

Firebrand 201

Chapter 201: Scouting for Talent

Scouting for Talent

Martel left the Chamber of Earth with some fresh bruises and additional respect from the others present. Someone had brought skin salve, which helped with the former, and Martel went to sleep feeling satisfied with the evening. It was nice to feel for once that something had gone the right way. He slept well that night without a repeat of unpleasant dreams; waking up the next morning, he felt ready to face the day.

Shuttling into Father Andrews' classroom, Martel took his usual seat and looked expectantly at the old priest.

"We shall let history rest for now. See if we have time later for more lessons," the teacher said with his croaking voice. "Now, it is fundamental for any educated citizen of the Asterian Empire to have impeccable penmanship and a good grasp of language, including spelling. Get your pen and paper."

Grabbing those items, Martel sat ready.

"Write this down as I tell you." The priest cleared his throat. "Before life flourished in the world, it lay covered in the twilight of Sol and Luna. High in the heavens, the deities met..."

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Walking down the corridor towards the dining hall, Martel passed by the entrance and froze. In the middle of the space stood the earthmage employed by the Night Knives, making cheerful conversation with the clerks. She wore ordinary clothes rather than those of her company, but he recognised her easily. It was strange to behold her in this way; in the Undercroft, he had caught glimpses of her looking ready to murder him, which she had also tried to do, or looking defeated and resigned on the march back. Now, she smiled and tossed her hair.

His first thought was that she had come to finish what she started, and his mind went through all the spells he might use in a fight against her. Then he realised that was foolish. She would not assault a student of the Lyceum right inside its entrance, especially not at lunchtime with everyone gathering in the dining hall next to it. Had she come to rat him out? Or maybe it was a coincidence. She had no idea who he was, and she had come to the Lyceum on some other errand unrelated to him. Regardless, no need to alert her to his presence. Slowly, he began walking backwards, eliciting protests from the people he almost bumped into.

"Martel! There you are!" The earthmage waved and approached him. "I figured I might catch you going to lunch."

As she approached, Martel desperately tried to figure out what to do. He stepped away from the corridor and the constant stream of people, waiting for her at the edge of the entrance hall. "What are you doing here?" he asked with a low voice.

"Relax. I'm here with an offer." She smiled at him. "Talking here at length might draw some looks, however, so I was hoping to invite you for lunch."

"You think I'm going anywhere with you?"

"As I recall from my days here, there's an excellent tavern just on the other side of the square. Open place, lots of people around. Nobody is foolish enough to hurt a student within sight of the Lyceum's walls."

Martel stared at her in disbelief, trying to understand her angle.

"I'll pay you two silvers for a quarter bell of your time. All I ask is that you listen to my proposal while eating a meat pie. After that, you never have to see me again," she explained.

"Who sent you?"

"I am in Morcaster on behalf of the Night Knives Company, acting on their full authority. If you mean who sent me to speak with you, nobody did. I am here because I believe you could be a valuable ally that my captain would reward me for recruiting. Now, could I tempt you with some food?"

Martel weighed his suspicion against his curiosity and desire to earn two silvers without work. "Anything looks fishy, you'll be the first to get a bolt of fire straight in the face."

She laughed. "Come along."

~

A few minutes later, Martel sat in the tavern opposite the school with a meat pie and a cup of ale in front of him. On the other side of the table, the earthmage had the same meal, which she quickly tucked into. "I missed these. I haven't been back to Morcaster since I graduated."

Martel considered her age. Somewhere in her twenties. Not long enough to have served the Empire for twenty years as he himself was contracted to do. If she came from a family rich enough to pay for her tuition, he could not imagine she would work for the Night Knives.

"I'm Flora. I know who you are, of course. Though it took me a while to learn your identity. I could not believe that Kerra had a battlemage in her employ, given how jealously the legions guard them. Imagine my surprise when I found out that the Copper Mage is a student still." She chuckled to herself.

"I'm not a battlemage. What do you want with me?"

"For someone your age, you did very well in the Undercroft. You're exactly the kind of mage that the Night Knives would like to have in our employ."

"I'm contracted for twenty years of service."

She waved her hand around dismissively. "So was I. A payment to the Imperial Treasury and the right people in the administration, and that will not be a problem. You should eat your pie."

That explained how she had been released from Imperial service. Almost reluctantly, Martel picked up his fork and grabbed a bite. Grudgingly, he had to admit it was good. "I don't want to kill people."

"Our first encounter has given you a poor impression of us. We would never accept a contract to fight ordinary people or just any law-abiding citizens, really. Most of our tasks involve guard duty for merchant caravans into rough territory. That's what I've done mostly." She tapped herself on the chest. "An earthmage to help clear the roads and provide a little extra power during dangerous situations is very valuable to the company."

"I'm going to train as a weathermage, probably. Maybe as a seamage. I don't see how I'd be useful."

"The company also provides protection for many ships. Not to mention, by controlling the wind you would cut a journey to the Western Isles in half. Doesn't that sound much more interesting than the Empire dispatching you to some forsaken outpost for only half the pay we offer?"

"I don't know. I don't like the idea of fighting for a livelihood, magic or not."

She regarded him over the edge of her cup as she took a sip. "A pity. Most mages fall victim to specialisation, you see. You saw that with me. I'm excellent with all things related to earth, but I was never trained in combat. You seem naturally talented, as to be expected from someone gifted in fire."

Martel's heart began beating faster, but he tried to look calm. "I'm not. I mostly use air and water."

She laughed a little. "Someone your age, throwing one bolt of fire after the other? Let's not lie to each other. Don't worry, I have no interest in revealing your secret. The legions would grab you up to be a battlemage, and you'd never be able to work for us Knives."

Martel frowned. "So, you want me to be a weathermage?"

"I want you to be skilled enough with weather that any ship would welcome you aboard, while having some combat capabilities to make any pirate turn around once you start setting his sails on fire," Flora explained with a smile.

Martel began demolishing his pie. He had no interest in the offer, but that was no reason to waste food. It also gave him a moment to consider his reply. He was not tempted to work for some mercenary band, but he also felt extremely uncomfortable that Flora had guessed about his affinity for fire. And an answer without commitment would probably be best. "I need to think about it. Consider my options."

She gave another smile. It was strange to see her in this easy-going manner, considering how aggressive she had looked shooting rays of frost to kill him. "Of course! I am confident you will realise our offer is best. You should know, we pay our people a share of the payment for every task completed in addition to a salary twice that of the Empire. There are none who can compete with that."

"I'll keep that in mind. Speaking of which, you mentioned two pieces of silver?"

"This first." Flora took out a small strip of parchment with an address written upon it. "Our current base in Morcaster, should you wish to know more." After that, she pulled out the money and placed it in front of him. "The Night Knives are true to their word."

Quietly, Martel scooped the coins up and placed them inside a pocket before finishing his pie.

Chapter 202: Familial Duty

Familial Duty

Although dismissive of Flora's offer, Martel ended up giving it more consideration than he initially thought. Obviously, if he wanted to be a weathermage and return to Engby, he could only do so in the employ of the Empire. Working for these Night Knives meant travelling across the continent or beyond, he surmised.

But if Martel decided to become a seaman, pursuing the dream of seeing distant lands, maybe he should consider doing so for the employer who would pay him the most. Martel had no illusions about their benevolence; if these mercenaries bought his contract, he would have to work off that debt same as the Empire demanded of him. But presumably he would do so faster if he was really better paid, and especially if he received a share of the spoils for each journey. Something appealed to him of having a stake in the outcome of such a voyage beyond simply ensuring his own survival.

The crux of the matter was whether he could deny doing a specific task. If these mercenaries came to him and demanded that he participated in an ambush, just like Flora had done against him, would he be allowed to refuse? Using magic to defend a merchant ship plying its trade was one thing; lying in wait to kill people he had never met was something else entirely.

The next morning at breakfast, Martel turned to his only source of answers at this early hour. "Max, have you ever heard of the Night Knives?"

"You could let me finish my first portion of porridge before badgering me with questions," came the growling reply.

"Hung over, are we?"

Maximilian made some grumbling sounds and carefully ran his spoon through his bowl.

"Good morning, fellows." Henry the air acolyte sat down next to Martel, and his greeting elicited more annoyed noises from Maximilian. "Oh, Martel, a letter came for you yesterday, it's out at my desk. What were you talking about?"

"I was just curious. I heard about this band called the Night Knives. Wondered what others knew about them," Martel explained.

"Never heard of them," Henry admitted, digging into his own meal.

"They are mercenaries," Maximilian barked. "One must explain everything to you lot."

"What else do you know?"

"What more do you need to know?" the mageknight replied, standing up to get a second serving, bowl in hand. "They fight for gold rather than honour. I suppose for commoners, merchants and the like, whose sole comfort is their wealth, that will do. I would not trust them to guard my dirty underwear."

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Martel grabbed the letter from home as he passed through the entrance hall, though classes and chores kept him busy until the afternoon. When he finally had time to himself, back in his room, he opened the envelope. It had come from his mother, and Martel was a little surprised to read it. It had been about a month since he sent his last letter north; scarcely enough time for it to arrive and his mother to send a reply back. Perhaps their letters had crossed each other in the post.

My dearest boy,

I am sorry to put this burden on you, but you have to know. Do you remember I wrote to you about John having a cough? He had one for a long time, and now he has taken a turn for the worse. Master Ogion helped us as best he could at first, but he has been called away far north on duty, and we do not expect his return for months. Certainly not before winter has ended.

Keith took John to see the alchemist in Littleborough, and he gave him a potion that helped, but it cost all our savings. The man said another would be needed to complete the cure, more expensive than the first. He is gathering the herbs for it while we collect the money to pay. We are all trying to help, your sisters contribute everything they can, and even William gave the few coins he had earned shearing wool over the summer. But Keith doesn't have much work come winter, and he could sell his tools, but then he won't be able to work next year.

My clever boy, can you help? I don't know the things you learn in the city, but you told us of your skills and earning money. Father Julius tells me of something called a 'silver letter', a way to send money with the Imperial post. They will guarantee that the coin arrives. We need another thirty silvers at least for the remedy, in addition to what we at home can gather. If that's too much, then anything you can do to help would be good. John is doing better now, thanks to what the alchemist gave him, but his cough has returned. With winter on the way, I am just so worried.

Love,

Mum

Martel thought about his sweet younger brother, quiet and serious even at play, but eager to learn letters and hear stories. He imagined the boy lying in the bed that the children shared, pale and sweating from fever. He tried to hold on to what his mother had written, that John had improved and was not exactly at death's door, but the unpleasant imagery of his dear brother wasting away intruded itself nonetheless.

Martel opened the drawer in his desk and surveyed his wealth. Two silver pieces, courtesy of Flora. And he owed nine pieces already.

If only the letter had arrived a few days earlier, back when he still had five golden crowns in a sock. Could he ask Shadi for the money back? If she found out why he needed it, she probably would not object, even if it would be awkward to explain that Martel had commissioned the watch, and not Max as he had pretended.

Maybe he could ask her for some of it back, if he needed it. But Martel was a mage with valuable and rare skills. A year ago, thirty eagles would have been an exorbitant sum. Now, he had earned that amount several times over, once in a single night. While that had been a unique event, Martel figured there were ways he could earn the money. And he did have other friends he could ask to borrow from.

Yes, no need to panic. Martel had picked up a few things about alchemy from Mistress Rana, and it sounded like the alchemist in Littleborough had given John a potion of fortitude, bolstering his health while working on a specific remedy to cure John's particular ailment. Judging by how long John had coughed before other symptoms appeared, and how his mother described him now, this was not a rapid illness. Martel had time. He would ask his friends to borrow what he could and take the opportunity to do work where he found it, collecting the rest. He would send the full sum, more even. He would save his brother.

Chapter 203: Quandaries as Posed by an Urchin

Quandaries as Posed by an Urchin

Knowing that Maximilian could be prickly in the mornings, Martel waited until lunch the next day. Once the mageknight was busy with his second portion, looking satisfied, the novice broached the

subject. "Max, I know that I already owe you money, and I haven't forgotten. But I received a letter that my brother is sick, and my mum needs money for his medicine. Any chance you can lend me some?"

"That is an intense question, Nordmark. Of course I will help, but it is middle of the month. Bad time to ask." He fumbled around in his pockets. "This is pretty much what I have." He managed to find four silver pieces and roll them onto the table towards Martel. "If you can wait until the first of the month, I can lend you some more. But do not make me ask my father. He is still sore about the gold he paid for those rune-marked arrows."

Martel carefully picked up the coins. It would be a couple of fivedays before next month; he did not intend to take that long. And he definitely saw no reason to involve the count of Marche or anyone else of such status. "This is fine, thank you. I will pay you back when I can!"

Maximilian made a casual gesture, mumbling something before finishing up his meal.

~

Martel's current wealth now sat at six eagles. After using pleading eyes on Master Jerome and spending two hours in the workshops, doing gruelling work by cleaning grimy tools, he had seven. Still some way from his goal, but a decent start. As the artificer had no other work to offer Martel, he left the castle to handle something else entirely. If he had read his lunar charts correctly, tonight was another full moon. After his failed attempt in the copper lanes and disastrous attempt in the catacombs, Martel had no designs on pursuing the maleficar. As much as he disliked admitting it, catching someone like that would require the kind of numbers and persistent effort that the inquisitors could marshal, unlike a novice. But with no other work presenting itself, he had the time to go and warn his little friends of the potential danger lurking this night.

As he entered the house giving roof to Weasel and his band, Martel was met by the small chief himself. "You got my coin?"

"Not yet, but –"

"I should have known," Weasel interjected, following up with a groan. "The one time I do something nice, I am punished for it. I expected better from a wizard. Didn't I tell you only to come around if you had the money?"

Martel could not remember if that were the case, but regardless, he had a good reason. "My brother is sick. I have to get the money for his medicine first. I'll pay you what I owe as soon as I can."

The little chief eyed him suspiciously. "If this is some sob story you're conjuring up –"

"It's not," Martel quickly said.

"Well, if you ain't got silver in your pocket, what are you doing here?"

The other children looked at him with expectant faces.

"Tonight is the full moon. I just came to warn you. The killer is still on the loose, and tonight might be when he would strike."

The children's expressions turned frightened, and some of them even ran away from the common room, scurrying up the stairs.

"We can see the moon just as well as you can," Weasel grumbled. "I shouldn't be surprised that madman is still roaming the streets. Looks like inquisitors are no better than city guards at doing their job."

"Not for lack of trying, I guess." While Martel was loath to praise the inquisitors for anything, he had to admit they had put in effort searching the streets. Even below them. "They think he might be hiding in the sewers. Any of you ever go there?"

"Not since we came here," Badger explained. "No sewers in the copper lanes."

"But they make for good hiding places elsewhere, like the market, when you grab something and you're on the run," another child added. "Even if they see where you went, nobody likes to follow you down there. Doesn't agree with their noses." She grinned.

"So, you know where the entrances are?" Martel asked. While he had no plans to return below, he was intrigued how the urchins reached the place. Martel had found some hatches when he was down there, but they had all been impossible for him to open. Either something stood on top of them to block them, or they were locked from above. Probably to keep people from running around in the sewers.

"Just a few. Most of them are closed off, but there's one at the square with the big statue," Mouse related. "I used that a few times."

"Most of the squares have statues," Badger told her in an overbearing voice.

"Never mind. Just beware of the place. It is not safe," Martel cautioned them. Especially not if one stumbled into the catacombs, though he saw no reason to frighten the children further. The threat of the maleficar alone should be enough to keep them topside. No need to give them nightmares of undead abominations with fingers as sharp as razors.

Weasel regarded him with a smile that could be described as contemptuous. "Is that what you did in the sewers? Trudging around filth to find some deranged wizard?"

"That's one way to put it."

"All that trouble and for nothing."

"It was worth a try," Martel argued, feeling defensive that his good intentions were being denigrated. "If I had found him, dealt with him, everyone would sleep more soundly at night."

"Oh yeah?" Weasel gave him a challenging look. "And now that your brother needs help, what is everyone doing for you? What has playing hero gotten you when it truly counts?"

Martel had no good answer to that.

Chapter 204: Silver Friends

Silver Friends

Solday meant Martel returned to the workshops, though he had to work the first bell for free. Taking advantage of Master Jerome's good will and sympathies, he convinced the artificer to let him work another bell, bringing up his acquired fortunes to eight pieces of silver.

Working his daily shift in the apothecary, Martel thought about how much faster it would be if Mistress Rana paid him. She had once given him two silvers per bell he had worked, back when he

laboured to make the cures for consumption. Even if she only paid half that, same as Master Jerome, it would still be a silver piece every day.

Eyeing Nora, Martel wondered if he should broach the subject with her first, before he risked displeasing Mistress Rana. "Nora, I was wondering. What does it pay to be the apprentice of an alchemist?"

"It pays pretty well," she admitted with a wink. "I get paid two eagles for every bell, and I only have to work four bells a day. It may not sound like a lot, but since I get free room and board, it's not a bad deal."

While Martel never spent time with Nora outside the apothecary, they did spend two hours every day in each other's company, and she seemed to like him well enough. Perhaps even so much as to share some of her wealth. "You must be able to save up a nice sum here and there."

She gave a shrug as she continued measuring powder into little vials. "My parents are poor, and they have six other children to feed. I send nearly all my money to them."

Right. Not everyone at the Lyceum came from a wealthy background, as Martel should know. His was not the only family with money trouble. Back to his first idea. "Do you think there's a chance Mistress Rana will begin paying me?"

"Sure, though it depends. She can't take you on as her apprentice. Guild rules forbid an alchemist from having more than one at a time. They don't want too many competitors," she grinned. "She'll probably pay you as a helper at some point, but usually she only accepts acolytes for that. Just the fact she took you on as a novice is unusual, though I guess it helped that you were older."

Well, Martel could not wait until he was an acolyte. He would have to go elsewhere.

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Taking a break from work and concerns about money, Martel left the Lyceum and set a course for the Khivan enclave. At least winter brought one benefit. Campaign season had ended, and the war with Khiva had entered hibernation until spring. Without reports of battles and casualties, tension between Asterians and Khivans in Morcaster had simmered down, and Martel could once again spend time with Shadi regularly. He still struggled with how exactly he felt about her; there had been nobody like her back in Engby, so he did not have much to compare with. But he knew that her company made him happy, and he cherished every source of that elusive feeling.

Martel knocked on the door to the workshop, and when Shadi opened, she pulled back to make room for him to enter. "Come inside and see something impressive," she told him.

Gladly, he stepped inside. He undid his cloak and placed it over the back of a chair before following Shadi to the inner room of the workshop where her father sat at work. "Sure we should disturb?" he mumbled, seeing Master Farhad carefully using his tools on something minuscule.

"It's fine, I told him you were coming. Dad?" she added with a loud voice. "Martel is here."

The watchmaker made some incomprehensible sounds, put his tools down, and turned on his stool to look at the guest. "Boy with magic. How is your clock?"

"It's very good, master. Runs perfectly."

He gave a sly smile. "Almost better than magic, no? Look here." He held out his hand, showing a small, round metal disc. "All made by hand, no magic. Enough of these little things, and I have made the smallest clock. Now, for your friend, I make another." Master Farhad gestured towards his workbench, which held several wooden plates that Martel recognised would serve as the cabinet of the watch, same as his own.

"Very impressive, master. Once others hear of this, they will want one as well," the novice speculated.

"Hope so. Useful that my daughter knows you. You and your wealthy friends."

"Dad, don't embarrass him," Shadi chastised the old man. "Come, let's leave him to his work," she added to Martel. "I could use some air, I haven't been outside all day."

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Once they both were properly attired for the cold weather, they left the workshop and wandered around the neighbourhood. "Not a lot of people outside," Martel remarked as they crossed the square with its little temple and fountain. "When it really gets cold, this place must be deserted."

"Yeah, that's part of it, but also just a lot of people have left. I think half the houses in the district now are empty. A lot left around harvest," Shadi explained. "While it was busy with ships going to Sindhu and such."

"That's a shame. Well, I'm glad you and your father are staying."

She smiled. "Me too. Anyway, what's new with you?"

"Not much. Well, I did get a letter from my mum. My brother is sick, has been for a while. I wish I could go see him, but the journey takes far too long."

"I'm so sorry to hear that." Her voice expressed the same sympathy as her expression. "Is he getting better? Any good apothecaries in the town who can help?"

"They sought an alchemist who is making a remedy," Martel related. "I'm doing extra work to gather some money and help pay for it. My mum said to send it with the post as a silver letter, but I have no idea what that actually is."

"Oh, it's actually quite clever. My dad did that long ago, sending money to relatives in Khiva. Obviously, before the war. I wasn't very old, but I still remember, he took me with him to the post clerk."

"But how does it work? If you put the money in the letter, anyone can feel the coins inside. Won't they just get stolen?"

"Nah, you Asterians are smarter than that." She laughed a little. "You deliver the money to their office here, and you write down the recipient and where they live. Just the note gets sent by the post, and once delivered to your mum, she can hand it in and get the money. Don't worry, it works."

Martel nodded to himself. "Guess I have a silver letter to send."

Chapter 205: Where All Roads Lead

Where All Roads Lead

"Martel, do you have any plans this afternoon?" Master Alastair looked at him as they took a break during the first lesson of the day.

"Just your second class, master," Martel replied while wondering what made his teacher ask.

"Remember I mentioned my friend in the Imperial administration? He has time to meet this afternoon. I figured we could do so in the bell before our class."

It took Martel a moment to remember; a lot had happened lately. Oh yes, Master Alastair's friend who worked with organising where the Empire sent its mages. "Sure, that sounds great. Where do we meet him?"

"Meet me at fifth bell in the entrance hall. We'll go to a tavern, halfway between his work and the school," his teacher explained.

"I'll be there," Martel promised.

With his afternoon spoken for, Martel had little time to work for coin between meetings and classes. He still swung by the workshops, asking Master Jerome, just in case he could help with something in the evening. No stranger to late labour, Martel would gladly work any hours of the day, or night for that matter. With a regrettable tone of voice, the artificer turned Martel down; he simply had no chores left undone. Martel's small hoard of silver would remain the same today. *freeWebnovel.com*

At fifth bell, the novice stood in the entrance hall. He watched the hands on Master Farhad's great clock, signalling the time as surely as the tolling of the bell, ringing across the school.

His teacher joined him moments later. "Let's go."

They walked for half an hour or so, maybe longer, before Master Alastair led them into one of the typical taverns found everywhere in Morcaster, serving food and drink at most hours of the day. His teacher signalled for cups to be brought and approached a table already occupied by a man wearing a red woollen tunic.

"Alastair, you old rascal!"

"Quintus, you bastard!"

The two men clasped each other's hands before Alastair and Martel sat down.

"This is Martel, the novice I told you about."

Quintus gave him a quick look. "Old for a novice, aren't ya?"

"I'm tall for my age."

"Well, I hope this one teaches you anything useful. Ten years ago, I wouldn't have expected him to have the patience for teaching," the old legionary said while nodding at Alastair. He had a few scars, Martel noticed, and although balding, he had a lean look that suggested otherwise good health.

"Alright, we are not here to talk about me. Save your soldier stories for another time," the former battlemage interjected.

"Fine. I hear you're thinking about becoming a weathermage or a seamage?" Quintus asked. As Martel nodded, he continued. "Now, all the contested postings for weathermages are in the southern provinces. You can wait a long time if hoping to be anywhere near the big cities, and forget about Morcaster or Aquila!"

"Actually, I would be happy with a posting in Nordmark," the novice explained.

"That's not going to be a problem. I don't know which regions specifically have need, but plenty of open spots in the province as such. For a good reason," the clerk warned. "All mages in Nordmark are considered part of the military reserve. If those Tyrian bastards make trouble, you could find yourself on the front lines."

Martel remembered his mother's letter and how Master Ogion had been called away. "What about becoming a seamage?"

"We have a lot more ships than we got wizards, so you got more room to manoeuvre there. You probably can't choose your first journeys for a few years, and it also depends on how you specialise exactly," Quintus explained as the tavernkeeper finally arrived with cups and drink to fill them. He took a large sip.

"How so?" Martel followed suit, tasting spiced wine that warmed him.

"Now, windmages mostly stay on land, but you might get a simple route on a river transport or such," the clerk elaborated. "If you're good enough to become a stormmage, you're all but guaranteed to be on a warship fighting Khivans. But if you end up in the middle, deemed as seamage, you'll have your pick. Long voyages to Sindhu or the Western Isles, or shorter ones between Morcaster and Aquila, we'll find use for you."

Martel had not considered the possibility that his skill level might decide his opportunities. It seemed strange that being too good would limit your options, though he understood why the Empire demanded anyone with the ability to become a stormmage to serve as such. It would be rather silly if, after hiding his talents to avoid becoming a battlemage, he ended up being sent to war anyway as a stormmage. Or that he took the choice of becoming a weathermage only to find himself fighting Tyrian raiders. As Master Alastair and Quintus began talking to each other, sharing laughter and old memories of soldiering days, Martel considered how every path forward seemed to involve the possibility of war.

Eventually they left the tavern, returning to the Lyceum for supper. As it was Pelday, Martel had to decide if he wanted to join the others for sparring again. His mind concerned with thoughts of John and distracted by the discussion of his future, he did not feel up for it. But perhaps that was all the more reason to go; training to fight when he felt least able could be a valuable experience in itself.

He went to the Chamber of Earth half an hour after last bell. Like before, he found about a dozen acolytes present, some of them already engaged in sparring. Martel stopped to watch Maximilian fight against a watermage in the dim, flickering light of the torches. He felt Eleanor's gaze upon him, and despite the low visibility, he believed she looked at him with disapproval, so he simply chose to ignore her.

"What's the novice doing here?" The question was asked with more than a touch of contempt.

Martel turned to see Jasper, the earthmage who worked in the entrance hall alongside Henry. For reasons Martel did not understand, Jasper seemed to dislike him.

Before he could think of a response, Henry pre-empted him. "Martel, why don't you show Jasper what you are doing here?" suggested the air acolyte. He extended his staff towards Martel, who accepted it.

The novice took position opposite Jasper while the others formed a circle, watching with anticipation. Martel's mind raced trying to think of what would be useful. He faced an earthmage, who obviously had the advantage of terrain, given they stood on loose, easily shaped soil. But he would be weak against air, the element furthest away from earth.

Henry gave the signal for the fight to start. Several big clumps of earth rose up in front of Jasper and hurled through the air against Martel. A good attack, but as it took a few moments, Martel had warning. He evaded some of them and smashed his staff against another, sending the dirt spraying in every direction. Before Jasper could attack again, Martel retaliated. He poured his spellpower into the wind as he pushed it against his opponent.

Overwhelmed, Jasper did not even manage to take a step backwards, as most would do trying to stave off the assault. He toppled like an unstable pillar, slamming the back of his head against the ground. Martel walked over and placed his staff against Jasper's face in a clear sign of domination.

"Looks like the novice stays," Henry jeered. The others agreed.

Chapter 206: Double the Mage

Double the Mage

While his last lesson with Father Andrew had hardly been riveting, practising his penmanship for a full bell, Martel saw the benefits of being able to write well. And he could think of worse ways to spend two hours. Sitting down at his desk, he looked at the old priest.

"Get your parchment and quill," Father Andrew mumbled.

Martel grabbed both, ready to write.

"Today, we'll look at arithmetic."

Martel barely suppressed an audible groan. He spent the next bell writing down numbers, staring at equations while an aged clergyman yelled calculations at him.

While an unpleasant start to the day, Martel had no further classes past noon. An obvious opportunity to work and gather more silver to pay for John's remedy, except none was available to him. Martel had to face another unpleasantness; getting enough silver by working for Master Jerome would take ages. He had three choices. Either find more people to borrow money from, perhaps wait until next month when Maximilian would have more, or seek employment outside the Lyceum.

The latter would be faster, assuming he could find someone in need of his services. He was not going to cheat at gambling, as he had tried once; nor would he engage in prize fighting. Such illegal pursuits had only brought him grief. No doubt he could perform other tasks for Kerra, but Martel trusted her less than rotting fish. That left him with one other idea. He opened the drawer in his desk and pulled out a small note detailing an address.

About an hour later, Martel had crossed the market district to enter the harbour. The address led to a small insula, about three stories tall. Just as he entered, Martel wondered if this was some kind of trap, though he quickly dismissed the idea. If anyone wanted to ambush him, they would not provide an open invitation and just wait around, hoping he would one day accept it.

Even so, he kept his wits about him, ready to summon his shield at the sight of weapons or the sound of an arrow whistling through the air.

Martel had never been inside an insula before, and it took him a little while to understand the numbering system used to distinguish between the apartments. Reaching the one mentioned on the address, Martel knocked on the door. As it was forcefully opened, he stood face to face with a Night Knife warrior. The same one he had fought in the Undercroft.

His sudden appearance made Martel's mind flash back to that moment, diving into a house only to be ambushed by this very man. For a moment, Martel's instinct told him to fight, and he was on the verge of blasting his first spell when the warrior looked over his shoulder.

"Flora!" he shouted into the apartment. "That kid is here!" He turned around altogether and walked back inside.

Stepping inside, Martel saw that the place consisted of two rooms. The outer held ordinary pieces of furniture like a desk, a table, a few chairs, and a large chest. In addition, he also noticed several dummies holding armour and more surcoats of the Night Knives, and finally a weapon rack.

Flora appeared from the inner room, just as her companion disappeared into that place, presumably serving as sleeping quarters. "Martel! Please, come in. You've met Marcus before, of course, but this time under friendlier circumstances." She wore the same dark surcoat as Marcus, with white threads outlining the knife serving as the emblem on her chest.

Martel closed the door behind him. "I almost didn't recognise him with his boots on."

The earthmage laughed. "Whenever I get tired of his grumbling, I ask him if he needs to borrow another pair of socks," Flora said. From the inner room came angry mutterings before the door was shut. "Anyway, please have a seat. Something to drink?" she offered.

"No thanks." As Martel sat down at the table, she did as well. He glanced at the weapon rack, holding a quarterstaff, a bow staff, a few swords with different lengths, and an axe.

In the silence that appeared between them, Flora gave him an appraising look. "I must admit, I did not expect you would come by. You seemed dismissive of my offer when we last spoke, even if you never said as much."

She was perceptive, Martel noticed, much like Kerra. He should probably consider his words carefully. "I like to keep my options open. Even if I'm not ready to wear your colours, I thought we might begin with working together on a less formal basis. If you have any tasks in the city, guarding something or protecting someone, I'd be interested in joining you for those."

She continued to watch him with her calculating expression. "That could be. Now that it's just Marcus and me, until we get reinforcements from Aquila, opportunities are scarce. If I could spread the word to our liaisons that we offer two mages, that would help with what jobs we might accept. Especially as between us, you and I have a good variety of spells at our disposal."

"I'm not afraid to fight, but I don't think I can be involved in ambushes and tasks like that," Martel specified. Self-defence was one thing, but being the instigator of violence violated both his principles and the law.

"I think we all learned our lesson on that," Flora remarked dryly. "Given our rather tenacious position, we are looking at much simpler jobs. Guard duty, collecting debts, providing a neutral force in tense situations, and so on."

"Sounds good to me."

"But if we bring you along, we must be able to rely on you." She leaned forward and gave him another scrutinising look. "No leaving halfway through because things take an unexpected turn, or you have to be back at the Lyceum. On the job, we stick together."

"If I'm in, I'm in."

The earthmage smiled. "I'll let our contacts know of our new offering."

Chapter 207: Present Help

Present Help

"Have you given any thought to what Quintus told you?" Master Alastair asked as his lesson with Martel was coming to an end.

Not really, given how Martel had spent his time since, not to mention being concerned about his brother, but that felt rude to say. "Yes, a lot. I was a little troubled to hear that as a weathermage or seamage, I might still end up in battles."

"It is unfortunate regarding being a weathermage, since any other province besides Nordmark would probably be safe. Though you should not let fears of war discourage you from becoming a seamage if that is your wish."

"I shouldn't?"

Master Alastair shook his head. "I have trained hundreds of novices over the years. I dare say that I have a good grasp of the talents and skills each possess. While you would make a fine seamage, more than capable of those duties, only a few possess the gift to become a stormmage. Nearly as rare as being fire-touched," he said with a smile.

"So you don't think they'll stick me on a warship?" That was a relief, Martel supposed, even if it did not seem like it in the moment.

"I do not. No conjuring of storms for you, my boy, just a strong wind to fill the sails of a merchant vessel." Master Alastair winked. In the distance, the bell rang. "Enough for now. See you at sixth bell."

Leaving the Hall of Elements, Martel felt the smallest tinge of disappointment at the thought that he could not be a stormmage. He knew it was weird to entertain such an emotion concerning this; a year ago, he had never heard of this profession, and until today, he had never even considered the idea of becoming one. Yet being denied this had the effect of making him want it. He contemplated the magic that he could perform with air, and how it would feel to possess ten times that power. Summoning powerful storms to engulf fleets and devastate entire armadas, according to what

Master Gilbert had claimed. Truly wielding the full force of nature's fury with the elements at your disposal.

Putting such thoughts aside, Martel let it go. The idea was enticing, but only a dream. He did not actually want to create tempests and cause death and destruction on such a scale. War sounded awful, and Martel wanted to use his magic to help others. For instance, by being a weathermage. Though the thought of boarding a vessel, with peaceful intentions, and sailing to distant lands still had a hold over him.

That was in the future. In the present, Martel's family needed him. While being fire-touched did not help him with his future plans, it did make him versatile unlike his peers, giving him opportunities such as with the Night Knives. But still things moved too slowly; it could be several fivedays before anything came along. Martel had to swallow his pride and seek help, again.

Martel waited until fifth bell, when he believed she did not have class. As he walked up the stairs of the girls' dormitory tower, catching some inquisitive looks as he did, Martel made his way to Eleanor's room and knocked on the door.

He heard rummaging sounds from within until she opened up; her expression revealed that she had not expected to see him. "Martel, what brings you here?"

Martel decided to just say it plainly. "My little brother is sick. He needs medicine from an alchemist, and my mum can't afford it. I'm trying to collect enough money for it. If you can lend me some, I'll pay you back as soon as I can." He said it all with barely a pause to breathe in between, feeling embarrassed. Things were hardly good between him and Eleanor, but he still held her in high regard, and he trusted her judgement in matters such as this.

Wordlessly, Eleanor turned around and walked back into her room. Martel stood confused; she had not closed the door in his face, so he assumed this was not a rejection.

She quickly returned holding a velvet pouch in her hand. Opening the string, she emptied the contents into his hands, which he hurried to form into a cup. "That is all I have right now. How much do you need? I can go home tomorrow and asked my father for an advance on my stipend."

"Oh no, I don't want you to have more trouble. I'm sure I'll have enough." This was more generous than Martel had expected, and it felt almost shameful to take further advantage of her. "Thank you, truly."

"You are welcome. Let me know when your brother is in improvement. I shall mention him next time I am at prayers."

"I will let you know. Thanks." He turned to walk away, but stopped as Eleanor spoke again.

"I am sorry that I kept you from the sparring matches." She glanced away before her eyes found him again. "I just thought you did not need any further encouragement for fighting."

Martel looked at her with half a smile, containing no mirth. "I probably don't. Thank you, again." He left, trying to awkwardly fit a bunch of coins into his pockets without dropping any as he walked down the corridor.

Back in his own room, Martel collected all his riches and stacked them on his desk. Eleanor had lent him eleven eagles and four pennies, giving him a total of nineteen silver coins and four of the copper kind. With his personal finances growing complicated, he took a scrap of parchment and made two columns. On one side, he wrote the names of Eleanor, Maximilian, and Weasel. On the other, he wrote down the sums that he owed each of them. He was still ten silvers and six coppers short; too much that he could hope to earn from Master Jerome in the near future. But he was more than halfway there, and tomorrow was another day.

Chapter 208: Selling Services

Selling Services

While Master Fenrick spoke about an etching of an obsidian idol from the Western Isles and what that might suggest about the local understanding of magic, Martel thought about the catacombs. Obviously, he could not reveal to a teacher that he had visited that dreaded place. The amount of uncomfortable questions this would unleash – best to keep it to himself.

But Martel thought about the markings on the walls, looking to be of different make than those who built the tombs themselves. They had been made by the Archeans, while the catacombs were older, made by Asterians long ago. That aligned with what he had learned of the history of Morcaster. And he could deduce that the eerie symbols somehow acted as a ward to keep evil at bay.

But he would dearly like to know more. Such as, how powerful was this protection? Would the magic fade over time? Could it be destroyed? Most importantly, could Master Fenrick teach them how to create such magic? While Martel could not reveal that he possessed any knowledge of the catacombs, he did have another avenue of inquiry.

Martel raised his hand. With a barely audible sigh, Master Fenrick looked at him. "Does your question pertain to the idol?"

Martel shook his head.

"Fine. What is it?"

"When you took us to see the Stone of Archen, the walls had these strange markings. You said they created a barrier to keep something trapped. How does that work?"

Master Fenrick narrowed his eyes underneath his heavy spectacles. "That was months ago. What makes you ask?"

Martel shrugged. "A desire for knowledge."

"I remember you opening the door to the hallway against my explicit instructions," his teacher growled.

Martel had no response to that.

"The markings, as you call them, are an early form of the Archean alphabet. Not the one used by educated people today, not as ancient as that of Phoenik, which it seems inspired by, but in between."

"So how does the magic work?" Martel asked, though he feared that he knew the answer, same as always when related to Archen.

"We don't know."

As Martel checked for messages, Henry looked at him with a knowing smile. "Flora, isn't she the earthmage who came to see you the other day? You got your hooks in another," the air acolyte said as he extended a small note. "I never would have guessed that about you. Must be those blue eyes."

With a scowl, Martel grabbed his letter and unfolded it.

Master Martel,

Your presence is requested.

Please pay us a visit today.

Flora

That was a lot faster than Martel had expected. But given his situation, he would make no complaints about it. As Master Fenrick had dismissed him from taking his spellpower class on Manday afternoons, he had plenty of time. With no reason to delay, Martel fetched his cloak and gloves before leaving the castle.

He made his way to the small insula like the other day, soon reaching the unassuming place that served as headquarters for the Night Knives in Morcaster. After he knocked, the door was opened by Marcus, who gave a snort and stood aside to let him enter.

Flora sat at the table, eating. Judging by the other plate, so had Marcus, who returned to finish his meal. Meanwhile, the earthmage looked up to smile at Martel. "You got my message. Good. Best if we can decide this today." She pushed her food aside.

Martel sat down at an empty seat. "What's going on?"

"Having two mages on offer sparked some interest, as I had hoped." Flora smiled again. "Lady Pearl – if you remember her – has a regular customer who has racked up a sizeable debt, which he now refuses to pay. We have been asked to pay him a visit and get him to cough it up."

It took Martel a moment to remember the name. He finally recalled her from the meeting of the Nine Lords. While not eager to become entangled with any of them, the task did not sound complicated, though Martel was a little suspicious. "Why doesn't she send her own people?"

"The man in question, Lord Roy, is a patrician. He lives where the bridge district meets the nobles' quarter, but just a few streets too far to the north. That is the territory of the Comtesse, and there's bad blood between her and Lady Pearl."

"Lady Pearl sending in her own people could escalate into a conflict," Marcus added, pushing his empty plate away. "Debt is not worth that headache. But we're a neutral force."

"Sends a signal that Lady Pearl isn't trying to muscle in outside her territory, she just wants her money," Flora concluded.

"Do you think this Comtesse, her men, could give us trouble?"

The earthmage shook her head. "We'll be in and out between two strokes of the bell. Though the pay is accordingly. Truth be told, Marcus and I could probably handle this, but it seemed a good opportunity to let you have a taste for it, see how we all work together."

Martel turned the rune token in his pocket over, glancing at Marcus. The warrior seemed dour, but not outright hostile. Certainly the task seemed simple enough, even if he did not like the suggestion of conflict between two of the Nine Lords. After Kerra and Tibert, Martel had no further taste for that. "How much?"

"Three eagles if we complete the job. If we must resort to fighting to get it done, pay is doubled. But that's no excuse to start trouble yourself," Flora cautioned him with a wry look. "We only fight if attacked. The faster and easier we get this done, the better."

Martel could agree with that philosophy, and he was in no position to refuse three silvers. "I am in."

Marcus gave a grunt while Flora smiled. "Good. What time can you be here tomorrow? The sooner, the better."

Tomorrow was Soliday, which meant an open afternoon. "Fifth bell?"

"See you then."

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Chapter 209: A Trio of Knives

A Trio of Knives

As agreed, Martel returned to the Night Knives the next day. As he entered the apartment, he found Marcus putting on chain armour and the rest of his equipment. Flora already seemed prepared. She glanced at Martel. "Lose the robe. You look like a scribe. We got a surcoat for you. Some armour too, just in case."

Martel pulled off his brown robe, revealing that he wore his leather tunic underneath.

"Ah, Master Jerome's work?" Flora nodded in acknowledgement. Of course, as a former student at the Lyceum, she would be familiar with the artificer. "Fine, that'll do. I don't suppose you're familiar with wearing a chain shirt?"

Martel shook his head before he put on the surcoat offered by Marcus, showing the shape of a knife as its emblem. Finally, he tied some cloth around his face to serve as a mask, like when he had fought in the pit of The Broken Crown.

"Stick to leather then. Better to have you comfortable and familiar with what you're wearing. We can look into training you with heavier armour another time." Flora took a staff from the weapon rack and threw it into Martel's hands, taking another for herself. "Looks like we're ready to go."

They crossed through a corner of the market to reach the bridge district. Martel had only been here a few times before, but he liked the neighbourhood. A few small insulae mixed with older buildings, family homes, and the same variety could be seen on the street. Ordinary people, peddlers and craftsmen, children running and laughing, the occasional merchant, much the same people as home in Engby.

Martel noticed that people shied away from their path. He had never experienced this before; usually when walking on the street, Martel had to take care to avoid others, or they would constantly bump into him. Apparently, the sight of three people in surcoats, one of them heavily armed, garnered respect.

The trio continued turning north. After a while, the surroundings changed. The houses became bigger and more expensive. No insulae in this part of Morcaster, as they provided cheap housing for the poor. Here, those with little coin worked as servants, living in the homes of their masters, the noble and the wealthy.

They crossed the street, steering towards one of the smaller buildings, though it still rose two stories tall, built from stone rather than timber. "Time to play," Flora told her companions. "I watched the place yesterday. Guy has a couple of guards, nothing we can't handle."

As they walked up the steps to the front door and Flora used the door hammer, an urchin watched them from the corner of an alley before quickly taking off.

They waited a while with Flora using the door hammer a couple of times more. As they began considering looking for a back entrance, the front door was finally opened. A man in clothes suggesting him to be the majordomo stood on the other side. He regarded the trio on the doorstep, wearing surcoats and carrying weapons. "Yes?" Both his expression and tone of voice made it clear he had little respect for the would-be visitors.

"We are here to see your master on behalf of Lady Pearl." Flora returned the man's gaze.

"His lordship is not at home. Please return another day."

As he tried to close the door, Flora extended her staff into the gap. She pushed the door and the majordomo back, stepping inside. "That won't do, I'm afraid. Fetch 'his lordship' now."

The servant tumbled backwards further, landing on the ground. "Help! Brigands!"

A guard appeared from either side of the entrance chamber, swords drawn. Marcus held his weapons ready, but he did not engage them yet. As for Martel, he stood wavering. This suddenly felt a lot more like the invasion of someone's peaceful home than the simple debt collection he had been expecting.

"Don't be foolish," Flora said quickly. "You stand against two mages." A glittering spike of ice appeared in her hand. Taking his cue, Martel ignited flames around his own, even as he held his staff in a defensive stance. "But there's no need for violence. Go fetch your master," she told the majordomo.

The servant scrambled to get on his feet and disappeared up the stairs in the background. Tense moments passed as the guards remained with their weapons drawn. Marcus and Martel mirrored their stance, while Flora seemed more at ease, allowing the spike of ice in her hand to dissolve back into the air.

After what felt like a long while, but probably was less than a minute, the majordomo returned. "His lordship will see you now," he sniffed. "Though he refuses to have all you thugs trampling all over his study."

"I'll be right back, boys," Flora said over her shoulder to her compatriots before she went up the stairs as well.

The two guards clearly remained wary, holding their weapons in position to fight, but as the moments dragged on, neither side could maintain the stance to jump into action. Placing the end of his staff against the floor, Martel allowed the magic around his hands to vanish, though he kept his back towards Marcus and his eyes on the guard in front of him. Behind him, he heard his companion likewise relax a little, the rings of his chain shirt jangling.

After several minutes, Flora appeared at the top of the stairs. As she descended, she gave a little nod to her brothers-in-arms. While one hand still held her staff, the other had a bundle in it. "We got what we came for," she announced.

"Now will you please leave!" The majordomo seemed to have found some of his courage at the prospect of the Night Knives leaving.

Flora ignored him, crossing the entrance chamber to reach the front door. "Let's go."

All three of them left, Marcus retreating backwards as the last until he stood on the doorsteps outside as well. As he turned around, he was greeted by the same sight that had met Flora and Martel.

In front of them, blocking their departure, stood ten armed men. Behind them, the front door was quickly closed and locked.

Chapter 210: The River Pearl

The River Pearl

Ten warriors, wielding an assortment of arms but without emblems on their clothing, stood in a semicircle to prevent the three Night Knives from escaping. Martel noticed that they all wore an earring of red gold, presumably in lieu of an insignia.

Marcus pushed past Martel to stand by Flora's left side, holding his sword and round shield ready. Having observed the mageknights in training, Martel understood where to position himself and stepped forward to guard her right side.

"You are not allowed here, mercenary." The man in front of the other thugs stared at the mage before him.

"We go where we please," Flora told him coldly. "But if you all would step aside, we'll take our leave."

"First you hand over your spoils. All such earnings in this district belong to the Comtesse." Behind him, all his men raised their weapons with various expressions of intimidation or anticipation on their faces.

"This money and other items rightfully belong to our client," the earthmage explained with calm patience, "so I cannot do that. And unless you wish to tangle with two wizards, which I sincerely doubt you have the numbers for, I suggest you make an expedient retreat. Before we tear you all apart."

"Yeah, that's believable," the thug sneered. "Get them!"

The fight began. Martel, having kept the spell ready, summoned his shield as the first thing. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Marcus had stepped forward to make several swings, mostly just

keeping their attackers at bay. Next to him, a ray of frost shot out from Flora's hand to hit the leader straight in the stomach, making him crumble to the ground.

An axeman came swinging with a loud scream at Martel. The assailant stared in disbelief as the edge of his weapon hit the mage on the shoulder, yet barely cut a single thread. Disbelief turned to terror as a ray of fire flew out to hit him in the chest, and he ran away, now screaming for a different reason. Martel's spell was still active, and the flames continued, hitting the man behind him, who promptly reacted the same way.

The close quarters, while useful in keeping the Night Knives from escaping, quickly proved a detriment to their attackers, as they could not use their superior numbers to their advantage. Another ray of frost from Flora felled a second man. He lay groaning on the ground, hindering his comrades from getting close enough to attack the earthmage.

Taking advantage of the moment, Martel released a fire bolt and hit another target. He prepared to shoot again when he saw there was no need. Already, the last attackers standing turned and fled.

"Let's make ourselves scarce," Flora told the others, and the trio hastily left the street.

Once safely back in the bridge district, quite some distance between themselves and the nobles' quarter, the three mercenaries stopped in an alley and caught their breath. "Some unexpected trouble, but you did well," Flora told Martel. "You earned your coin."

"Something wasn't right though," Marcus argued. "We were quick to get in and out, but they waited for us. They knew we were coming."

"How?" Martel asked.

"Couple of ways," Flora considered. "A spy at Lady Pearl's establishment. Or the Comtesse created this situation."

"How so?" Marcus frowned, wiping sweat from his brow.

"Lady Pearl and the Comtesse have always been at odds with each other. She could have found out about Lord Roy's debts, she might even have encouraged him to incur them," Flora contemplated. "She would only have to tell the patrician to refuse payment, knowing that Lady Pearl would respond by sending someone to collect."

"You think that's why Lady Pearl hired us? She knew and wanted to avoid risking her own people?" Marcus suggested.

"Certainly possible. She may have figured that two mages could get the job done where ten henchmen would not, at least with a lot less trouble. Which she would be right about," Flora said with a wry smile.

Sitting down on an overturned barrel, Martel disliked the thought of being embroiled in another fight between two of the Nine Lords, exactly as he had feared when told about this task yesterday. But he was not actually a Night Knife, nor did he have any affiliation with this Lady Pearl. He had earned his money and would otherwise stay out of their feud. "There is one good thing."

Flora looked at him. "What is it?"

"Someone else started trouble, meaning we get double pay."

Marcus slapped him on the shoulder. "The kid gets it!"

They traversed the bridge district until they reached the great main road that ran from the gate in the east towards the Lyceum in the heart of the city. Flora steered them towards a large building made from stone, rising up several stories. It was not an insula, however, but some manner of tavern or public house. Several doors gave access, large and inviting with people entering and leaving. Signs hung above showing the usual symbols for food and drink, including others he could not decipher.

The three companions stepped inside, entering a large common room typical of these places, though different when compared to The Copper Drum or The Golden Goose. First of all, a heavy scent of perfume lay in the air. Even though it was early in the afternoon, a bard played on a harp somewhere. Rather than lots of tables and chairs to make the most space for customers, the place had mainly sofas with low tables, where the patrons and their female company could sit.

It took Martel a little while to grasp where he was. He sometimes walked past harlots on the docks, offering their services to sailors, often in rather aggressive fashion. Whenever the target of their advances, Martel had always just hurried past. He had never imagined a whole establishment full of them.

"My darling Flora, you returned." The extravagantly clad woman with the bald head that Martel recognised as Lady Pearl appeared. Furs, jewellery, and perfume lay heavy around her, the latter even penetrating the other scent already present as she approached them. "With good news, I hope?"

The earthmage hefted the bundle in her hand.

"Please, step inside my study and we can settle accounts." Lady Pearl looked towards one end of the room, which held large barrels of drink and a pyramid of mugs. "Darling, offer our guests some refreshments on the house," she told a waitress stacking the mugs. "Slake their thirst, though anything else, they'll have to pay." The proprietress turned her attention back on the mercenaries. "Welcome to The River Pearl, my good masters. Flora, shall we?"

While Marcus and Martel received their drinks, served with a lascivious smile and wink that made the latter blush, Flora followed Pearl to her chamber. Unlike the common room, heavily decorated in all manners intended to pique the senses, Pearl's study was lacking in ornamentation. It held the basic furniture for conducting business, though all of it made from expensive wood imported from the Western Isles. Flora placed the bundle from the patrician's house on the desk, letting the cloth unfold. Sitting down, Pearl quickly appraised the pieces of jewellery in between the golden coins. "Any trouble?"

"Some. A bunch of bloodgolts tried to keep us from leaving. We denied them the gold, bloodied their noses, and took our leave." Flora smiled at her own play on words.

Lady Pearl smiled, quickly looking up. "Good. I suppose that means I owe you extra payment."

"It does. I did wonder, Lady Pearl, did you expect the bloodgolts would try to stop us?"

"It was a possibility. That's why I hired two mages. Why? Are you afraid of the Comtesse?" The bald woman looked at the earthmage with scrutinising eyes.

"Not if we have another ally equal to her."

Lady Pearl gave a laughter that matched her name. Opening a drawer, she counted out a stack of silver. "Make sure you get a drink before you leave."