ray of fire from the palm of his hand. As soon as the flames reached the man, they vanished into air, killed by the gold he wore. With a grin, he quickly advanced on Martel.

Staff in hand, the novice tried to protect himself. With ease, the Night Knife used his shield to smash Martel's weapon aside, leaving an opening. He thrust his sword forward for a killing blow. Desperate, Martel summoned his shield just in time. The blade failed to reach him, stopped by the invisible force of his magic.

It bought him a moment, but nothing more. And he could not hope to defeat this man in actual combat. He thought about what had just happened to Kerra, attacked where she lacked protection. Taking inspiration, Martel extended his hand down towards the warrior's boots and released another stream of fire. This time, he connected. Pouring his magic into the attack, he made sure the heat was more than enough to ignite leather. Screaming, his feet on fire, the man dropped his weapons and ran away.

Catching his breath, Martel threw the sword and shield out of the window, just in case the warrior returned. That accomplished, he looked outside to see one of his companions lying on the ground, filled with arrows. Wolfram, Sigrid, and the last of Kerra's guards were all engaged in battle. Some were Tibert's men, others were Night Knives. Fighting so closely, Martel could not unleash any magic on them without hurting his own people.

But he could do something about the archer, as an arrow flew into Wolfram's shield. From inside the building, he had limited visibility to locate the man, but he looked at the possible angles from where the arrow might have been shot. Focused on that direction, he let his magic flow out to search the area. He sensed the bodies of the combatants out on the street, all of them fiery flashes of heat. Further ahead, twenty paces or so, he sensed another. Looking in the direction, he spotted a shape moving in and out of the shadows.

The archer looked to be another Night Knife, probably also protected by gold, which limited Martel's possibilities. Though he could not hit the man with his ray of fire across such distance anyway, not without risking one of his companions stepping in front of the flames.

But, while the archer might be protected against magic, his weapon would not be. Martel remembered what he had done in the fight against the Broken Blades. The distance made it hard, especially with all the other sources of heat in between, not to mention the noise and dreadful smell of blood in the air. He closed his eyes, letting his magic feel the bowstring, made warm by friction and the fingertips of the archer. It took only a little magic to increase that warmth until it caught on fire.

Martel could not tell the archer's expression upon seeing his weapon made useless, but his reaction became clear as he moved into combat, drawing a short sword.

On the street, Wolfram and Sigrid held their own. The other guard had died, caught by an ambush from a Night Knife emerging from within the building opposite where Martel hid. But Kerra had chosen her remaining companions well. Wolfram seemed impregnable as if he were a mageknight, engaging several enemies at once. As for Sigrid, she dodged constantly out of danger, always gone before a strike could land.

Rocks flew through the air. The very stones of the cobbled street were being raised up and hurled against Kerra's embattled band, though with little success. Either the amount of gold on the battlefield slowed down the rocks to limit the impact, or they caused as much difficulty to the attackers as the defenders.

Martel knew the source of these improvised projectiles. The only other person in the fight who would not wear any gold, as it would only inhibit their magic. Wolfram and Sigrid had no chance at engaging this enemy, probably the most dangerous on the field.

In a morbid twist of fate, the Night Knives engaged in close combat protected Martel's companions; if Wolfram and Sigrid killed their current opponents, it would only make them an easier target for hostile magic afterwards. Gold protected against direct attacks, but as Martel had both seen and shown, a skilled spellcaster could find ways around that.

There was only one thing to do. Martel had to fight the enemy mage.

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Chapter 186: Rematch

Rematch

Still hiding inside the building, his face illuminated by the flickering magelight around his staff, Martel tried to think. The shouts and screams from the street did not help, but he had been in situations like this before, and he knew how to focus. He considered what he might deduce about the enemy mage. He had caught a quick glimpse, and it looked to be a woman, but he could not tell anything else from her appearance. But, judging by the wall she had raised, she had to be an earthmage. Hopefully, this meant she had not been trained as a battlemage at the Lyceum; those with a gift for earth usually did not have a strong skill in fire. In fact, he had only seen her use earth magic, other than animating the rope that had ensnared Kerra, which could mean a limited range of spells.

What else? The opposite of earth was air. He stood a good chance of landing an attack using that element. After air, fire was furthest from earth. That helped him – his fire spells ought to hit too. Water was closest to earth; he would have to be aware of not only attacks using stone or rock, but also any puddles of water or the like that she might draw on.

Next thing to consider – his angle of approach. He could not approach on the street. He would have to move past the fighters to get to the enemy mage, and they would probably just strike him down if he tried. Even if he managed to evade them, the other spellcaster would see him coming.

Martel turned towards the inside of the building where he hid. Nothing but darkness lay within, but he had to find the way. He already wasted valuable time cowering in here. Staff in hand, the magelight showing his path, he walked deeper into the small house.

The other rooms were as empty as the first one. A window let him leave the building, and he found himself on the other side. Now to hurry down this back alley and find a way back onto the street. He extinguished the magelight placed on his staff, plunging his surroundings into darkness. Moving as fast as he dared, one hand on the wall of the buildings to guide him, Martel moved parallel to the street.

He continued until his hand no longer touched stone, informing him of a passage between the houses. Sneaking between them, he reached the edge of the street and peered out. His last two companions remained alive, and Tibert's own men lay slain. But two Night Knives still fought in close quarters, and the mage stood in cover, conserving her spellpower for now. As for Tibert, Martel could not see him.

Martel's heart pounded. Somehow, this struck greater fear in him than the other times he had been in a fight, perhaps because this time he had a choice. He could run away. Willingly entering the fight made him feel more panicked; a little voice in the back of his head whispered to make him hold back, to turn around, to convince him to leave.

A powerful gust of wind flew from Martel's hands as he chose the element most likely to get past the enemy mage's defences. It slammed into her back, sending her sprawling to the ground.

Martel followed up with fire. He could feel himself getting tired, magically speaking, from using shields and air, but he could wield his favourite element with greater ease. However, the intense rays of fire, his usual choice, drained him too much. Instead, he summoned small flames in his hands, throwing them at his enemy.

One of them hit, igniting her clothes. But she simply summoned water straight from the air to extinguish the fire before she got on her feet, taking cover inside the nearest house.

Martel became aware of movement to the side. Turning, he saw Tibert in full sprint across the street, wielding a short sword and a dagger. Wearing gold, he was well protected against magic. Martel shot a bolt of fire against the man's boots, but the flame vanished. Tibert had left no vulnerabilities. He raised his weapons and struck against the wizard, who stepped back into the alley, defending himself with his staff.

With the greater reach of his weapon, Martel continued to retreat. The darkness of the Undercroft threatened to swallow them both, making it hard for either person to see their enemy. Martel fell victim to this before Tibert did. Miscalculating his defence, the novice failed to keep the old legionary at bay. With a vicious sneer, Tibert's dagger passed under his staff to stab Martel in the stomach.

The leather armour took the worst of it, but he felt a sharp sensation of pain as his skin was sliced open. Martel knew, same as he had experienced it when first brawling in the pit, that he faced a superior fighter. And he could not use his magic offensively.

He relied on an old feint instead. Leaving himself open, he summoned his shield, ignoring the strain; besides this, he had enough strength left for another three spells or so before exhaustion would set in.

His enemy vulnerable, Tibert noticed even in the dark and struck. His blade was held back by magic, and Martel retaliated, aiming his staff straight at his enemy's head.

Tibert evaded. Martel had spent another spell for nothing. Once again, he retreated while defending, desperately trying to think of something else.

Finally, it came to him. Taking a step back, he closed his eyes. In front of him, Martel summoned the brightest light he could create. He heard Tibert's surprised outburst and kept his eyes shut. He did not require sight or sound to aim. Instead, he used his magic to feel the heat emanating from his enemy and struck.

His staff smashed into Tibert's temple. The man groaned, staggering to the side under the weight of the blow. Martel did not give him a chance to recover but hit him again in the same place. As his enemy fell to the ground and remained there, knocked out, Martel extinguished his light and opened his eyes. Two spells left.

He knelt down, finding Tibert's weapons to throw them away. Next, he tore the golden jewellery from the fallen man's body, as best he could find, hurling it into the darkness as well. He would not kill a defenceless man in cold blood, but he would take precautions.

Something came flying through the air to hit Martel on the shoulder. A big stone. Looking down the alley in the direction of the street, he saw the shape of the enemy mage illuminated by flickering torchlight.

Chapter 187: Spells in the Dark

Spells in the Dark

Already, the other spellcaster raised a stone from the street and hurled it through the air. Diving to the ground, Martel evaded it. Face to face with the unconscious Tibert, he moved to take cover behind his body. Martel assumed the mage would not risk killing her employer.

The earth shook underneath him. A mound rose into the air, with Martel rolling down one side and Tibert the other, separating them. So much for that plan.

His enemy changed tactics. Rather than the slow moving rocks, she raised her hand. A ray of blue frost shot from her fingertip to strike the mound behind which Martel lay. She slowly approached, finger poised for another attack, aimed at his position. .c(o)m

Retreat. Hide in the dark. Already, the light from the street barely reached him. Jumping to his feet, Martel ran deeper down the alley, hoping to vanish from sight. Another ray of frost shot past him just as he turned the corner. He continued, moving down the back alley that ran parallel to the street. He only stopped once he was certain that he could not be seen in the dark, and he turned around. Closing his eyes, he let his magic sense what lay ahead until he felt the heat of a person moving around the same corner as he had just moments before.

He had the advantage of surprise. The only question was how to attack. She expected ranged magic, more bolts of fire or blasts of wind. Best to do the unexpected. Martel drew his dagger and took a step forward.

A thin, blue line shot out to strike him in the stomach. Despite his clothes, he felt as if the very warmth of life had been sucked out of him. Panicking, his eyes still closed, he summoned the bright light as he had before, using one of his two remaining spells before he went into exhaustion.

The distraction worked. As he stumbled to the side, her next frost attack missed him. He extinguished the light, lacking the spellpower to keep it burning.

How had she known where to strike at him in the dark? He could not believe she had the ability to sense his body heat as he did against her. She was an earthmage, after all.

The answer came to Martel. When he had moved, his foot had touched the ground. She could sense movements through the earth.

Martel threw his dagger down several paces away. Another blue ray came immediately where his weapon had landed.

Before she could recover, Martel lunged at her, igniting his hands with fire to use as a weapon. He grabbed her wrist with one hand, missing the other. He tried to head-butt her, but failed as well. Fear and fury took hold of him in equal measure as the fire surrounding his skin increased in intensity.

In response, ice formed upon her skin to meet his flames as they struggled in a purely physical fight, all tactics and clever spells forgotten in the moment where desperate survival hung in the balance.

A pair of metal knuckles upon a fist came flying to strike the earthmage in the back of her head. She sank to her knees, and Sigrid gave her another blow. Groaning, the female wizard did not resist as Sigrid wrapped a golden chain around her neck.

The brawler looked at Martel as the fire surrounding his hands slowly subsided. "Thanks for being a lighthouse," she grinned. "Led me right to you. Hey, you mind creating some more light?" she asked as his disappearing flames threatened to leave them in the dark. "Would be a shame if we got lost on the thirty paces back to the others."

~

Appearing back on the street, Martel saw the fight had ended. Tibert sat on the ground, conscious again and under guard by Wolfram, who looked injured but standing. Kerra was present as well; she must have found a way around the earthen wall that separated them in the first place.

"Still in one piece," she expressed as she saw Martel appear. "That gladdens my heart." She looked past him to watch Sigrid arrive with the earthmage. "You took her alive. Good."

"It wasn't hard," the brawler claimed. "Our boy here almost had her by himself, but I figured I'd step in and speed things up."

"What will happen to me?" asked the mage.

"You will return to the Night Knives as a witness of what has happened tonight. I expect besides being paid compensation for letting you live, your company will refrain from further attacks upon any in my employ," Kerra demanded. "In return, I will not seek retribution for my dead, given that you suffered more."

Martel looked down the street where the darkness hid the bodies of the slain.

"My captain will find that acceptable, I am sure," the mage declared.

"Can I be included in that surrender?"

Everyone whipped around towards the speaker as he emerged from between buildings, a Night Knife warrior without boots or socks. Blinking, Martel realised it was the man he had fought in the beginning, setting his footwear on fire.

Kerra raised an eyebrow at seeing his bare feet. "Sure. Double the compensation."

The warrior nodded, looking relieved as he joined the earthmage.

Martel was glad that the fighting had ended, but he also felt strange. Moments ago, he had tried to kill this wizard, as she had tried to kill him. Same with the warrior. Now they stood without hostility, as if they had never been enemies. Lastly, he also felt angry at Kerra for letting them walk into this ambush.

"As for you..." The Copper Lady turned her attention on Tibert, who raised his head. "Not a bad plan. Isolate me to ensure the Pact was kept and kill my people for your revenge, including my Copper Mage."

Martel disliked how she phrased that last statement, but he kept quiet. With the emotions of the fight gone, he felt the sting of his wound on his stomach; besides that, he was tired and parched.

"Just get on with it. Slit my throat and be done," the grizzled veteran growled.

Kerra smiled. "I suppose I could get away with killing you down here, where none would know. As long as I killed the other witnesses as well." She glanced at the Night Knife wizard, who shuddered. "The only problem is that none would know. And I want everybody, including the Nine Lords, to be aware of how I bested you."

"Always talk, never action from you," Tibert sneered.

"Here I am, being merciful and even escorting you back to the surface, and this is the gratitude I'm shown." She gave a dramatic sigh. "Very well. I'll do it regardless. Come along. Let's get back to the city."

Tibert got on his feet, and the small band set into motion, continuing down the path back towards The Copper Drum. Incredulous at the thought that after everything, Kerra would simply let Tibert leave, Martel followed along.

Chapter 188: Reminders

Reminders

They finished the remainder of the journey through the Undercroft in silence. Martel felt a host of emotions, which altogether left him disinclined to talk. As the hot-headed emotions of the fight subsided, he still felt an after-shock when considering how close he came to death. If Tibert's ambush had not been intended to kill Kerra, the most likely target would have been the mage who had embarrassed him twice, both at The Broken Crown and at The Copper Drum.

Tibert had gone so far as to hire another wizard. Martel had to thank the Stars that she was an earthmage, suitable for creating a trap underground but less trained in warfare than a battlemage or mageknight would be. Martel knew if he had faced either of those, he would most likely have perished.

His wound ached with every step he took. He would have to take care of it when he got home. He glanced at Wolfram, walking with staggered steps rather than his usual, confident gait. Sigrid brought up the rear, as she did before. Whenever Martel turned to look at her, she had her eyes on Tibert's back.

Martel glanced at the defeated master of the harbour a few times. The man walked staring straight ahead, but the novice could almost feel the anger brewing inside of him, emanating like waves. Was he simply going to be released after this? Undoubtedly, he would return a third time for his revenge, with Martel at the top of the list.

Perhaps he should have killed Tibert when he lay defenceless on the ground. Yet Martel knew he could not do that. Defending himself, sure, even if it meant causing harm to others. But taking another man's life in a cold, calculated gesture – he could not make himself do that. And while it would solve his concern if Kerra killed Tibert on his behalf, Martel was not going to ask that. Both because of that damnable Pact, and because it felt wrong to ask another to commit a misdeed for which he himself lacked the nerve.

~

Finally, after what felt like the longest journey of Martel's life, they reached the locked door that led out of the Undercroft. Kerra unlocked it, and they filed up the narrow staircase. Martel breathed an almost audible sigh of relief, even as his legs felt unbearably tired walking up the steps.

They climbed up the hatch to emerge within The Copper Drum. To Martel's surprise, a few people waited for them, namely two guards and a physician. Kerra motioned for the latter to attend Wolfram, who sat down on a barrel with heavy breaths. "Let's go up. There should be food and something to drink waiting for us. You can be on your way," she told Tibert, who merely snorted in response.

Martel wondered at the time. Judging by their torches burning out and being replaced on the journey, they had travelled for more than an hour in each direction through the Undercroft. He was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to get home, but something to drink and perhaps eat would probably be best.

The small group left the room, leaving Wolfram behind with the physician. Although Tibert remained unbound, Martel noticed that the guards kept to him while they walked. Finally, they reached the large common room. To his surprise, it was nearly empty. Even if the hour was late and dawn not far away, he would have expected at least some drunks hanging around, maybe slumped over the table. But the only people present, other than the staff of the Drum, was a small band of warriors. Some of them looked vaguely familiar, though Martel could not recall from where. Pushing that aside, he focused on the table holding large plates of food and several pitchers of ale. He quickly walked over to help himself.

"What is this?" Tibert growled.

Gorging himself, Martel turned around to see a curious sight. The armed men already in the common room had stood up to approach Kerra and her group. For some reason, it felt tense, even if nobody had drawn any weapons.

"I am giving you an escort home to the harbour," Kerra declared with a smile. "Your own lieutenant and his most trusted men will see to your safety."

"You dare to make a move against me," Tibert all but hissed, staring at the man ostensibly in his own employ.

"You wasted a lot of gold lately, master," replied the lieutenant. "But we can talk about that once we are on our own territory." He gave a nod, and two of his companions seized Tibert. Inclining his head at Kerra, the lieutenant turned to leave the tavern with his retinue and soon to be former master.

Kerra looked at the Night Knife wizard. "Go with them," she commanded. "Bear witness that I left Tibert in the hands of his own people, and nothing happened to him while he set foot in the copper lanes."

The earthmage bowed her head and quickly followed after the others, as did her comrade, still barefoot.

Exhaling deeply, Kerra sat down by the table and emptied a tankard of ale in one draft. "That, as they say, was that."

Martel stared at her from across the table. "You planned for all of this."

"Indeed I did. So did Tibert, except I dare say my plans were better made." She gestured with a finger for Vernon to approach. "You have the mage's payment?" Her lieutenant handed over a purse, which she opened. "As agreed." She counted out five golden crowns and placed them before Martel.

"Why? All the things you have done, from sending me into The Broken Crown to this, what was it all for? You started this whole war," Martel said in disbelief. He did not notice how everyone stared at him, some looking apprehensive at his tone.

"You heard them at the meeting. The Copper Lady of the copper lanes, last to be named. Even that Khivan fop is before me." Kerra drew her dagger and stabbed a cold slice of meat. "Now they will all know that I destroyed Tibert without ever endangering the Pact. If we are to be the copper people, they will learn to fear the bronze knife." Her followers murmured their agreement while Kerra ripped into the meat with her teeth.

~

Martel stumbled more than once on the last leg of his journey home. Kerra had offered him a bed for the night, what little was left of it, but he had class in the morning, and his absence would be conspicuous. Besides, he had no desire to spend one moment longer than necessary beneath the roof of The Copper Drum. He left, though he did take the coins with him. If nothing else, he had earned that money.

The horizon brightened as he made his way through the city. He took the straight route back to the Lyceum, through the harbour; at least he had nothing further to fear in that district.

First bell rang as he trod his weary steps through the gate of the castle. He desired nothing but sleep, but he knew that if he lay down, he would not wake for many hours. Thus, as he dragged himself up the stairs to his room, he only stepped inside to take his key to the apothecary and left again.

Going to the infirmary, a few of the nurses were already awake; knowing him to be an aide to Mistress Rana, they did not question his early presence and simply greeted him.

Once inside the apothecary and alone, Martel removed his robe and his leather armour. It cost him some pains, especially when his undershirt slid up and down across his wound. Fortunately, it did not seem deep. Sitting down on a stool, he cleansed the injury and applied blood salve afterwards. With the most pressing matter handled, he got some skin salve for his bruised shoulder, where the earthmage had hit him with a rock.

Feeling so tired, yet also enjoying the relief of the balm as it eased his pain, he closed his eyes for just a moment.

Noise from the infirmary jolted him awake; a nurse must have dropped something. People would be in the dining hall opposite the infirmary by now, and walking around the hallways. It would raise questions if he returned to his room carrying his leather armour in his arms, so Martel gritted his teeth and put it back on, followed by the robe on top.

He locked the apothecary behind him and walked wearily away. Stepping into the corridor, he wavered. There was one person he wanted to see, but boys were not allowed in the girls' dormitory tower before second bell. He looked into the dining hall and saw her, eating breakfast with her friends.

He could not approach her under those terms, in full view of the entire school; instead, he leaned back against the wall and waited.

Several girls walked past him, giving him odd glances. The route from the boys' tower to the dining hall went along the southern hallway, and they mumbled their guesses to each other why this boy stood in the northern hallway at such an hour.

Martel ignored them, barely paying attention anyway. His eyes threatened to close, and his ears heard little of what happened around him. At length, she appeared from the dining hall, and he pulled himself together. "Eleanor," he spoke with a hoarse voice.

Looking disturbed at the sight of him, she detached from her friends and approached him. "What is it? Why are you here?"

Cautiously, he placed his arms around her in a tight embrace. The scent of lilies reached him. He quickly pulled back again, knowing people would notice and talk behind Eleanor's back.

"Are you - wearing armour underneath your clothes? Martel, what is wrong?"

He shook his head. "Nothing at the moment. I just needed to be reminded of you." He walked away.

Chapter 189: Late Appointments

Late Appointments

Martel had survived plenty of classes with only a few hours of nightly rest. He discovered there was a vast gulf between functioning on little sleep and doing so on no sleep. Every thought moved slowly through his head. When someone spoke to him, he felt like it took ages until he had comprehended their meaning, let alone formulated a coherent response. Nora simply laughed at him, warning him that he was fortunate Mistress Rana did not catch him in such a state.

Master Alastair was less forgiving, at least once he ensured that Martel did not suffer from another case of consumption. To him, lack of sleep was not an acceptable excuse for slacking or doing poorly. "While I'm sure you could pass the examination, you only have a year afterwards to finish

your studies," he chastised Martel. "You need all the practice you can get. An expert weathermage can summon rainclouds within moments, but that requires absolute control over water and air. As someone mainly drawn to fire, do not expect such grasp of water to come easily to you."

"Yes, master," Martel mumbled after a few moments, trying once more to summon an actual cloud between his hands. He failed miserably. Since he had not slept, his spellpower had not replenished itself since the fight, and trying to do any kind of magic more complicated than igniting magelight felt impossible. But he could hardly explain why he had no reserves of magical energy left in him, since that would lead to questions about why he had not slept all night. Trying his best to focus, Martel made another attempt. Same result.

~

As soon as the bell rang, Martel mumbled his goodbyes to Master Alastair and left the Hall of Elements. He knew that if he went to sleep now, he would miss lunch, but it did not matter. Besides the physical exhaustion, being without spellpower made him feel vulnerable and ill at ease. He went straight to his chamber and fell down on his bed, sleeping for two hours until the bell rang again.

As it did, Martel woke with a jolt. He still felt awful; clearly, his body needed more rest. But living nearly a year in the Lyceum had conditioned him to be alert whenever the bell rang, including waking up. And he did have a second lesson with Master Alastair at sixth bell; missing that would be embarrassing, considering his teacher already grumbled about his performance.

He looked at his Khivan clock, which showed a hand pointing at the number two. Only fifth bell. Martel had plenty of time before his next class. Yet try as he might, even though he knew that he needed it, he could not fall back asleep. He tossed and turned, drank all the water in his small pitcher, and kept rearranging his pillow and blanket. Nothing helped.

Eventually, he admitted defeat and got out of bed. Picking up his pitcher, he shuffled out into the hallway and filled it from the tap. Returning to his room while slaking his thirst, he finally had time and enough presence of mind to digest what had happened in the Undercroft. The more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that the whole affair was rotten.

It was the fact that Kerra had Tibert's men waiting to take custody of the man, betraying him. She could only have done that if she had known beforehand that a fight would develop, giving her the chance to take Tibert back to The Copper Drum. That meant she had not only willingly walked into an ambush, but she had lied to Martel by claiming it would not be dangerous for him.

More than that, she had used Martel as bait; after all, Kerra had not been the target of the ambush, given how it had unfolded. Kerra had deliberately dangled the novice in front of Tibert to spring the trap. Stars, maybe she had planned this all the way back when Martel trained her guards on how to fight magic, figuring that Tibert would bring a mage in order to kill a mage.

Tired or not, Martel had enough strength left in him to feel infuriated. The desire for revenge flared up inside of him. He ought to set her precious tavern on fire and watch her burn inside of it.

He enjoyed the thought of that for a while until reason prevailed. If he did anything like that in the copper lanes with its old, wooden houses, countless innocents would be caught in the blaze and die. And his face was well-known in those parts of the city by now; if he used his magic to attack Kerra, witnesses would report him to the Inquisition. Making any move against her would endanger him.

And in the end, however much he delighted in the idea of vengeance, he could not quite stomach the idea of actually going through with it.

But this was the third time now that Kerra had used him as a pawn, lying about her true intentions and luring him into danger with callous disregard for his life. No more. He would never trust the Copper Lady again. And if the chance to get even on his own terms presented itself, he promised himself that he would seize it with both hands.

~

Martel's second class of the day went marginally better, even if he still felt tired. Having skipped dinner, he made sure to stay awake for supper. He would just have an early night, and hopefully by morning, he would feel back to his old self.

He was busy cutting a sausage into pieces when he suddenly remembered Julia. He had told the girl that he would fetch her this night and bring her to Weasel and his gang, providing her with a proper home – better than her current residence in the sewers, anyway.

There was no way around it. He had no method of contacting her. He had to go and find her tonight, even if it meant two hours' journey to the copper lanes and back, after nightfall.

He grumbled a little to himself, feeling tempted to just stay home, but he knew that he could never do that. In the end, as tiresome as walking across the city felt in his current state, if it provided a warm and safe place for a malnourished, freezing girl who currently lived where no human should be forced to dwell, it was a small sacrifice.

Saving the rest of his meal, Martel returned to his chamber and waited. Once darkness had fallen and the moon could be seen rising in the distance, he made his way towards the square of Emperor Lucius. He went to the same corner as he had two nights previously, waiting by the alley where Julia had appeared. An unpleasant wind blew past him on occasion, making him pull his cloak around himself as he sat on the ground.

It was difficult to keep track of time. Last bell had already rung, so he had no external markers to tell him how long he waited other than the slow movement of stars above. It proved irrelevant; Julia never showed.

Chapter 190: Buried Beneath

Buried Beneath

When Martel eventually began to suspect that Julia would not appear, he got up from his uncomfortable seat on the ground and walked down the alley. He summoned a globe of magelight to hover in front of him and began searching for any entrance to the sewers. Unfortunately, he was rather hamstrung by not knowing how they looked. He had never had reason to find one before or take a closer look at his surroundings while walking around Morcaster, nor had his course on water magic dealt with this. After a while, shivering slightly from the cold wind, he gave up.

He did not do so lightly; he had no way of getting in touch with Julia. Abandoning this meeting meant he might never find her again. But he could not spend the entire night until daybreak on a fool's hope. She had not been interested in his offer when he proposed it; he had to take the hint that she did not want his help. At least he had been able to provide her with clothes against the cold and proper food. It would not last for long, but it was better than nothing. Trying to draw some

consolation from that thought, Martel returned to the Lyceum and could finally sink into proper sleep.

~

Waking up, Martel did not feel as fully refreshed as he had somehow expected to be. The experiences and weariness of the Undercroft still marked his body, but he felt himself able to function, at least. His magic also seemed returned to full force; performing a few simple spells did not cause any reaction, and his spellpower appeared to be back. He felt a bit of the same relief as the morning after the feast in the Imperial palace, feeling his magic return after he had exhausted himself to the point of throwing up.

His first class of the day was also an easy one that did not require any use of spells. It would have been better if that were yesterday when Martel really could have used the reprieve, but no such luck.

His sojourn through the Undercroft not only lingered in his body, but also his mind. Last five days, Martel had asked Master Fenrick about that vaunted place without learning much. The novice suspected that perhaps by now, he knew more than his teacher, considering he had actually been there, as he doubted that Master Fenrick had seen its eerie streets as well. Not unless he had some rather surprising business with the Nine Lords. Though, who would have suspected that a novice would ever be invited to such a gathering – perhaps Martel should not be quick to dismiss anything, even if he felt rather safe in his assumptions about Master Fenrick.

But a related question made itself known to Martel. Meeting Julia, as well as her absence last night, made Martel speculate on what else lay below the city. When he had first ventured into the sewers with Mistress Vana, she had not warned them against the Undercroft, but instead the catacombs that also could be found underneath. It gave Martel cause to wonder at the connection between these places, both physically but also in terms of origin – had they come from the same hand? Had the many people presumably buried in the crypt once dwelt in the sunken city?

Master Fenrick made some kind of noise in his throat as he saw the hand raised. "Yes, Martel?"

"Mistress Vana told me about the catacombs beneath the castle, beyond the sewers. Who made them?"

His teacher scratched the beard on his cheek. He might seem annoyed at being asked about something irrelevant to his lesson, but he never refrained from answering. "Difficult to say precisely. If you are wondering if they are the work of outsiders, such as the Archeans who built this castle, I do not believe so. I am reasonably confident that the catacombs were delved by the original people of Morcaster, whose descendants still live in this city. But I cannot think of a more exact answer, as we cannot determine their age. They predate the arrival of the Archeans, as far as I know, which would make them more than five hundred years old."

Martel could not grasp such a long period of time. Having only lived sixteen years, anything above the age of thirty felt old to him. "What happened? Why did they become abandoned?"

"The Archeans. Their funeral ritual was to burn the deceased. Thanks to their influence, burial was no longer practised except in the case of some noble houses."

"Has anybody entered them since then?"

"On occasion, some foolhardy treasure hunter tries." Master Fenrick locked his gaze onto Martel.
"They do not return."

~

Leaving the dining hall after the evening meal, Martel was intercepted by Eleanor in the hallway. As he saw her approach, he briefly considered simply walking along as if he had not noticed her; but the thought bothered him, ignoring her in that way. A moment later, his considerations became moot as she reached him.

"Do you have a moment?"

His gaze strayed, somehow finding it difficult to look straight at her. "Sure."

"What happened yesterday morning?" Her voice carried a tone of concern that reached him even if he avoided seeing the corresponding expression on her face.

"Nothing of importance. I was out in town, later than I should have been. I just felt tired and emotional, that's all." That was close to the truth; close enough that he did not feel bad about deflecting her question. He was not lying to her, not directly.

"I wish you would tell me."

Except she did not wish to know, Martel thought; she had made that clear previously. And he had been wrong to approach her that morning, dragging her back into his affairs. "It is not your business nor your responsibility," he replied, sounding harsher perhaps than he had intended. Nothing further to say in a conversation he could not salvage, Martel turned from Eleanor and walked away.