

## Firebrand 191

### Chapter 191: Searching Blind

#### Searching Blind

Arriving at the workshops for his Solday task, Martel waited with the other novices until Master Jerome appeared and gave them their work for the bell. As the others dispersed, he waited behind to get the artificer's attention. "Master Jerome, I was wondering if you had more tasks for me to do today? If I could earn a silver or two."

"Been a long while since you asked me that. I thought Mistress Rana kept you in her pay?"

"She doesn't pay me. Not yet, anyway."

The bulky man scratched the back of his head. "Not much going on this close to winter," he considered. "I already finished tanning the leather we'll need for the next months. I suppose I could find you something, if you really needed."

"Not desperately," Martel admitted, "but I borrowed some coin from my friend, and I don't want to wait too long before I pay him back."

"That's a good sentiment, at least. All right, do your shift now in the laundry, and you can scrape some parchment and sharpen some quills for me this afternoon."

Martel bowed his head. "Thanks, master."

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In between working his spells in the workshops, one for free and one with pay, Martel still had his daily chore in the apothecary. He was tempted to ask Mistress Rana if he could start being paid – working one bell every day for nearly a year amounted to a lot of free labour, and even if Martel received just a pittance in payment, it would still provide him with a little coin for his most basic needs. But he had told the alchemist that he would work without pay, and given the value of the knowledge she might share, he did not wish to rock the boat. At least, he assumed she would eventually teach him actual alchemy, not just the simple remedies that any apothecary might make.

Martel did have the five golden crowns that Kerra paid him for his assistance in the Undercroft. Martel had never owned a gold coin before, and five of them felt heavy in his hand – even more so as they dampened his ability to sense with his magic. Currently, he had stuffed the money inside a sock lying in the back of his drawer. While that would easily clear his debt to Maximilian, whom he only owed five silver pieces, that money was intended for Shadi. It was the primary, perhaps even the sole reason he had gone with Kerra and suffered that whole ordeal; he would not risk spending some of it and find himself short when giving it to Shadi that she and her father might keep their home.

Besides, Martel had earned a lot of easy coin lately, whether gambling, prize fighting, or actual fighting, and he was worried about developing a habit. Once he got accustomed to earning money in such ways, he might never convince himself to stop. Working for Master Jerome was a slow and monotonous way of making coin, but it was honest labour that would not get him into any trouble; a decisive advantage, considering Martel's latest experiences.

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With his second bell in the workshops completed, having sharpened many a quill and scraped much parchment for ink, Martel received one silver piece from Master Jerome. It would take him another three fivedays at this rate to repay Maximilian, but he did have other afternoons off, so maybe he could squeeze in more work – assuming Master Jerome could find more for him.

He thought about last time, going into the sewers to unclog the pipes. While unpleasant work, it had been easy enough. "How are the waterways of the castle?" Martel asked.

The artificer snorted with hints of laughter. "Working, for the time being. You did well last time."

"If you need me to do it again, I am ready. I imagine other students are less keen about this particular task."

Master Jerome smiled before his expression faded. "No need for it right now, happily. Besides, with the inquisitors sniffing around down there, I wouldn't send any of you that way. I don't want them harassing you."

"The inquisitors are in the sewers? What for?"

"Good hiding place, I reckon. For someone who doesn't want to be found. And with the catacombs nearby, the whole place has a sinister tone to it." The artificer gave him another smile and a wink, returning to his work elsewhere.

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Martel had assumed that Julia did not show the other night because she had no interest in Martel's proposal. It had not occurred to him that she might have been prevented from appearing. He still did not know why the inquisitors pursued her family, but looking at her sorry state, he could not believe she posed any danger to anyone.

Martel did not have to help her, of course. He barely knew her, and he had no responsibility towards her. But he knew, the moment he had seen her ribs poking out through the holes of her ragged clothing, that he could not abandon a child in such straits. He had been given magic, granting him power and privileges, and he would use those to help. Not to mention, if he did not aid Julia, nobody would.

He would have to locate her. If the inquisitors were searching the sewers, it was all the more reason to bring her to safety with Weasel in the copper lanes. Martel could only hope that she had evaded capture so far until he could find her.

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Martel did not have the key that would unlock the grate door into the sewers, so he decided to approach his search from the opposite direction. Leaving the castle, he returned to the square of Emperor Lucius, this time in daylight. He found the alley where Julia had appeared and resumed his search for anything that might look like an entrance to the sewers. He tapped the cobbled stones to feel if any were loose. He pushed crates aside along with debris, in case they hid any openings. He even tried to smell his way, hoping to catch the stench of the sewers.

Nothing worked. Either he was terrible at this, or Julia had appeared from much further away and simply chosen this place out of caution, preventing people from following her back to her hideout. If the latter, it worked.

Martel did not feel ready to admit defeat. He would return to the first place where he had met her, despite the difficulties. No matter how, he would figure out a way to get through the locked door underneath the Lyceum and find the child.

## Chapter 192: The Fellowship of Feathers

### The Fellowship of Feathers

Before Martel began running all over the sewers, which would include somehow getting through the locked grate door, it seemed prudent to make sure Julia had not already been picked up by the inquisitors. He knew that the Inquisition had a building in the temple district, and he assumed any prisoners would be in that place. It seemed a simple matter of going there and inquiring, but he figured that a little support from a high-ranking member of society would not hurt.

"No." Maximilian's reply came as resolutely as it was curt.

"But you're a viscount," Martel argued. "They won't refuse you anything."

"That works with the city guard," the mageknight countered. "The Inquisition does not care about my title. Even if they did, the fact that I am also a mage makes it absolutely certain they would never tell me anything."

"Just come with me and give it a try," the novice pleaded. "It can't hurt to ask."

Maximilian slowly broke his bread into pieces while giving Martel an overbearing look. "It most definitely can hurt. You go to the office of the Inquisition and inquire about a prisoner in their charge, and you can be certain they will consider you an accomplice, whatever the crime. Doing so as a mage is doubly foolish, as they will only be waiting for an excuse to slap golden manacles around your wrists. Be sensible for once, Nordmark, and stay out of whatever this is."

"Surely they wouldn't do that just because we ask a simple question."

"My father took me to see a heretic being burned at the stake when I was ten," Maximilian told him. "I remember his words. 'That will happen to you if you give the inquisitors any reason to accuse you. They want nothing more than a highborn culprit to prove that none are above their authority.' Excuse me if I do not like it as hot as you."

With a sigh, Martel abandoned his attempt to persuade his friend. He would have to go at it alone.

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It took Martel a while to reach the temple district. With every step, he felt less and less certain of his decision to go to the office of the Inquisition. At first, he had believed his own words to Maximilian, that it seemed preposterous asking a simple question would cause any trouble for him. As much as the inquisitors had pestered him, Martel had not actually suffered anything other than inconvenience at their hands. For all their authority, they had yet to use any of it on him.

Yet the fear that his fellow mages felt regarding the Inquisition slowly began to infect Martel the more he thought about it. Eleanor's story about the alchemist, executed and strung up for all to see. Now Maximilian's tale of the heretic burned at the stake, a dreadful fate that seemed too cruel to be true. And while he did not know what had happened to Julia's parents, her predicament did not speak well of the inquisitors either.

Perhaps most troubling to Martel, if he drew the scrutiny of these zealots, they could easily find incriminating evidence against him. Just the company he had kept of late, technically being in the employ of one of the Nine Lords, or participating in illegal prize fighting, all of it could bode ill for him. It might not be acts of maleficus or heresy, but he doubted that the inquisitors were particular as long as they could accuse a mage of breaking the law.

Trying to steel his resolve, Martel continued as the Basilica rose before his eyes at the end of the road.

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It took Martel a while to get directions – several people simply gave him a look and hurried away – but finally he stood before the office of the Inquisition. Compared to the beautiful and almost delicate buildings nearby such as the Basilica, it looked plain and unassuming, built in regular stone and at most a few stories high. It lay almost hidden behind smaller temples and living quarters for the clergy that filled the district.

Seeing the occasional inquisitor or two entering and leaving the small compound almost made Martel turn around and leave. Walking past, though he kept to the other side of the street, he cast a glance through the entrance to see what he assumed was a clerk sitting behind a desk. That made sense; probably the inquisitors themselves did not handle mundane matters such as simple administration.

It also gave him an idea. Martel had no desire to walk in and declare himself a mage, but people had often assumed him to be a clerk or scribe, thanks to his boring, brown robe. Heart pounding, sweat beginning to form on his palms, Martel prepared himself for deception and crossed the street to enter the office of the Inquisition.

Trying to look calm and collected, Martel walked up to the desk and cleared his throat. The clerk, looking at most a few years older, looked up. "Yes? What can I do for you?"

"Hullo, I work for Father – Andrew at the Basilica. He was asked to come here and pray with a prisoner of yours, name of Julia. He sent me to confirm whether she is here already," Martel said.

The clerk pushed some pieces of parchment around and opened a large book on his desk. "Any other names for this one, or designations?"

"Her family name is unknown, or at least they didn't tell me. She's a young girl, I think, like twelve or fourteen years old. You know how it is, they don't tell me much," the novice said with a strained smile, repeating a complaint he had heard on occasion in the taverns of Morcaster.

"Don't I know it," came the reply. "Well, no prisoner by that name or description." He closed the large book.

"You're sure?"

"Of course," the clerk replied, sounding almost indignant. "This ain't the salt mines. We rarely got more than one or two prisoners at a time. I don't know who spoke to you, but we don't have her."

"I guess Father Andrew will be glad he sent me, saved himself an unnecessary trip. Thanks for your help," Martel said and tried to keep himself from running out rather than walk at a normal pace.

"Any time."

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Returning to the Lyceum, Martel knew his next course of action. He needed a way to get through the locked grate door that separated the castle from the sewers, unless he wanted to run around the city trying to find an entrance elsewhere, which might leave him far from where Julia most likely hid. But Martel had an idea for handling that; he would do so tomorrow, feeling too tired for more excursions. Instead, he turned his attention towards the other thing he needed: information.

Entering the library, Martel saw the librarian at his desk and smiled. "I should like a book."

"Consider me surprised. Would any do, or must it be a specific title?"

"I should like one that delves into the waterways of Morcaster. The sewer system and so on," Martel explained.

The librarian's expression, hitherto showing mild annoyance, slowly turned friendly, and when he spoke, it was without any hint of mockery. "You like subterranean engineering?"

"Oh yes, I find it fascinating. I'm really curious how they connected all the districts of Morcaster with the sewer system."

The custodian of the library laughed heartily. "Oh, it only extends to the northern and eastern districts. Those in the south, they have to throw their garbage onto the street and wait for the rain to wash away."

Sadly, that sounded all too likely. "Does the library have a map or some kind of plan over the tunnels?"

The librarian beamed. "It certainly does! Come, I will show you."

## Chapter 193: Service for Hire

### Service for Hire

"Father Andrew, could we delve deeper into the history of Morcaster?" Martel said as soon as he sat down, trying to seize the initiative before the old priest might start on another topic. "I think it might be important for me to understand the city where I live, capital of the Asterian Empire. And I was fascinated by what you told me last fiveday on the beginnings of its rise to glory."

Eyes surrounded by wrinkles beheld the novice for a while. "I suppose we can, though I'm not sure how much more there is to say. The records of the Aquilan Empire mostly deal with Aquila. That was already a large city back when Morcaster was a small fishing town, which they are happy to remind us of."

That sounded a bit like how some people from Morcaster delighted in reminding Martel he came from a small town in Nordmark. "But isn't Morcaster really old? Considering it has the Undercroft."

The priest gave him a sharp look, rather in contrast with his usual slow mannerisms. "How do you know of this place?"

"I think Master Fenrick mentioned it." He did, after Martel had asked about it.

"He should stick to his magic. Regardless, we know nothing about the Undercroft, making it pointless to discuss. It might be older than Aquila, it might not."

"What about the catacombs? Master Fenrick said they existed before the Archeans came."

"I suppose he got that right," Father Andrew grumbled. "The old Asterians buried everyone until the Archeans convinced them to burn the dead. Over the centuries, kings and queens, nobility, and commoners alike were placed in the catacombs, often with lavish gifts."

"What kind of gifts?"

"For ordinary people, probably ordinary items. Tools associated with their trade, combs, or jars of perfume. For the powerful, no doubt wealth in the form of gold or gems, probably weapons, and maybe even artefacts of magical nature."

Martel had no idea. He had only ever experienced cremation as funeral, and his mind boggled at the idea of leaving useful items behind in a tomb, let alone vast riches or something as important as an artefact.

"Don't get any ideas," Father Andrew warned him; perhaps Martel's expression had given him away. "Sol's curse is upon any who would break the peace of the dead. And if that doesn't scare you off, the traps should."

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Martel needed to get through the padlock on the grate door to the sewer. He had no idea how people got through locks, but since thieves existed, he assumed it could be done. Deciding to consult an expert, Martel set out for the copper lanes. He had no doubt that Kerra would know someone skilled with opening what others wanted closed, but both pride and caution prevented him from going to The Copper Drum. He had no desire to become indebted to that woman for any reason or otherwise ask for her assistance. Instead, he steered towards his other friends in low places.

Martel received his usual welcome from Weasel and his gang; the latter were happy to see him, chattering away, while the former regarded him with a wary look. "You come empty-handed, which suggests you expect to leave here with something instead," the little chief said.

"To start with, some advice. There is a door with a padlock upon it at the Lyceum. I need to get through it."

"Well, advice won't do that. You need a good pair of hands and some lockpicks," Weasel told him.

"Is that difficult to learn?" Martel asked, making the children laugh.

"We certainly can't teach you. Besides the time it would take, we don't just hand out secrets of the trade like that. Why can't you use your magic on it? Not powerful enough to break a simple lock?" The small boy gave him a challenging look.

"Breaking the lock would make it rather obvious what had happened. I prefer getting in and out without anyone noticing."

"There's a simple solution," Weasel said. "I'll show up, pick the lock for you, and you do whatever you need. When you are done, you just place the padlock back and lock it again."

That did sound simple. "You can do that?"

"Of course. For ten birds."

Martel gave him a look. "You're mad. Ten silvers for what I expect will take you a moment to do?"

"You're paying me for my skill, not my time."

"What about all the herbs I've given you and your people? All the free consultations. Being an apothecary is a skill too, you know."

Weasel smiled. "Then you should have charged us."

"Come on, Weasel, be nice." The plea came from Mouse.

"Yeah, Master Martel has been good to us," Badger joined in. Several other children voiced their agreement as well.

"Fine." Their little chief gave a loud sigh. "Five birds."

"That's still robbery," Martel protested.

"I happen to be well acquainted with the art of robbery, and this is not it," Weasel lectured him. "If you think you can find another lockpick willing to enter the Lyceum and do this job for you, for less than five silvers, you're welcome to do so."

Martel gave the small boy a defeated look. "Fine. But I don't have that coin at present. I'll have to owe you until I can get it."

"You're a mage. Can't you just wave your hand about?"

"No."

Weasel gave another sigh. "Very well. But you better be good for it. I know where you live."

"Speaking of that, are you able to enter the castle without detection? I'm pretty sure if you try through the front gate, it'll set off all kinds of bells."

Weasel waved his hand about. "Don't worry, I know how to get in. Where do we meet?"

"The southern hallway, just to the right of the entrance hall. Assuming you entered the normal way," Martel specified. "That's the entrance to the workshops."

"Fine. We going tonight?"

"No, I need to buy some things first."

"So when?"

"Tomorrow night," Martel replied. He was about to suggest they meet at two past midnight when he realised Weasel probably did not have a Khivan clock in the house. "We need to wait until everyone is asleep. The moon settles early, so let's say once it's past the horizon, we meet up."

Weasel gave him a sly smile. "See you then."

## Chapter 194: Picking and Entering

### Picking and Entering

The next day, in between classes, Martel prepared for his nightly excursion. He felt almost excited at the prospect of going exploring, even if his destination was the least appealing place for such an activity. While he knew that he was probably breaking a rule by entering the sewers – if students were allowed to go there, they probably would not leave it locked – Martel saw no harm. Nobody would know, and he had noble reasons for doing it.

He did require a few aids, as he had told Weasel. For that reason, he went to the nearest market. He bought only two things, as he only needed a little and also lacked the funds for more. His single silver coin from working for Master Jerome was spent. In addition, his debts had more than doubled. Leading an honest life had its challenges.

His supplies bought, Martel returned to the castle with a piece of white chalk and a small jar of perfume.

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Knowing how late he would be up, Martel tried to get some sleep in the late afternoon with mild success. The difficult part came late in the evening when he would normally go to sleep. He figured it was best to stay in his room rather than draw any attention at such a late hour, but that also severely limited what he could do to keep himself awake. Sitting down on his bed would only lead to him lying down and eventually falling asleep, so he either sat on his small chair by the writing desk or else paced around.

He tried to do some magical exercises, but he was wary of expending his spellpower, just in case he needed it tonight. Every time he looked at his Khivan clock, the hands had barely moved. He spent some time examining the map he had made of the sewers, thanks to the surprisingly helpful librarian. Along with the white chalk, which he would use to mark his route, Martel figured he would not have any issue finding his way down there. Light would not be an issue, fortunately.

After a long wait, he finally looked out his window to see that the moon had disappeared behind the horizon. Assuming Weasel could be trusted, it was time to meet up. Martel dug out the cloth mask he had worn for his fights at The Broken Crown, hitherto languishing in the back of his drawer; right next to the sock with five golden crowns, in fact. Martel had not expected he would ever need the mask again, but it was not in his nature to throw out something in perfectly good condition. Using the perfume he had just purchased, he doused the cloth with sweet-scented oil. Lastly, he grabbed the map and chalk, ready to find Julia.

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Martel quietly left his room and walked the empty hallways of the Lyceum until he reached the agreed upon meeting spot. He had no good answer if anyone should come by and ask the reason for his presence, so he stayed just within the workshop while occasionally glancing out at the corridor.

"Some lookout you make," Weasel's voice said next to him, making the novice flinch. Somehow, the boy had snuck up on him. He could have used his ability to sense heat, but Martel had worried that any use of magic might attract attention, the same way he could sometimes see when others cast a spell. Weasel seemed likewise arraigned to avoid attention; his clothes and skin were marked by soot, making him impossible to see in the dark.

"Let's just go before anyone comes," Martel suggested, turning around to lead the way.

They ventured deeper into the workshops, eventually reaching the hatch that led down to the waterways.

As Martel opened it, revealing the first inkling of the smell that awaited, Weasel raised an eyebrow. "This is only getting stranger."

Martel descended the small ladder carved into the wall. "Come along. The lock is nearby."



Martel ignited his magelight and they continued down the tunnel until they reached the grate door.

Stepping aside, the novice gestured towards the padlock while keeping his light flowing above them. "All yours."

Weasel dug out a small scrap of leather holding his tools. After choosing his picks, he began tinkering with the lock. "You must be the first to ever break into a sewer. Well, whatever you're looking for, it better pay enough that you can clear your debt to me."

"You'll get your coin, don't worry." Martel hesitated to say the next part, not certain how Weasel would take it. But broaching the subject now would give him time to get accustomed to the thought. "Perhaps even more. You see, I'm hoping to find a young girl who needs a place to stay. She's about the same age as your crew."

The little thief stopped poking his picks and looked up at the novice. "And you figured you'd dump her on my doorstep."

"A doorstep I helped you acquire, let's not forget. Besides, she's been on her own a while. She won't be a burden, she knows how to forage for food and such."

Weasel made some grumbling sound and returned his attention to the padlock. "I suppose we can talk about it. But don't you dare show up with her without the money you owe me."

"I'd never dare." Martel most likely would dare, since he intended to bring Julia straight to the copper lanes once he found her. But he intended to save that argument for when the time came.

An audible click revealed that Weasel's work was done. He removed the now open padlock and placed it in Martel's hands. "I'm out. Have fun dredging the sewers."

Quickly and quietly, the young boy disappeared back towards the hatch, soon gone. On his own, Martel placed the padlock in a corner by the grate door. No sense in hauling that around. He grabbed the cloth mask from his pocket and tied it around his head. The stench of filth disappeared, replaced by the scent of lilies. Lowering his magelight to illuminate the map in his hand, chalk in the other to mark his progress on the tunnel walls, Martel crossed the threshold.

## Chapter 195: Slippery Paths

### Slippery Paths

Martel did not require map or markings for the first leg of the journey. With only one direction to travel in, he continued down the familiar path that led to the pipework of the Lyceum, flowing into the sewers. As he reached that point, he had to make his first decision. Several tunnels branched from here, though the choice seemed easy. He remembered where Julia had appeared from the first time he met her, so he went that way. Still on familiar ground – he could undoubtedly find his way back to the Lyceum from here – he did not use his map or chalk just yet but continued going, happy that his mask protected him from the surrounding stench.

It could not protect him from other dangers, though. As the waters of the sewers occasionally rose during heavy rain, they left the ledges serving as pathways both slimy and slippery. More than once, Martel almost lost his footing. While falling into the water would probably not hurt him, he did not wish to conduct his search drenched in filth. It might ruin his clothes as well, and he doubted the quartermaster would be pleased about having to replace them.

After a while, his next decision arrived, this one more challenging than the last. He had arrived at a crossroads with three other tunnels besides his own, small grate bridges connecting them across the waters.

Martel looked at his map, trying to ascertain the cardinal directions. He believed that he had been walking west and south so far. Assuming that was true, the tunnel to his left should lead towards the market district; he assumed that since Julia had chosen to appear at Emperor Lucius' square, that was the most likely location to find her. His choice made, Martel took his chalk and left a large mark on the nearest wall to show where he had come from, letting him track his way back when the time came.

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On occasion, Martel heard something scurry about ahead of him in the dark. Using his ability to sense the heat, he could always tell that nothing other than rats kept him company; nothing big enough to be a human, not even an underfed girl.

It was difficult to keep track of time, walking underground in surroundings that looked the same regardless of distance, but he began to feel foolish. Judging by his map, he had only traversed a small part of the sewers, but he had seen nothing to indicate where Julia might be. It was clear to him that he could not hope to search all of the underground tunnels before night had ended, even if he could not be sure how long he had left until sunrise. Loath to admit it, Martel started entertaining thoughts that he should abandon his search.

Stubbornness kept him going. Especially the thought of paying Weasel five silver pieces with nothing to show for it. Going as far south as he could, assuming the winding tunnels had not led Martel astray, he decided to turn east towards the bridge district.

The water flowed differently in this part, perhaps because it fed into the river east of the city. Martel was not sure if the two connected; he probably should have paid more attention when Mistress Vana explained the subject some months ago. In his defence, it was difficult to predict that Martel would have need of such knowledge.

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Every now and then, the tunnels had these small side chambers, little more than alcoves, where water flowed down from above to join the main passageways. Soon after noticing the first of these, Martel had not paid them much attention until he realised that if you made your home in the sewers, such a place might be where you would rest your head. He began checking each of these as he passed them, annoyed at himself for only realising this now. It also cost him extra time, as they sometimes lay on the wrong side of the water flowing in the middle of the tunnels, forcing him to find a crossing and go back if he wanted to be thorough.

It paid off. After investigating perhaps dozens of these alcoves, he came across one containing more than just a pipe. On the ledge inside the alcove lay a large piece of cloth. Ragged, damp and dirty, but serviceable as a bed or blanket for someone making their home in this place. A few other items cluttered the place as well, looking like debris; Martel was not tempted to take a closer look.

Clutching to this find, hoping it proved that his search was not in vain, Martel stepped back into the tunnel. "Julia?" he called out. "It's me, Martel. I'm worried about you."

He received no answer except for silence. Accepting this, he continued.

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Walking a while, about ready to turn back and head home, Martel saw a light ahead. He almost shouted in hopes it was Julia when he remembered their first meeting. If she lived down here in the dark, she probably did not carry a torch around; she would not have the tools for one anyway. Dousing his magelight, Martel retreated softly as he saw the glow ahead approach.

His eyes confirmed his fears. A pair of inquisitors headed straight towards him. He could try and hide in the nearest alcove, but if they happen to look into it while passing, they would definitely see him. He could turn and run, but trying to do so in the dark, he would surely slip and fall or probably lose his way. He could light a flame again, but that would just draw their attention and make it easy for them to pursue him.

Martel tried to suppress his rising panic; he knew that his presence would seem suspicious to them, a pair of zealots with distrust of mages in their bones. At the very least, they would drag him away, probably lock him up in the office of the Inquisition for a day or two, causing all sorts of trouble for him at the Lyceum. He tried to keep retreating, hoping to keep enough distance between them and himself to stay out of the ring of light from their torch. Looking at its flickering fire, the solution finally came to him. Reaching out with his magic, he simply extinguished the flame.

"Crud!"

"What did you do?" asked the other inquisitor.

"Nothing! Wind must have blown it out."

"The wind? Underground?"

"Spare me the remarks. Here, hold the torch while I get my flint out."

Step by step, careful not to make any sound, Martel slowly inched away.

"Just get it lighted. We've already searched half the eastern sewers, I'm ready to go home."

"Don't remind me," groaned her partner. "They'll just send us back tomorrow for the other half."

"Waste of time. I told the high inquisitor we ought to start to the north, underneath the Imperial palace, but no, it had to be here."

Martel stopped in his tracks. Perhaps he might glean something useful before he left.

"North, east, it doesn't matter where these sewer rats are. They live here in the dark. As soon as they see us coming with torches, they scatter. We'll never get to interrogate any of them about the maleficar." The sound of flint striking tinder could be heard with little sparks lighting up.

It took Martel a moment to realise, the rats in question were people like Julia, not actual rodents.

"We have to keep trying. Judging by his pattern, last victim from the copper lanes, he'll strike next to the north, east after that, and so on."

The male inquisitor managed to light the torch, and Martel figured he had pushed his luck far enough. Reaching out again, he extinguished the torch a second time and made his retreat.

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Tracing his steps back, Martel considered what he had learned. The maleficar was still active in Morcaster, or at least the inquisitors assumed so. Furthermore, he had left enough victims to establish a pattern. This only made Martel all the more convinced that he had to do something. Whether he might find Julia or the dark wizard first, he could not know; regardless, his course of action remained the same. He would have to return tomorrow night.

## Chapter 196: One Does Not Talk About Sparring Guild

### One Does Not Talk About Sparring Guild

Martel traced his steps back through the sewers until he reached the grate door. He picked up the padlock and placed it onto the door but without clicking it together, leaving it unlocked. With luck, nobody would have reason to come here tomorrow, and the door would still be open for Martel's next trip. This taken care of, he hurried to get all the way back to the castle, up the hatch, and out of the workshops. Removing his cloth mask, he took a few deep breaths; the effect of the perfume had lessened eventually, leaving him with an odd mix of sweet and foul odours in his nose. Continuing towards his chamber, he noticed that the smell seemed to follow him; his robe had suffered from prolonged exposure. As he reached his floor in the dormitory tower, he pulled off most of his clothes and sent them down the hatch for laundry. Returning to his room, he glanced at his clock. It read five, meaning he had spent about three hours underground. It also meant he could hope for two hours of sleep. Forced to take what he could get, Martel went to bed.

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Unlike his last sojourn to the subterranean labyrinth of Morcaster, Martel had chosen the date better this time. As he dragged himself to his first class rather deficient on sleep, he praised his Stars that today was Manday; no need to perform spellwork during Master Fenrick's lesson on the theory of magic. In fact, as long as he avoided visibly yawning, he could get away with paying little attention and letting his sleep-deprived mind rest.

The afternoon allowed Martel to catch up a bit on rest before his practical lesson, the second of the day with Master Fenrick. Luckily, he had not expended his spellpower last night in the sewers, so despite his lack of sleep, he had no problems using magic. He gathered with the other novices in the arena, despite the rain. This particular lesson could be done anywhere, but for some reason, Master Fenrick would not allow them to, say, go to the Hall of Elements or the Chamber of Earth or something like that. If asked, Martel was sure the teacher would say something about a mage had to be ready to cast spells regardless of the weather.

Drizzling rain aside, it was a slightly odd class that at the same time seemed both easy and difficult. The purpose was to train the novices in their spellpower, making them able to cast more and more challenging spells, holding concentration and maintaining effects for longer and longer time. The easy part was that it did not matter which spell they used; the difficult part was that they were expected to keep going until the limits of their strength. At first, Martel had noticed how he had improved, almost from one class to the next. Now, it did not seem to happen anymore.

"Martel, come here." Master Fenrick beckoned for the novice to join him.

Guessing that his teacher had also noticed his lack of further progress, Martel walked over feeling a little downcast.

"I think you may have reached the limits of what can be demanded of you. At least until you learn far more advanced spells than a novice can master."

That was not what Martel had expected to hear, but he made no complaints. "What should I do then?"

"To begin with, you may be dismissed from this class. Your first year is nearly at an end anyways, and you have made faster progress with your spellpower than most novices. Perhaps due to your age."

Martel imagined he had probably had more opportunities to use his magic outside of school than most novices as well. "So I don't have to attend this lesson anymore?"

Master Fenrick shook his head. "No. Use your afternoons on Manday to practice spells for your examination."

"I shall, master."

~

"Max, you don't own a Khivan clock, do you?"

The mageknight looked up briefly from his supper. "Why should I? I already got that damn bell whipping me to go from one class to the next. Besides, one of those monstrosities would take up half my chamber."

"No, they can be – never mind." Martel would just let it be a surprise. He turned his thoughts to another matter. Ever since his duel against the earthmage in the Undercroft, he had thought about how to best defend against magic. As a mage, Martel had great advantages fighting ordinary brigands and thugs, but he wasn't on even footing against another wizard.

Also, the conversation between the inquisitors that he overheard last night made it seem distinctly possible that he might encounter the maleficar in that damp place. While Martel still believed that this fiend could not possess great power, since he let a little girl escape from his clutches, it would not hurt to be prepared for such a fight as well. "Max, are there any places where wizards fight each other, like for training. I know you mageknights do it, but what about elemental mages?"

The mageknight made some mumbling sounds, keeping his eyes on his meal. "I have heard of that, I suppose."

"Do you know any? Can you introduce me? I'd ask myself, but I don't know any acolytes really, and they probably won't take me seriously as a novice. But you know that I'd put up a good fight in a sparring match."

"There are some who meet on Pelday nights. In the Chamber of Earth, a while after last bell," Maximilian muttered.

"That sounds great!" Exactly what Martel needed. "Like a fighting ring or sparring guild?"

"You could call it that."

"Have you been?"

The mageknight cleared his throat. "I have been there one, two... months. Maybe three. Half a year at most."

Martel crossed his arms, suddenly feeling indignant. "And you never told me? You never thought I'd like to be part of this?"

"Look, it is not for novices. Most of the students are acolytes in their second year. I could not show up with a fresh novice learning his first spells, aiming to be a weathermage," Maximilian defended himself.

"That might have been true half a year ago, but you have seen me in fights. You trained me!"

"Yes, to fight against ordinary brawlers - no need to spar against mages, right? And given how much you complained and moaned about not only training, but also having to fight some poor sod without magic, I did not think you would be interested."

Martel kept staring at his friend, feeling betrayed.

"Also, Eleanor did not want you there," Maximilian mumbled. Receiving another look from the novice, he threw his arms up in frustration. "Look, it is an informal thing. You are not supposed to tell people about it or just invite anyone, especially not novices. And you know I have to keep on good terms with Eleanor, given the connection between us."

Martel had forgotten; he could not quite grasp the idea that his friend, same age as himself, already had a marriage union planned. "Pelday, after last bell? I will see you then."

Maximilian grumbled something inaudible in response.

~

Martel spent another evening like yesterday, keeping himself occupied in his room once the last bell had rung. However, he did not feel the need to wait until two or three in the morning; that had only been to ensure nobody saw Weasel in the castle, whose presence could not be explained away. If Martel roamed the hallways, he could always simply claim sleeplessness and taking a walk. At worst, he would be told to return to his room. He only had to avoid being seen in the workshops, where he had no reason to be.

Once his Khivan clock showed midnight, Martel felt ready to depart. With the same supplies as yesterday, he left his room. He did not encounter anyone making his way to the workshops; using heat to sense his surroundings, just very briefly, he did not notice anybody nearby, and he slipped inside.

He hurried to reach the hatch and climbed down. Putting on his scented mask, Martel continued down the tunnel and found that the padlock remained open. Once more, he could remove it and pass through the grate door, ready for whatever he might encounter, whether a lost girl or a dreaded killer.

Chapter 197: Close Encounter of the Cold Kind

Close Encounter of the Cold Kind

Martel had a new strategy for exploring the sewers. Remembering that both hostile wizards and scared homeless people might live down here, he did not light a flame to follow him around permanently. If he met the former, Martel would like to have the element of surprise; with the latter, he did not wish to frighten them away. Instead, he only ignited his light when consulting his map,

ducking into an alcove each time to limit who might see. Should he be unlucky enough to meet inquisitors again, this would also let him avoid detection and slip away.

Otherwise, he travelled in the dark. He kept one hand on the wall to ensure he stayed on the ledge and did not stray near its edge. On occasion, whenever reaching a new tunnel, he reached out with his magic to sense any heat. Nothing bigger than a rat met him.

He moved northwards, marking new tunnels as he went along. He assumed after a while that he stood underneath the temple district or perhaps the nobles' quarter, even if all the tunnels below looked the same. It cost him some confusion at times, trying to reconcile a crossing or path with his map; he suspected that he might not always have read it right. But it did not trouble him; he used his chalk marks to find his way back, after all.

When he had walked yet another while, perhaps an hour since he left the Lyceum in total, he reached another place causing him to doubt his navigation. Several tunnels met, with the usual grate bridges connecting them across the waters. As Martel lit his flame to inspect his map, he noticed a doorway on the ledge nearby, which did not have any flow of water beneath. Instead, it led to a solid road beyond.

Scrutinising his map, Martel could not reconcile this. Nothing on the parchment indicated such an entrance next to several other tunnels converging. Perhaps it was simply an entrance to the upper city and therefore not marked on the waterways. Regardless, Martel considered it encouraging. A dry area would be a suitable place for someone to have their hideout. Furthermore, it led north, which was the direction Martel favoured. Extinguishing his light, Martel stepped beyond the doorway. In the dark, he did not notice the wooden planks on the ground that had once boarded this entrance up, nor the strange symbols inscribed on the walls around him.

~

Walking without light, on unknown ground, Martel's progress was slow. Even without the danger of falling into the water, he kept one hand on the wall just to steady himself. After a while, he began to notice the ridges of the stonework. Usually, the walls of the tunnels were perfectly cut by Asterian precision, fitting together perfectly, and feeling smooth if damp to the touch. Now, he felt all sorts of irregularities. Curious, Martel finally risked a small light, just to understand why the stonework had changed.

To his surprise, the uneven surface did not come about from lack of craftsmanship, but the very contrary reason. Figures had been carved into the stone, depicting a scene that might be a hunt of some sort. Delightful, but Martel wondered who would have put such effort into creating ornaments when none would see. Stranger still, he found a series of symbols etched into the walls above the figures. These looked cruder, as if done by a different hand. Martel did not recognise them, even if they seemed familiar. Perhaps he had seen similar at the Lyceum; he knew enough to say they could not be Tyrian runes.

Interesting, but not important. Martel extinguished his light and continued. He had not come much further when another anomaly occurred. The wall, which he still followed with his hand in the dark, disappeared. His hand flailed about, and he had to take a quick step to keep from stumbling.

Fumbling around a bit, he realised there was a kind of alcove, but not as big as those in the other tunnels, back in the sewers. This was not a separate room, but simply a small opening in the wall

about one foot deep. Curiously, it was also about one foot tall; then a layer of stone and another opening above, like shelves in the wall.

What seemed oddest of all, something lay upon these shelves. Elongated and firm, maybe like hardened wood. Though it had a strange shape, thin in the middle and bulging at the edge, like a shillelagh for a child. Unable to restrain his curiosity, and after using his heat sense to ensure he was alone, Martel ignited his magelight.

A grinning skull greeted him. Shocked, Martel almost fell backwards. He did not need to see or feel anything more to understand. The alcoves were primitive tombs, with each shelf holding the bones of someone long dead. This was why the area had not been on his home-made map of the sewers. He was in the catacombs.

Martel quickly killed his light. No need to attract attention. Now to make a hasty retreat. He had no desire to find out if either of Father Andrew's warnings about Sol's curse or the traps were true.

A creaking, scraping sound of eerie movement reached his ears. Standing completely still, Martel stretched out his magic to sense any heat around him. Nothing returned, not even the smallest of rats. Yet he heard the sound again, coming from the same tunnel where he stood. Swallowing, perhaps against his better judgement, Martel ignited a glow of magelight to see.

As the tunnel became illuminated and Martel saw the source of the sounds, he finally understood. The letters scratched into the walls, he remembered where he had seen them before. At his trip to the Stone of Archen, they had been engraved on the entrance to the labyrinth, acting as wards to prevent the escape of a creature most sinister. He realised they served the same purpose here. The catacombs of Morcaster did not require curses or traps; the dead guarded the dead. Straight ahead of Martel stood a skeleton, animated by foul magic.

Acting more on instinct than anything else, Martel hurled a bolt of fire straight at the creature even as its empty sockets turned towards him. His magic, strong enough to ignite fabric or even wood, struck the hollow rib cage and flared out. If a skeleton could still feel, Martel got the impression he had just made this one mad. Sapient or not, the undead creature began to move towards him.

Martel turned and ran.

## Chapter 198: Limping In

### Limping In

For a being without muscles, the undead skeleton moved fast. Running down the tunnel, whenever Martel looked over his shoulder, he found the creature keeping pace. While maintaining his magelight, floating over his head, Martel tried to shoot more bolts of fire behind him as he ran. Unable to take aim using his heat sense, he had to rely on the light, which did not work as well; sprinting in panicked flight probably did not help either. Every bolt missed, accomplishing nothing but making him slow down each time he looked over his shoulder to attack.

Moment after moment, the dreadful creature gained on him.

But Martel did not have to go far. Assuming he was correct about the letters scratched into the walls, the skeleton could not pursue him past a certain point. He had not come far from the entrance; he could make it back.



Glancing behind him while shooting off another bolt, Martel did not watch his step. He stumbled and fell.

The skeleton launched itself forward to close the distance with one leap, landing on the ground with its bony arms outstretched to grab Martel's ankle. Both of them now on the ground, Martel panicked as he felt the impossibly strong grip around his leg. He kicked with the other, but even though he hit the skull of the skeleton, it caused no harm.

Keeping Martel from escaping with one skeletal hand, the undead creature raised the other and swiped across his leg. Sharp as knives, bony fingers tore through Martel's trousers to draw blood, making five gashes.

Pain caused an outburst from Martel, but it also cut through his panic and focused his mind. Raising both hands towards the skeleton, he unleashed a ray of scorching fire, pouring more and more spellpower into the attack.

It did not kill the creature – if one could kill something already dead – but it raised both hands to protect itself against the onslaught of the intense flames. Released from its grasp, Martel scrambled to get on his feet. The pain in his leg momentarily suppressed by his overriding need to flee, he ran as fast as he could.

Behind him, the skeleton came in pursuit. Ahead of him, he began raising a wall of flames.

As he jumped through his self-made obstacle, he felt it singe his hair. Fuelling it with further spellpower, he kept running. He waited several desperate moments before he dared to look behind. Nothing but the curtain of flames met his sight. Whatever sentience ruled the skeleton, it had decided to stay back. With deep breaths, Martel staggered onwards to escape the catacombs.

~

Limping through the sewers, Martel felt about the same as he looked. His leg hurt with every step, and he could feel the dried blood on his wounds twisting around. He had lost his map; it probably fell out of his pocket during the struggle. His chalk was gone as well, though that at least was easily replaceable. And although least of his concerns, he had also lost his cloth mask, and the full stench of the sewers assaulted his nostrils, adding insult to injury.

The fight forced Martel to re-assess some of his considerations. He had assumed the maleficar did not actually possess any powerful magics, considering he could not prevent a small child from running away. But if he was a necromancer, even if he had no other skill in sorcery, a whole army of corpses lay dormant for him to use. Certainly, the novice would be foolish to still think he might contend with the dark wizard haunting Morcaster like a spectre.

Martel considered if this was something he should report. In the end, he decided against it. He had no reason to assume any connection between the maleficar and the undead creature he had encountered. Also, if his assumption about the wards scratched on the walls was correct, the undead could not leave the catacombs. Lastly, any explanation for his presence in that unholy place would be awkward for himself at the very least. Master Fenrick would be furious at his reckless behaviour; the inquisitors would probably consider him a maleficar in training or something like that. The last point alone decided matters.

After a long and slow march through the sewers, Martel reached the grate door. Picking up the padlock, he had another decision to make. Feeling defeated, he placed the lock on the door and

clicked it together, barring his own return. Once again, Martel had gotten himself in over his head, but at least he could recognise this and stop. His journeys underground had brought him nothing but pain; whether Undercroft, sewers, or catacombs, Martel finally understood to stay away.

Reaching the Lyceum did not afford him rest immediately. Knowing the danger of leaving injuries unattended, he made that his first priority. Limping all the way up the tower to his chamber, he only stayed to collect his key to the apothecary and left. Another walk saw him to that place, where he might clean his wounds and apply blood salve to prevent infection and finally a bandage. When he first became aide to Mistress Rana, he had never imagined that the best part would be gaining access to healing supplies.

His clothes proved the next issue. His other robe was already waiting to be cleaned, as smelly as what he currently wore. He could not throw this one to be washed as well, as that would leave him with none to wear tomorrow. So, another slow trot back to the workshops and into the laundry. At least he was familiar with the routine.

His robe dripping wet, but at least smelling more like soap than sewer, Martel yet again marched up the steps of his dormitory tower. Exhausted, he entered his chamber and placed his robe on the dummy reserved for his leather armour so that it might dry. He glanced at his clock. He had been gone four hours or even more; Martel forgot when exactly he had left. It did not matter either; only sleep did.

## Chapter 199: The Shape of Things

### The Shape of Things

Martel hardly felt rested as he woke the next day, even if little sleep was better than none. His leg still hurt, but if he walked slowly, he could disguise his limp. None of the gashes were deep, thankfully, but it would take a few days to heal at least. Although he had not planned for it, he was lucky that today was Solday. While he had his work in the apothecary and the workshops, he would not be required to do any spellcasting, as he had no classes. With much of his spellpower still drained because of his insufficient rest, Martel did not feel like much of a mage.

He would have to make sure that he got proper sleep tonight, so he was ready for the sparring group the following night. While Martel did not currently feel up for something like that, he would not give himself an excuse to skip. Clearly, he needed the practice, and potential assailants could not be expected to delay until he felt up for being ambushed.

He looked at his robe, hanging on the dummy. It was still damp. Martel opened his window and pushed some wind through his chamber, helping the cloth to dry a little. Better than nothing.

Today, Martel did not ask Master Jerome for any extra work. Besides having plans with Shadi this afternoon, he did not feel in much of a state to work long hours. He was just glad that the artificer sent him to the small laboratory to make ingredients for ink, which he could do sitting down some of the time, sparing his leg.

Strangely, he felt a little guilty about his nightly endeavours. Even if he had caused no harm to anything in the workshops, going through the place to access the sewers and afterwards using the laundry to hide his tracks could seem like a betrayal of the trust shown to him by Master Jerome. All in all, Martel was happy to be done with his chore and leave the workshops as soon as he could.

Nora teased him in her usual manner as he pulled up a stool to sit down for his chores in the apothecary. Knowing her good nature and that she meant nothing by it, Martel let it pass, even if he was not in the mood to jest with her.

He could not forget that first sight of the animated skeleton. So far, hearing about necromancy and other dark arts from Master Fenrick had been abstract, intangible. While he had not doubted his teacher, it had not felt real to him. Standing face to face with such a being had seemed like a nightmare appearing before him in the flesh, so to say. Martel had been too exhausted to dream after the ordeal, but he feared restless nights ahead with memories of the dark catacombs intruding on his sleep.

Perhaps he had also had some notion that a creature consisting only of bones would be weak and feeble. Yet Martel's magic, strong enough to injure and drive back even hardened warriors, had barely made the skeleton blink – so to say. Its fingers had been as sharp as the knife Martel used for chopping up roots. Unhappy at the memory, the novice finished his tasks and left the apothecary once the bell had rung, signalling the end of his shift.

~

At least he had something pleasant to look forward to afterwards. He left early, giving him the option of resting at times and breaking up the journey to the Khivan enclave into smaller bits. His wounds did not hinder his movement other than causing some pain, so he took pauses as needed and gritted his teeth the rest of the time.

Pulling his cloak tighter around him, Martel finished the last stretch and reached the watchmaker's workshop. After knocking, he only waited a brief while before Shadi appeared outside, all bundled up.

She gave him a smile in greeting. "Want to go look at the glassblower's work?"

A capital idea, since that cost nothing, and Martel only had the five gold coins on him marked for a specific purpose. "Let's go."

They walked down the street while chatting idly; mostly Shadi, talking about her friends in the quarter and their mischief. Martel had decided against telling her of his exploits in the catacombs last night. It would only upset her to know.

Soon, they reached the workshop where a glass blower and his apprentices worked. One wall was removed, allowing the intense heat of the furnace to seep away, also providing a good vantage point for anyone to view their labours.

Some of the apprentices nodded and smiled at Shadi, apparently on friendly footing, while they studiously ignored Martel.

"I love seeing them at work," she related. "Just their skill and how the most amazing shapes can come from a simple rod of glass."

"It's very impressive," Martel agreed. "A kind of magic of its own."

"Hah, that's a good way of putting it."

"How about your father, is he busy with work?"

Her response came dragged out. "Not right now, but he'll get some soon."

"Definitely. In fact, I got this." Martel gave her a small bundle of cloth.

Shadi unwrapped it to see five golden crowns, and she quickly wrapped them up again. "Martel, I can't accept this!"

"Of course not. It's from Max. He's envious of my little clock and wants one for himself. Is that enough?" he asked, suddenly worried that he had misjudged the price.

She smiled. "It should be. Hah, you should show your clock to more people at your fancy school!"

Martel watched as the glass blower work his material, slowly taking shape. "I will."

"This is good." She exhaled. "I didn't want to say too much, but rent keeps rising across the district. And it's weird."

"What is?"

"Lots of people have been forced to move out, but no other Khivans can afford such high rent, and Asterians don't want to live here. So those houses just stand empty, meaning the landlords lose money. Where's the sense in that?"

Martel could not say, but some of his experiences had shown him what people would do for greed, regardless of who got hurt. Inside the workshop, the glass began to take the shape of a beautiful cup. "I wish I knew."

## Chapter 200: Who Talked About Sparring Guild

### Who Talked About Sparring Guild

Martel's prediction came true. As he slept, his dreams moved through dark tunnels, full of familiar people and strange creatures, where he walked endlessly without ever finding the way out. It felt eerie to wake, his head overtaken by all these thoughts, but he could take comfort feeling magically refreshed with his spellpower restored to him. His leg had also improved; it still hurt a little when he walked, but otherwise did not trouble him.

Even though he had to save some of his spellpower for tonight, Martel put in more of an effort during his first class with Master Alastair, knowing he had something to prove after a lacklustre performance of late. He was still miles away from summoning anything that resembled a rain cloud – his natural affinity for fire made it harder for him to master anything advanced concerning water – but at least he could not be faulted for his effort.

"Martel, there's something I've been meaning to do," Master Alastair informed him as they took a break to let the novice catch his breath.

"What is it, master?"

"I have a friend working in the Imperial administration. He used to be a clerk in my legion, now he has a cushy job pushing paper around," the former battlemage laughed. "He works in the office handling logistics of Imperial assets, first and foremost its mages."

Martel chewed on the unfamiliar words. "Like, where mages are assigned to work?"

His teacher nodded. "Exactly. Now, you will be learning similar spellwork regardless of pursuing weather work on land or at sea, so even after you become an acolyte, there's room for you to change

your mind. But I thought now was a good time for you to meet him and learn about where you most likely would become posted, if you become a weathermage or a seamage or something else entirely."

"Certainly, that sounds great." With everything that had happened in the last month or so, Martel had practically forgotten about his future. It was good that he had Master Alastair to look out for him. And getting a glimpse of where he might spend the next many years of his life, the sort of work he would do, excited him.

His teacher nodded again. "Good. I'll reach out to him and arrange a meeting one of these days."

~

Martel felt a little strange, almost nervous as he watched the hands of his clock. Last bell had rung a little while ago, and he wondered how long to wait before it would be appropriate to make his way to the Chamber of Earth. It struck him as a bit silly to feel these tingles of nervous excitement, given that he had already fought another mage with no holds barred, life and death hanging in the balance. Not to mention all the other scraps he had taken part in.

But his feelings did not stem from any fear of losing. Rather, these were his peers. Similar to him in not only age, but also talents and position. As much as Martel was accustomed to spending his time alone, impressing some of these acolytes might lead to a less lonely year at the Lyceum going forward.

When half an hour had passed since the bell rang, Martel donned his leather armour under his robe and left his room. Other students could still be found around the castle, especially the common room; it would still be an hour or so before most of them went to sleep. But boys were not allowed in the girls' dormitory tower after last bell, not even just passing through, so Martel had to take the slightly longer route down the southern corridor, across the dining hall, and past the Hall of Elements.

He met a few servants cleaning up, gathering laundry, or other such chores, and he waited until he was alone in the hallway. At that moment, he quickly opened the door, ignited a small light, and descended the familiar stairs to the Chamber of Earth.

He had not arrived too soon, it appeared. Someone had lit the torches, and a handful of acolytes were present. Martel was glad to recognise Maximilian among them, making him feel less alone.

"Martel!" Henry, the airmage who worked as a clerk in the entrance hall and usually handed him his letters, waved. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"We can guess who told him." Eleanor cast a pointed look at Maximilian, who mumbled something while glancing down.

"We don't allow novices here," said a battlemage in a shrill voice.

"Martel is better than he looks," Maximilian intervened, finding his voice. "Let him have a chance."

"Yeah, before we kick him out, let's see what he's got," assented Henry.

"Very well. Anyone who is here must fight their first night anyway," Eleanor declared. "I will be happy to test his mettle." She took position five paces away from him, standing ready with a short sword and a shield. Martel hoped the blade was blunt, at least.

"Alright." This was one reason why he had come, to prove himself. Though he lacked a weapon. He glanced at the other elemental mages, all of them wielding a staff.

"Here." Henry threw his for Martel to catch.

Armed, Martel arranged himself in a fighting stance, just like in the pit at The Broken Crown.

"Ready when you are."

Despite his words, Eleanor took him by surprise with her swiftness. He barely had time to blink before she stood before him, striking down. Desperately, he parried as best he could with his staff while stepping backwards, still taking hits on his arms.

As Eleanor moved forward to stay in close range, hampering his ability to use his longer reach, Martel decided to use his own abilities. With a quick stomp into the ground, he raised a small mound of dirt right where Eleanor walked to trip her.

Without even looking at the floor, simply from seeing his leg move, Eleanor jumped up as she moved forward, avoiding his obstacle entirely. For all his efforts, he received a blow on his shoulder with enough force to hurt.

Trying something else, Martel raised the wind and pushed it towards her while expending spellpower. In response, Eleanor anchored her feet, turning her body sideways while raising her physical shield to stand firm.

Martel had to be smarter. Just like he wanted, he was fighting another mage who knew all these little tricks. Meanwhile, she continued to hammer blows against him.

Eleanor knew his moves, but maybe not if he combined them. He waited until she had finished an assault and readied the next. Summoning his shield, he bought himself a few moments and the opportunity he needed. As Eleanor attacked, he allowed his shield to receive the blow. Besides giving him the opportunity to retaliate, it also meant Eleanor was off balance from her forward strike. Calling on both air and earth, Martel raised the wind behind him and a small peak of dirt behind her.

Even while raising her physical shield, Eleanor could not anchor herself as before, and she staggered backwards only to stumble over his small obstacle rising from the ground. As she landed on her back, Martel held his staff by her throat, as he had seen the mageknights do when convincing a fallen opponent to yield.

"Well done by the novice!" Henry applauded while Maximilian looked satisfied.

Eleanor got on her feet, staying quiet, while the others assented their acceptance of Martel's presence. Now he knew where he would spend his Pelday evenings in the future.