

Firebrand 211

Chapter 211: Expanding Circles

Expanding Circles

Pelday morning, Martel counted his wealth. Thanks to his work with the Night Knives, he now stood at twenty-five pieces of silver and four pennies. Close to the wanted sum of thirty, yet still a while away. Waiting for chores to open up with Master Jerome would take many days unless something had changed drastically. Another task with the mercenary band would ostensibly net him the remaining coin, but he had no idea when that would be. Lady Pearl had not given them a new assignment, so that might take several days as well.

Waiting for an undetermined amount of time did not suit Martel. The only alternative was to do as before and borrow the money. Both Maximilian and Eleanor were dry wells, so Martel turned to the last person in Morcaster that he felt comfortable asking.

He waited until the bell had rung and their lesson ended. "Master Alastair," Martel said, but then his courage failed him. Asking his fellow students was one thing; approaching a teacher just felt wrong.

The Master of Elements looked at him, standing inside the hall where he taught. "What is it?"

Adopting the same strategy as with Eleanor, he simply let it all spill in one rapid exclamation. "My brother is sick, and he needs a potion. My mother wrote to me to ask for money. I have almost gathered the whole sum, but I need a little more. Could I borrow some from you?" Martel looked away.

"How much do you need?"

"Four silvers and six coppers."

"Come with me." His teacher left the Hall of Elements, leading Martel westwards down the corridor.

They reached the faculty wing. Master Alastair raised a hand to signal for Martel to wait before he entered his private chamber. Moments later, he returned and placed a golden crown in his student's hand.

"Thank you so much, master!"

"Good health to your brother. Now, I do not make a habit of this, just so we're clear."

"Of course, master. I'll pay you back as soon as I can."

"In your own time. Now, I have another class to teach. See you this afternoon."

In the evening, the acolytes of the Lyceum gathered in the Chamber of Earth, or a handful of them at least. Martel counted close to a score tonight. Many of them were mageknights, but acolytes of every element could be seen as well. Martel stood among them as the only novice, though in the dim light of the torches, nobody paid much heed to the brown colour of his robe. After his performances the last two times, none seemed against his presence. Or if they were, they kept quiet about it. Jasper shot Martel a look that could be interpreted as hostile, but that was the extent of it.

As the mageknights made up nearly half of the group, most of the sparring pairs involved them and an elemental mage. Even if Martel's curiosity had initially been to improve himself against wizards of other elemental gifts than his own, he did not mind going some rounds against a mageknight. It seemed that if he were to continue doing tasks with the Night Knives, he would mostly be faced with ordinary warriors, fighting with steel but no magic.

Training against a mageknight came closest to resembling that while providing an even greater challenge; no matter how skilled a warrior might be without magic, they would never be able to match a fully trained mageknight in terms of speed and strength. Not to mention, possessing magic of their own made them more able to resist spells flung by Martel, forcing him at times to react quickly or change strategy rather than rely on the same old tricks every time.

The mageknight lashed out with his sword, and Martel found himself hard pressed to keep defending himself. It was pointless to retaliate with his staff, as his opponent had a shield and would easily block any strike thanks to his superior speed. Martel had already received a couple of blows from futile attempts, and his elemental magic had not fared better either. Apparently, the mageknight had watched Martel's efforts the other nights, as he dodged the different attempts to trip him up.

Receiving a blow to his stomach, Martel felt the wind leave him. He struggled to maintain his balance and composure while aware that he was moments away from losing the match.

As the blade came sweeping at him, Martel evaded with an inch to spare, but he knew the sword would turn around and come back at him in a moment, and he could not hope to dodge a second time. Instead, he poured his remaining spellpower into a gust of wind. Rather than aim at his opponent's body, which he could protect with his shield, Martel directed the wind against his sword hand instead. Taken by surprise, the mageknight fumbled in vain as his weapon flew out of his grasp.

Looking from his lost sword towards Martel, the mageknight appeared frustrated for a moment before his face turned into a grin. "You got me," he admitted. "That will teach me to improve my grip. Master Reynard has reproached me on that more than once."

The name of the teacher annoyed Martel momentarily, but he let it pass. His opponent was Alain, whom Martel knew from his ill-fated lessons with the Master of War. They had also shared the trip to the Stone of Archen together. Until tonight, they had never really spoken; as a mageknight acolyte, of noble blood, and compatriot of Cheval, Martel had always assumed that Alain would show him nothing but enmity.

But he recalled seeing Alain with his family at the celebration in the Imperial palace, wearing their house insignia of a hawk. Given the small retinue, Alain came from a family of minor importance, who probably could not pick and choose their friends freely. Certainly in this place, Cheval being absent and Martel having proven his worth, Alain had treated him cordially. Perhaps there was hope yet that Martel could expand his circle of friends beyond Maximilian.

Noticing Jasper staring at him with a scowl, it seemed probable that the circle would remain small overall. Ignoring the acolyte, Martel took position opposite Alain again as he contemplated other tricks for winning the next sparring round.

Chapter 212: Silver Letters

Silver Letters

At breakfast, Martel was among the first as usual, allowing him to choose an empty table. As he was nearly done, he was joined by not only one, but two mageknights. Maximilian was no surprise, but he had not expected to see Alain there, even if they did have a good sparring session last night. He wondered what Cheval would say if he saw his companion now sharing Martel's company.

"Nordmark, you work in the apothecary, correct?" Maximilian asked.

"Yes, what of it?"

"You know the balms that we use, do you not?" Alain asked. "After the fights in the chamber," he added with a conspiratorial whisper.

"I got that," Martel assured him. He had made use of it himself for a few bruises, making them ache less and heal faster.

"We usually buy them from that girl, Mistress Rana's apprentice," Maximilian explained. "Any chance you can make it for less than ten silvers?"

"Sure!" The ingredients cost maybe two or three silvers, depending on season. "In fact, if I had any money, I'd just buy the herbs and bring some for next time. Maybe when I can earn some coin." Martel had not considered where the salves had come from. They had just been passed around to whoever needed them. But obviously, someone would have paid for them. Martel felt a little mortified that he had taken advantage of others' generosity without giving a thought towards contributing.

"No need just yet," Maximilian told him. "We have more, so there should be enough for at least a fiveday or two. Just the price made us wonder if you were a better bet than the alchemist girl."

"Definitely." Martel nodded eagerly. "Just let me know when the time comes."

Working his two hours in the apothecary alongside Nora, Martel started to think more about the conversation from earlier. Both blood and skin salves were sold at fourteen pieces of silver, so unless the mageknights had some kind of agreement to buy them cheaper, he did not understand why Nora would charge ten eagles a jar. If she made them on behalf of the acolytes, she should only charge the cost of the ingredients, which would be a few silvers. Glancing at the apprentice next to him as she mixed powders and liquids, the answer came to him. She did it for the same reason that Martel had tried to cheat at gambling and now worked with the Night Knives.

Nora was using her knowledge of alchemy to make money by selling products cheaper than the apothecary. Since she was presumably selling quite a lot to a group of people who wanted to avoid attention, keeping their gatherings restricted to the few, both parties had an interest in protecting the other's secrecy.

That answer led to the next question; why did Nora need money that she would defy Mistress Rana's ban on her helpers setting up their own little shop? Thinking about his conversation with the apprentice the other day, Martel could guess. He was not the only one with family who needed money, most likely.

Giving Nora another glance as she quietly hummed to herself while working, Martel saw no reason to pursue the matter. He had his own reasons for everything he did, and he would dislike anyone questioning him about it. He decided to afford Nora the same respect.

After receiving directions from Henry, Martel set out to find the nearest office of the Imperial post. He had all his wealth in a purse by his belt, one hand constantly clutching it. If anyone tried anything, Martel was ready to burst into flames and roast them.

Luckily, he would not have to go far. One such office lay in the market district, allowing merchants and peddlers to conduct their business as needed by a post, including silver letters.

The building looked like any made for the purposes of Imperial bureaucracy. Perfectly hewn white stones with banners showing the Imperial eagle. In addition, a sign showing parchment with letters declared its purpose. His hand still on his purse, Martel entered.

He was met with a busy scene. A member of the city guard stood just inside the entrance, and several desks with clerks arranged large piles of letters or scribbled in ledgers. Martel could also hear activity from the inner rooms, though he could not see the cause of the noise.

Unsure how to proceed, Martel simply approached the nearest scribe. "I need to send a silver letter."

"Speak to my colleague." Without looking up, the clerk pointed towards the desk on his right.

Walking over there, Martel repeated his request.

With experienced motions, this scribe pulled out a form from a drawer and slapped it on the desk in front of him. Grabbing a quill, he began to write. "Name of the recipient?"

"Hilda of Engby."

"Never heard of that," the clerk remarked with an overbearing voice. "Which province?"

"Nordmark."

"Region or fief or such?"

"Farill."

He dutifully wrote everything down. "I assume this Engby is not so big that a specific address is needed."

"I guess not."

"Alright. What is the sum to be sent?"

Martel opened his purse and emptied out one golden coin and twenty-five made of silver. "Thirty-five eagles."

The sound of metal rushing out onto the desk attracted a few looks. "You must get paid a lot better than me," the clerk remarked with a mutter as he began stacking the money and counting it.

He probably figured that Martel was a scribe like him. And while he could let the remark pass, something made Martel speak. "I'm a mage."

The clerk swallowed as he looked up briefly, quickly resuming his counting of the coins. "Thirty-five pieces of silver, all in order, good master." He quickly wrote down the sum on the letter before turning it around and pushing it towards Martel. Offering his quill, he spoke with a respectful voice, "Your signature at the bottom, good master."

Grabbing the feather pen, Martel signed his name. "Anything else?"

"Just your receipt, good master." He quickly scribbled down the details of the transaction on another scrap of parchment, including names, sums, and today's date. Grabbing a small seal, he stamped both the letter and the receipt with a red ring of ink and finally handed the smaller piece of parchment to Martel.

"Thanks." Taking his receipt, Martel left.

Chapter 213: Fire and Ice

Fire and Ice

Another fiveday passed where little happened beyond Martel's usual routines. He stayed mindful of the debts he owed to no less than four people, but with the silver letter sent to his mother, at least the weight of his brother's medicine had been lifted. It might take a while, but he would gather the money to repay what he owed in due time. Apart from Weasel, Martel did not expect the others to press him for repayment any time soon. So while he stayed alert for any messages from the Night Knives and also checked with Master Jerome, just in case a silver coin could be earned, Martel remained patient.

He had need of this virtue for his classes with Master Alastair, as the spell for creating rainclouds still eluded him. Martel had spent more time in pursuit of this particular magic than any other, so far with little to show for it. Water remained the most difficult element for him to shape, and the addition of a second element proved beyond his abilities. For now.

"Let us rest for the time being," Master Alastair suggested. "You will burn through all your spellpower at this rate, and you do have a second class with me later today. Better to take a break and try again with renewed vigour."

Martel also had his sparring match in the chamber tonight, for which he would need some of his spellpower as well. Although frustrated, the novice conceded to his teacher's suggestion and ceased his spellcasting.

"Remember, this is advanced magic beyond the scope of most novices. Even if you fail to crack it with me, Mistress Vana is very skilled. I have never heard of any of her acolytes failing to graduate the Lyceum."

Martel forgot about that sometimes; that his time with Master Alastair would come to an end soon. As the teacher he had spent the most time with, and who knew his secret, it felt weird to consider he would no longer be taught in the Hall of Elements. "It will be strange to become an acolyte."

"No doubt, but in the end, you will be happy. Exchange that brown robe for one that is blue, no more kitchen duty, and you'll begin to learn real spells, not simple manipulation of the elements we have done so far."

Martel thought about the kind of magic he had learned. True, all of it was simple. Direct application of one element or the other. Except that one time he summoned lightning and it made him vomit

afterwards. It would be nice to master such a spell without losing the contents of his stomach. "I guess you're right, master."

Martel looked forward to Pelday evenings. It had not occurred to him beforehand that thanks to his misadventures in the city, he had become quite adept at using magic in combat. Until lately, his only experience fighting other mages had been in Reynard's classes when he first arrived and barely knew anything. Now, Martel proved himself equal to mageknights and elemental wizards years ahead of him in training. And they respected him for it, even suggesting new matches for him and gathering to watch his performance.

"Look at her. They say that Mistress Vana will recommend she is made a frostmage," Henry whispered to Martel. They both looked towards the middle of the chamber where a young woman in blue robes fought against a mageknight.

"I didn't even know frostmages exist," the novice admitted. f reeweb novel.com

"They are not to be trifled with," the air acolyte impressed on him. "They're usually sent to difficult places like northern Nordmark, keeping the witches of Tyria from sending terrible blizzards to cover all of Aster."

Martel had never heard of that, but it did sound impressive. He observed as the frostmage hurled rays of ice against her opponent at such impressive speed and in such numbers, the mageknight could not defend against them all. Cowering behind his shield, he was still struck on his limbs and eventually sank to his knees, defeated.

"How about it, Martel? You're studying to be a weathermage, think you stand a chance against her?" Henry asked.

Martel wondered at the same thing. Her command of water excelled any of his magic, including his control of fire. Gifted though he might be, he had done little to hone that talent, unlike her, who clearly had spent her years refining her mastery of water magic. But he noticed that she had used nothing else, being extremely specialised.

"Let's find out." Borrowing a staff, Martel approached her and gave a nod.

Understanding his intent, the frostmage acolyte raised her hands in position and waited.

"Henry, give us the signal," Martel requested.

A moment passed. "Go!"

Immediately, the barrage of ice came flying against Martel. That she could sustain this, flinging spells one fight after another, suggested she had honed it until it drew minimally on her spellpower.

Martel knew his shield would not protect against this. Shaped by magic, the ice projectiles could not be hindered by something as feeble as his magical shield. He swung his staff to catch the worst of them, protecting his face, but several still landed. He stood in danger of suffering the same fate as the previous mageknight.

Air was a bad choice here, considering its proximity to water; the frostmage might command that element better than Martel as well. And he did not have enough control over earth to figure a way to retaliate with that.

But he did have the element opposite water. Shooting out a ray of fire, it burned through the ice she flung at him. Knowing she would quickly recover, Martel did not hesitate but leapt forward and slammed his staff straight down on her forehead.

She either lacked the skill or speed to protect herself with her own shield. As Martel's weapon made impact, she went down like a sack of apples.

"Stars damn it, Martel, you take no prisoners," Henry remarked.

A few others complemented the novice as well while the frostmage got on her feet, one hand on her head and a pained expression. Accepting accolades from the others, Martel did not notice Jasper staring at him with an indeterminable expression.

Chapter 214: Getting Baited

Getting Baited

Besides the Pelday evenings, Martel was also making the most of his Malday afternoons. In the alley behind the insula where the Night Knives resided, he sparred with them as well. He did so using his staff rather than offensive magic, as their training had a specific purpose; for the first time in his life, Martel wore chain armour. It lay heavy on him, weighing many pounds, and made his arms feel slow. It also necessitated layers of fabric and leather, unless he wanted the iron rings to gnaw on his skin. Thanks to that, even on the second day of winter, Martel quickly felt hot from the constant exertions.

He could still use magic, of course, to add a bit of empowerment to his movements. While Flora had deemed it best they avoid using visible magic in this place, given the curiosity of the neighbours, nobody could tell if Martel expended some spellpower to make himself fast enough to keep up with Marcus. But as he was not a mageknight, Martel was rather inexperienced using his powers this way, and the effect was limited compared to how much it strained his magic.

Seeing Martel struggle, Marcus did not ease up, but seemed to only go harder on him. Martel suspected that the warrior enjoyed the opportunity to repay the novice for their first encounter, which had left him without boots or socks. At least his weapon was blunt; his smirk cut deeper.

Martel could not say how long they trained on the cold street hemmed in between buildings that blocked the sun. It felt like a whole bell had passed, wearing the heavy chain armour, but he knew he lacked the stamina for that, so probably between a half and a full hour. He had gotten used to his Khivan clock measuring time for him precisely. A pity the device was far too expensive and delicate to carry around.

Finally, Marcus stepped back and lowered his weapons. "This was half of an exercise routine among the Night Knives, but I'll show mercy since it's your first time, and I don't expect much from someone studying books all day."

"I barely ever read," Martel protested. "Most of my time is spent doing practice or work."

"Fine. Next fiveday, we'll do the full routine." The warrior smiled, sheathing his blunt sword.

Martel groaned, wondering if he had just taken easy bait.

They walked up to the apartment in the insula to remove their armours and wash away the worst of the sweat. Already, Martel envisioned the warm baths in the basement of his dormitory tower, especially a delight on cold days.

"Martel, I am visiting Lady Pearl tonight. She might have more work for us. I assume you're interested?" Flora sat by the desk, sorting through correspondence.

Finally, he thought. "Definitely."

"Excellent. If she does, I'll leave a message for you at the Lyceum. You can come by tomorrow and we'll discuss the details."

"Sounds good." Besides repayment of his debts, having some coin between his hands would be good, just to make life a little more comfortable and to handle some errands.

"Now hurry up and change. You're making our office stink." The earthmage made a shooing motion with her hand, directing Martel to the inner chamber where Marcus had already begun to disrobe.

Once back at the Lyceum and after a beneficent bath, Martel felt sore but pleasant, and he had worked up an appetite. Filling his plate as soon as supper was served, he found himself a seat and began enjoying his meal. No better spice than hunger – except maybe rosemary when it came to potatoes, though sadly not on offer this night.

Soon after, Jasper sat down opposite him. Martel could not recall that the earth acolyte had done so before; certainly not when Martel was the only one at the table.

"How's the food?"

"Same as usual," Martel remarked. There was not a great deal of variety in the meals served by the kitchen. Bits of chicken seasoned with salt and pepper alongside rice and beans tonight, as always served with bread.

"You did great last night," Jasper continued, apparently not that interested in discussing flavours. "Really showed that frostmage how it's done, using fire to stop her attacks. You must have done well during the introduction to fire magic."

No doubt Martel would have done very well – if he had taken that course. Mistress Juliana had wisely kept Martel away from that. "Bit of luck to it last night. I mostly train water and air, but it's good to branch out."

"Yeah, me, I was out of the Circle of Fire pretty fast when I took the class. Not much interest in someone so closely attuned to earth," the acolyte remarked, giving a shrug. "What was the teacher's name again? Angry old sort, always yelling."

"Oh, I don't remember either." Martel shovelled food into his mouth, trying to seem disinterested in the conversation.

"Always stroking that white beard while screaming, always angry like those fire types tend to be. Did he do that with you as well?"

"I suppose. I wasn't there long either," the novice claimed, clearing his throat. "Definitely glad to be done with his classes."

"I bet. I think we all were. Few things as scary as a six foot tall battlemage shouting in your face, and you know he can set you on fire if he gets mad enough," Jasper laughed.

Martel faked the same reaction while eating the last of his food. He had planned for a second serving, but the earth acolyte's company made him feel uncomfortable. Something felt insincere about the way he made conversation. Maybe because he had noticed the others becoming more accepting of Martel at the sparring matches, and he desired to ingratiate himself. If so, Jasper would have to find a different target.

His meal finished, Martel got up. He nodded to Jasper as a quiet farewell and left the dining hall, blissfully unaware that the teacher of fire magic at the Lyceum was a woman.

Chapter 215: Clean-up Job

Clean-up Job

Martel's first lesson on Glunday went much like those on Pelday, with little to no progress. "I'm sorry, Master Alastair." Mostly because between spending time with the Night Knives or in the Chamber of Earth, he had barely practised these spells as he was supposed to.

"Don't be, my boy, you will learn however fast or slow you must. But maybe we shall try some other bits of advanced magic. The trouble is that water is far from your natural inclination, and coupled with another element, that's just beyond your control for the time being. Maybe I'll leave it to Mistress Vana, and for now, we'll focus on other ways of increasing your abilities."

"You know best, master." Any kind of magic had Martel's interest, regardless of whether he needed it to become a weathermage or seamage. Just learning basic apothecary lore had proven tremendously useful so far, even if Martel did not envision himself working as an apothecary.

His teacher gave a smile. "If only that were true in all cases. Alright, I hear the bell. See you next time."

After lunch, Martel stopped in the entrance hall to check for messages, remembering that Flora might have sent him something. He approached Henry, but before he could even ask, Jasper waved him over. "Letter for you," the acolyte said. "I noticed it and figured I'd make sure you got it."

Like yesterday, the conversation felt strange to Martel; after all, he assumed he would have received the message no matter who handled it. Jasper handed over the piece of parchment to the novice, who unfolded it. More a note rather than an actual letter, it read,

Master Martel,

Your presence is requested.

Please pay us a visit today.

Flora

Same wording as last time, brief and inconspicuous. Martel would have to show up to find out what the task was. He briefly considered his schedule for the day. He had about three hours until his second class with Master Alastair; if he were quick about it, he could make it to the insula and back again. Might as well get it over with. Also, Martel was curious both about the nature of the task and the payment.

Looking up, he realised that while Jasper had returned to his desk, the acolyte was watching him. Deciding to avoid the guy in the future, Martel went to his room. He grabbed his winter clothes and left; increasing his pace as he crossed the entrance hall to leave through the gate, he made sure to avoid eye contact with Jasper.

Following the same path as yesterday, Martel made his way to the insula. He did not attract any looks from the people on the street or in the building as he passed them by on his way to the Night Knives; either they recognised him by now, or they did not care.

Marcus let him in, and Martel took a seat, looking expectantly at Flora.

"Lady Pearl has graced us with her business again. Full pay is guaranteed this time too, since violence is also guaranteed." The earthmage returned Martel's look, perhaps gauging his reaction.

"Who are we fighting?" The novice could not help but feel apprehensive. He had sometimes been ready for a fight, but deliberately starting one, possibly with the result that people got killed, that still felt like an extra step in a direction he disliked.

"A gang of cutthroats have set up shop in the bridge district," Flora explained. "Southern part, close to where it meets the Khivan enclave. Off the main streets, among poorer people, probably hoping they can operate without drawing much attention. Unfortunately for them, they did."

"None of the Nine Lords accept competition in their own territory," Marcus added. "Our job is to persuade them to leave the bridge district, scatter them to the winds. Nobody dies, unless we are forced while defending ourselves. Bodies make the neighbourhood nervous and cause a headache with the city guard."

Martel preferred it that way as well. Engaging in violence with the specific aim of killing someone else – that was definitely a step too far for him. "They're cutthroats, you say?"

"Small-time thugs, basically." Flora shrugged. "Intimidating the locals, demanding money in exchange for leaving them in peace, that sort of thing. Probably former veterans, Morcaster is rotten with them. So they'll know how to fight, but with two mages I expect we'll have them on the run easily."

Martel was immediately reminded of the Broken Blades. Hurting street children, forcing them to steal on their behalf. Kidnapping him with the intent of selling him overseas. Slapping gold on him like chains, brutally severing his connection to his magic. Martel was almost tempted to do this for free. Certainly most of his qualms about this fight had vanished. "What's the pay?"

"You'll earn eight pieces of the emperor's best silver," Flora told him with a smile. "There's six of them in total. Small number, but since they probably got experience with combat, I told the lady Pearl we deserved a bit more."

"I'm so bored, I'd do it for half that," Marcus mumbled. "Nah, not really." His fingers ran over the hilt of his dagger.

"They're holed up in some ramshackle house, you know the type. All over Morcaster in the lower districts. Two stories, made of wood. Looks ready to go up in flames. You should probably be careful where you fling your spells," Flora laughed. "I'll give it a good look over tonight, figure out

the best approach. Between the three of us, I doubt we'll break a sweat." She gave Martel an inspecting look. "What do you think?"

Given that they had easily dealt with ten fighters on their first task, Martel shared her optimism. He could see why having a mage, let alone two, made such a difference. And eight eagles would go a long way to begin clearing his debts. "When do we meet up?"

"Tomorrow night. Best to hit them after it's dark and the streets are quiet," Flora said. "Be here at last bell."

"Understood."

Chapter 216: Three's a Crowd

Three's a Crowd

Martel kept to himself all through Manday, waiting for tonight. He felt the weird mix of anticipation and anxiety brewing inside of him, threatening to reach a boiling point. He was not concerned about the fight as such, being two mages against a group of brigands. Yet he knew a moment of hesitation could cost him dearly. These thoughts remained in conflict within him, feeling confident one moment, concerned the next. It made him restless, unable to focus on much else. He spent the afternoon in his room, practising a few spells with poor concentration while looking at his Khivan clock every other moment.

As soon as supper was served, Martel ate heartily and left the castle straight after. For the third day in a row, he walked towards the harbour district and his new allies, trying to keep his emotions under lock.

They greeted him curtly, which either spoke towards their own state of mind being similar to his, or maybe it was simply discipline asserting itself, keeping them focused on the task at hand. They all changed into armour, and Martel was glad he had spent the time to become accustomed to chain shirts; the heavy weight of the iron made him feel calm, protected. With weapons distributed, they set out.

It took them perhaps an hour walking directly east. Even if still early in the evening, the sun had set, casting the streets into darkness except for the enchanted lamps posted along the main thoroughfares. They eventually left those, peering into the poorer neighbourhoods that straddled the border between the bridge district and the Khivan enclave. The buildings did not change, all of them being the cheap wooden houses common to this part of the city; only the appearance of the inhabitants determined when they strayed into the enclave and when they returned to the bridge district.

"I'll sneak around and enter through the back once I hear you've started the festivities," Flora told her companions. "Stay behind Marcus, do as he says, and you'll be fine," she added to Martel before she disappeared into an alley.

"That's the house just ahead, with the one man on guard outside," Marcus explained. Martel glanced in the direction, seeing the building as described. "You got a spell to knock a man out?"

"I can hit him with a blast of wind," Martel suggested. He adjusted the mask covering his face. "That should slam him back against the house and on the ground."

"Good enough. When we get inside and things heat up, I'll stay in front of you to keep them back. But you have to cast your spells quickly. I can hold back maybe three at a time, staying offensive, but more than that, they'll overwhelm me. And if any of them get past me, you don't hesitate. Understood?" The Night Knife warrior stared at his companion, wearing the same surcoat as himself.

"Got it."

"Good. Get that first spell ready. As soon as he reacts to our approach, you hit him with it. Come along." Marcus set into motion, walking down the street in the direction of the house. Quickly catching up, Martel followed.

Ten paces away, the guard outside took notice of them and became suspicious enough to place one hand on the hilt of his short sword. In reaction, Martel blasted wind at him, pouring spellpower into his magic just to be certain of the effect.

The thug flew backwards, hitting the wall before falling to the ground. Immediately, Marcus closed the distance and pummelled him in the head, knocking him out. Grabbing the unconscious man by the neck collar, he stepped forward and kicked the door in. As he walked through, still pulling the fallen guard with him, Martel rushed to follow.

Within, he saw five men, all of them looking rough and grim. They had different weapons, some of them looking professional, others makeshift. He noticed their collection of scars and in some cases, missing fingers, ears, or more. None of them strangers to war. All of them had gotten to their feet, brandishing their arms while staring at the intruders.

Letting go of their comrade, who fell to the floor, Marcus unclasped his cloak to reveal his surcoat with its emblem. "Listen carefully. You are not welcome here. Lady Pearl has seen fit to send the Night Knives to drive you out, and believe me, you lack the numbers and skill to win a fight against us. You have one opportunity to collect your friend and leave the bridge district. Refuse, and you'll lose even more limbs than you're already missing."

"Kill them!"

Drawing his axe and raising his shield, Marcus stepped in front of Martel. He kicked the nearest furniture to create an obstacle on his left while swinging his weapon at an attacker on his right.

Safe in the back for now, Martel knew he needed to make the most of it. He launched several bolts of fire, some of them hitting their target. Yet they did not accomplish what he had hoped, sending their enemies into panic. They extinguished the flames on their clothes and turned their attention on him.

"Boy's a mage!"

One of them jumped over a table to get past Marcus on the far left and slashed at the novice with his sword. Remembering his recent training, trusting in his armour, Martel met the blow with his forearm. The chain shirt held against the blade, and Martel unleashed a ray of flames straight into the man's chest. This time, he poured spellpower into his magic, creating flames that could not

simply be extinguished. As his attacker retreated in terror, Martel kept the spell going and aimed the fire at an enemy behind him. Too slow; his target dodged.

The whistle of an arrow caught Martel's attention, and he saw it strike directly into Marcus's chest. Quickly, Martel threw a gust of wind at the archer in the back, who had appeared from the upper floor. That disrupted the bowman, but two more came running down the stairs. They were badly outnumbered by far more enemies than expected.

Dropping to the ground, Martel repeated his spell from before. Bursts of flame shot out from the palm of his hand, now aimed just a little above the floor. He struck two people around their ankles, setting their trousers on fire. This time, it worked as intended, and they dropped their weapons while trying to put out the flames.

From all sides, Marcus took blows. Martel could feel himself been drained of magic, having eagerly spent his spellpower on his first spells. He had enough for a few more, but he would have to make them count. At least six enemies remained, and the archer had returned to the fight; Martel had reacted on instinct, choosing a poor spell rather than something that would disable him permanently.

The backdoor burst open, revealing Flora. A wall of earth shot up from the ground, breaking through the boards of the floor. The brigands in the back were now separated from their companions fighting Marcus, who eagerly went on the offensive, swinging his axe. Rocks flew through the air, striking their enemies.

However intense the fight, it ended quickly. Faced with two mages, the bandits fled if able; the others lay on the ground, groaning or unconscious.

"What kept you?" Marcus asked.

"Guard at the backdoor took a moment longer than I thought," Flora replied with a smile. "Well done, boys."

They left the fight soon after, their task done. "How was it, Martel?" Flora asked.

Frightening, but also exhilarating, he thought. "It was fine."

"Good to know I didn't misjudge you. Come by the apartment tomorrow afternoon?" she suggested. "I'll have collected payment from Lady Pearl by then, and she may already have another job for us. She hinted as much when I spoke to her last. Always one to tease, that one."

"Sounds good." At this rate, Martel would settle his debts in no time.

Chapter 217: The Price of Friendship

The Price of Friendship

Working in the apothecary or the workshop always stood in stark contrast to Martel's affairs in the city, lately those involving the Night Knives. Previously, he had enjoyed the change of pace after the more harrowing events such as the fighting ring at The Broken Crown; returning to the Lyceum and carrying out mundane tasks in quietude suited him after such intense experiences.

But he was starting to feel different. While the fight last night had certainly made his heartbeat quicken, he could not avoid feeling almost euphoric at casting his spells under such circumstances, pitting himself against numerous enemies and proving the victor. Along with the chain armour,

which lent excellent protection, he felt almost invincible. Clearing out brigands who harassed the locals, and getting paid for it, only added honey to his porridge.

In fact, he looked forward to returning to the Night Knives this afternoon, receiving not only his payment but also hearing about the next task. And afterwards, he had arranged to visit Shadi, resuming their tradition of spending Soliday afternoons together when possible.

"Martel! Message for you." Jasper got up from his desk and crossed the entrance hall to catch Martel, offering him a strip of paper.

"Thanks," the novice mumbled, accepting the message. Was there a polite way of saying that he only wanted Henry to handle his mail for him? Feeling awkward with Jasper's eyes on him, Martel walked away a bit before reading the note.

Martel, sorry. Have to help my dad this afternoon. Next Soliday? Shadi.

That dashed half his plans for the afternoon. A little annoying, since by going to see the Night Knives, he would already be halfway to the Khivan enclave, so it would have been easy to visit Shadi. Nothing that could be done about it, though. After getting dressed for the weather, Martel left the school. The first few snowdrops of the season had begun to fall.

Marcus greeted him with the usual grunt, letting Martel inside the apartment. "You did all right last night," the warrior spoke, more verbose than usual. "For a kid, anyway."

A meagre compliment, but Martel accepted it all the same. "Thanks. You make a decent obstacle."

Marcus snorted and walked into the inner room.

Flora sat as usual by the desk. She finished scribbling and put her quill aside. "Have a seat," she told Martel. "I was just detailing our performance last night, writing a report to the captain of our company. I made sure to mention you. You are in good standing among my superiors, should there have been any doubt."

That never hurt, Martel reckoned. "I appreciate that. My payment?"

The earthmage laughed. "You definitely fit in with a bunch of mercenaries." She placed two small stacks of silver in front of him, each holding four coins.

Martel grabbed them and placed them inside an inner pocket. "What's the new task?"

"This one is different. No fighting, but challenging in other ways. Lady Pearl wants us to catch a thief."

"How so?"

"She has a lot of wealthy clients that she entertains at The River Pearl," Flora began to explain. "This attracts cutpurses and pickpockets. Now, she keeps a close eye on everything indoors with lots of guards. But still, lots of complaints lately about theft. So she thinks, someone is watching the place and waiting for them to move out on the street, whenever patrons are entering or leaving the establishment. Probably someone who knows how her guards look by now."

"But not how we look," Martel added.

"Exactly. Most likely, this is some street kid, able to hide in the smallest shadow and slip away in any crowd."

That sounded familiar, though it also made Martel uncomfortable. He knew the life that these children led, and they only stole because the other option was starvation. "Once we catch this kid, what do we do with him or her?"

"Hand them over to Lady Pearl," Flora said. Seeing the expression on Martel's face, she continued, "Don't worry, nobody will waste someone so talented. Lady Pearl will give them the chance to join up, use their skills in a way that doesn't mess things up for the lady. We'd probably be doing that kid a favour."

If it took the child off the streets and maybe also provided protection against thugs like those yesterday, Martel could see the point. "When do we go?"

"It has to be during the day. Kid like that, too slippery at night. But you have classes tomorrow afternoon, right?"

Martel was a little impressed that she remembered. "I do."

"The day after tomorrow. Come by and we'll set a trap for our intrepid little thief."

Martel returned to the castle in a good mood. The silver would allow him to repay Weasel, his most pressing creditor. With a few more tasks done for the Night Knives, he might soon have enough for Master Alastair as well. He could even spare a few coins to buy some herbs and create a salve that he might bring as offering at the Basilica. That would be an expensive gift, relatively speaking, certain to please Sol and allow John a speedy recovery.

With these and other plans in mind, Martel removed his cloak and hung it on the dummy for his armour before digging out his newly gained coin from the inner pocket.

A knock on the door. After putting the coins into his small desk drawer, Martel opened it to find Jasper.

"We have some business to discuss." The earth acolyte moved forward, entering Martel's chamber and making him step back.

"I don't think we do. I want you to leave." Martel stared straight at him, not afraid of someone he had handily beaten in a duel.

"We can discuss it in the hallway. If you want everyone to know about the Night Knives."

Martel did everything he could to keep surprise or guilt from showing on his face. "I don't know what that is."

"So you don't mind if I talk about you, Flora, and Marcus? What you were up to last night in the bridge district?"

How did he know? Martel tried to form a response, but he could think of nothing.

Jasper smiled with contempt. "Let's have some privacy." He closed the door.

Martel finally thought of something to say. "I don't care what you know. It's your word against mine."

"Ah, but it's so much more than that. I've noticed, Martel, you're pretty skilled with fire. Few novices who can create a flame hot enough to melt ice."

Martel cursed to himself. "My gift lies in air, as you'd expect from a weathermage. Fire is the closest element to air."

Jasper continued to smirk. "I'm sure that would convince others. After all, if you were truly skilled with fire, it would have been noticed during your introduction to fire magic. With Mistress Moira." His smile widened at the last part.

It took Martel a moment to catch up. Jasper knew he had not taken the course. Martel became acutely aware of his Khivan clock ticking, underlining his silence, his inability to argue in defence of himself.

"One short conversation made it obvious you never took that course, yet I hear you're due to take the novice examination later this month. How can you possibly do that when you haven't been evaluated for fire?" Jasper's expression made it clear how much delight he derived from this. "Someone is protecting you, hiding your abilities. That's corruption among the faculty."

Mistress Juliana would lose her position over this. Maybe Master Alastair as well; he had taught Martel four lessons every five days for a year. Nobody would believe he had never suspected Martel's talent. "What do you want?"

"That job you pulled last night. You got paid eight silvers, didn't you?"

How did he know! Martel felt trapped, suffocated. "What of it?"

"I want half. That's all. Plenty left for you. A reasonable arrangement."

Martel could not think, except for the single thought that he wanted Jasper out of here. Pulling his drawer open with an angry motion, he counted out four coins and slapped them into Jasper's waiting hand. "Get out."

"No need to be harsh. We're friends now." Jasper gave a grin. "Keep working with your nocturnal friends. In fact, that's part of our arrangement. Keep earning for us both." He turned to open the door.

Once the earth acolyte had left, Martel sank down onto his bed.

Chapter 218: Playing at Defence

Playing at Defence

Martel spent the remaining day in a daze. When he tried to think of something else, he found it impossible. Another person knew his secret, and unlike Maximilian, he could clearly not trust Jasper's intentions. He could tell someone about the earth acolyte, but to what end? Martel could not complain officially, as Jasper would surely retaliate by revealing what he knew. That would hurt Martel far more. He could tell Mistress Juliana or Master Alastair, but he might have to admit his involvement with the Night Knives, which could make things even worse for him.

Try as he might, Martel could think of no way out. He eventually gave up and went to sleep, though it took him hours before he found any rest.

As soon as he woke, Martel's troubles invaded his mind. He lay in his bed, trying to keep them from overwhelming him while formulating some kind of plan. What could he do? Today was Pelday when he was busiest. Two classes with Master Alastair, where he would have to pretend everything was fine. What of the sparring matches in the evening? Considering that was how Martel had revealed himself to Jasper, it seemed prudent to stay away.

On the other hand, it would provide Martel with some opportunities. Henry would most likely be there, giving Martel the chance to ask him about his fellow clerk. Maybe he could discover a weakness to exploit. Besides that, Martel would watch how the earth acolytes fought tonight. Just to prepare himself in case things turned ugly with Jasper.

Walking down the dark stairs towards the Chamber of Earth felt foreboding. Normally, Martel had no issue lighting a few flames to see in the dark, but now he felt self-conscious about it. Had anyone else guessed his secret? Were they suspicious? Would any further use of fire magic on his part make them see the truth?

Almost stumbling a few times, Martel managed to descend and enter the chamber with its flickering torchlight.

"Martel! Who is your victim tonight?"

Well, finding Henry was easy. "I'm taking a break tonight," the novice explained as Henry walked over to him. "Want to see how others do, learn what I can."

"Boring," the air acolyte complained. "Well, I'll definitely be in the thick of it tonight."

Before Henry could leave and find someone to spar with, Martel hurried to continue the conversation. "I've noticed that Jasper has started delivering my post. Have you guys changed something?"

"No, not really. It just usually works out that I sort the post, but for the past five days or so, he's wanted to do it. Change of pace, I guess."

That probably explained how Jasper had found out about Martel and the Night Knives. He read the messages from Flora and either knew who she was or figured it out. Maybe even followed Martel to his meetings with them. Bastard. "Yeah, makes sense." What else to ask about? "Does he take a lot of breaks, leave you to do all the work?" Letting him sneak away to follow others around, for instance.

"No, I wouldn't say that. He's got Maldays off, so I'm busy on that day, but I get Peldays off, so that evens out." Henry gave a shrug.

Martel was meeting the Night Knives on exactly Malday to catch the thief. He would have to keep watch to see if he was being followed.

Before Martel could think of another question, Henry wandered off, looking for someone to spar with. Left to his own thoughts, Martel considered what to do. He wished that he could stop working with the Night Knives, as if severing ties with them would help him get out of this mess. But he figured that Jasper's final words yesterday meant Martel was expected to keep working for them and keep paying the earth acolyte.

"Martel, a quick word."

The novice looked towards the voice to see Alain walking towards him. "Yes?" His response came a little more curtly than intended, born of his frustrations.

"We'll need more blood salve soon. If we get you some coin, will you make some?"

"Oh, sure." Other things were happening besides extortion, Martel belatedly remembered. "Yeah, that's no problem. I am going to market the day after tomorrow to buy some herbs anyway." He could not forget about his brother's health or the offering to Sol either. And if he was making one jar of balm, he might as well make two. "I'll have it ready for next time."

The mageknight beamed at him. "Excellent."

Their conversation at an end, Martel glanced around. Jasper was not present tonight, but other earth mages could be found. Martel looked at each of them in turn, waiting for the opportunity to study their magic in a fight.

Henry took position opposite the earth acolyte, and the match began. Both acted at once, one offensively, the other defensively. A powerful blast of wind pushed through the chamber, but before it could knock the other mage down, he raised a wall from the ground tall enough to cover himself. Raising his hands and stretching them out, Henry conjured a whirlwind and pushed it towards the improvised earthen defence.

Before it could arrive, the other acolyte sent chunks of the wall flying out in an attack. One of them struck Henry on the forehead, knocking him to the ground. His whirlwind dissipated. The fight was over, as swiftly as it began.

Several applauded and cheered for the earth acolyte, stepping out of his defence to help Henry back on his feet. Martel walked forward to study the earthen wall instead. It was a very good spell for this purpose. Nothing offensive could push through something this thick and dense, at least nothing at Martel's disposal. Not his spells with fire nor air, certainly not anything he could conjure with water. And he lacked the skill with earth to dismantle it.

It seemed an insurmountable defence, same as how Jasper protected himself with his knowledge, leaving no way for Martel to fight back. He would have to find a way around that.

Chapter 219: Thief Catcher

Thief Catcher

Unlike previous times, Martel did not feel the same concoction of emotions as he headed out to meet the Night Knives for another task. His heart and mind felt heavy, given the circumstances. Maybe he could tell the Night Knives that he would not do further work after today; then he would say to Jasper that they simply had not offered him any new tasks. It would not solve the fact that the acolyte knew about him, but at least Martel would not have to undertake more of this work and pay Jasper for the privilege.

He reached the humble headquarters of the Night Knives. Despite his low mood, he could not help but laugh as Marcus opened the door. The grim warrior was dressed like a dockworker or day-labourer, wearing practical clothes of leather and linen. He wore no weapons except for the dagger

that always sat in his belt, of the same make as what Flora had. Compared to his typical armour and surcoat, he looked a far cry from his usual intimidating self.

Seeing Martel's response, Marcus snorted and let him enter. As for Flora, she wore a dress made from wool, sensible for the season, and dyed in bright colours. Along with some jewellery, a heavy purse, and a bundle of keys hanging by her belt, she looked like the wife of a well-to-do merchant or sought-after craftsman.

"How do you like our disguises?"

"Better than what you usually wear," Martel replied. "Is this the plan?"

Flora grabbed the purse by her waist and shook it. "I got a nice bag of iron bits. Jingles just like coins, looks heavy too. I'll parade my wealth outside The River Pearl. Lady Pearl, not to be confused with her establishment, has made her guards patrol heavily outside for the last few days, hopefully starving our thief so that they seize the opportunity I present."

"Marcus and me, we're the lookouts?"

She nodded. "Since our quarry can't run south, into the tavern, they got three escape routes. East or west along the main road, or north into one of the alleys. You and Marcus will take position west and north, covering those roads. I'll watch east and send a signal if I don't manage to capture them in the act. Then it will be up to you."

"Alright. Let's get going." Moments after, the trio left the insula.

This was so dull. Martel sat on a crate, waiting as nothing happened. By his estimate, an hour had passed at least. The only thing he had done since their arrival was occasionally getting up and moving elsewhere, just to make it less obvious that he surveilled The River Pearl. The cold weather did little to improve his opinion of this task. They had been promised two silvers for undertaking it, four if they caught their prey. Martel wondered how many bells they would have to wait until they had earned their two birds.

Martel glanced towards Flora across the street, talking merrily with some of the women of the Pearl. She also moved around, in and out of the big tavern or up and down the street, whatever she could find an excuse for. At times, Martel lost sight of her, usually when a cart rumbled past him or such, but he kept his eyes open for the signal. Even if Martel had little faith it would come.

Frustrations about his predicament back at the Lyceum also seeped in to blend with his current annoyance. His mind kept returning to considerations of how he might get Jasper to back off. As long as he paid him, presumably he was out of danger, but what happened when Martel ran out of money? Should he keep working for the Night Knives solely to ensure Jasper stayed happy? A dreadful prospect, but perhaps necessary, and it made Martel doubt his earlier thought to wind down his cooperation with the mercenaries.

One of the cobblestones from the street shot straight up into the air. Martel stared, as did everyone else, especially those nearby hurrying to avoid being hit once it started to fall down again. The signal!

Martel leapt to his feet, staring in every direction. He could not see Flora, as another cart moved past him. Nor could he see any sign of someone running to escape with ill-gotten gains. He looked towards Marcus, exchanging glances; the man shook his head. No sign of the thief there either.

Where could they have gone? Nobody had moved past Martel to escape into the alley behind him, he felt certain of that. Unless their quarry had gotten past Marcus, that meant the thief would have moved east along the main road, but Martel had seen no movement other than the cart.

Suspicious arising in him, Martel ran to reach the wagon and look into its load. It was empty. No place for anyone to hide.

Chasing his only other idea, Martel bent down to glance between its wheels. Underneath the cart, crawling on the ground, a boy perhaps aged nine or ten looked out to lock eyes with Martel.

Dextrously, the boy scrambled to the other side of the wagon. Running around to give chase, Martel refrained from using magic; other people were nearby and might get caught in his spell. But the thief would no doubt make for an alley to become lost in the winding little streets, which could afford Martel the opportunity he needed.

As long as he could keep up. Despite his young age and what appeared to be little more than skin and bone for legs, the boy ran faster than an Imperial courier.

He also had the advantage of knowing the area, making quick turns where Martel lost time as he tried to do it as swiftly. In a few moments, it would be too late.

Praying that nobody else would appear suddenly, or at least they would not get hurt if so, Martel sent a blast of wind forward when he had a direct line to the boy.

The gust pushed the boy straight onto the ground, slamming his little body against the dirt. The sight made Martel feel guilty; he had not intended to use quite so much of his spellpower, but fear that the thief would escape had made him use too much rather than too little.

"I'm a mage, boy! No use in running. But if you stop and come with me, I won't hurt you more. I promise." The novice hoped that Flora had told him the truth about Lady Pearl wanting to recruit rather than harm the little thief, lest she made a liar of Martel.

The boy got on his feet slowly, turning around to face his pursuer. "You won't hurt me again?" His body relaxed a little.

Martel quickly closed the distance between them. "I won't." He placed one hand on the boy's shoulder. "Come with me."

Without warning, the thief kicked his foot into Martel's groin. As the mage sank to his knees in pain, his prey bolted.

That little – Martel was going to kill him. If he could just focus long enough to cast another spell. Taking deep breaths, Martel relented from using fire to burn the boy into a crisp and sent another blast of wind against his target.

This time, the boy willingly allowed himself to fall forward, letting his feet and hands touch the ground. As the wind passed over him, he leapt back up and started running again, though he had time to look behind him and make a rude gesture at Martel.

As he turned his head forward again, he found a wall of earth blocking the alley. Behind it stood Flora. "That's close enough, kid. Stay out of kicking distance." She looked behind him at Martel, slowly getting back on his feet. "Come on. Let's get paid."

Chapter 220: Close Friends, Closer Enemies

Close Friends, Closer Enemies

Martel had only just returned to his room after breakfast when someone knocked on his door. With a bad feeling, Martel opened it. As suspected, Jasper stood outside. "I hear things went well for you yesterday. You finished another job. I'm just here for my half."

Martel figured with a strong enough punch, he could smash the smirk from Jasper's face. It would not solve any problems, but it would drastically make Martel feel better for now. Taking a deep breath, he went back into his room, collected two silver coins, and let them fall into Jasper's waiting hand. As he began closing the door, the acolyte quickly placed one foot across the threshold.

"Another thing. I heard you're making salve for the sparring matches."

"So?"

The acolyte crossed his arms, giving the novice an overbearing look. "Don't do that. Tell them you can't."

Martel frowned. Why did he care? "For what reason?"

Jasper's smug expression turned angry. "Because I told you so," he hissed. "Don't forget how this works. I command, you obey." The acolyte retracted his foot and turned to leave.

Martel balled his hands into fists, but he restrained himself as he watched Jasper walk away. Not yet; not like this.

Starting his day in such a manner left Martel in a fell mood. It was difficult to conceal from Master Alastair, having two classes with no other students around. But if his teacher noticed anything amiss, he did not address it and simply ran Martel through different exercises, all intended to help him improve at wielding air and fire together, honing his skill to use the elements in advanced fashion. Although lacking focus, Martel carried out the exercises while staying quiet, fearing what he might say if he voiced any of his frustrations. Same with doing his shift at the apothecary, giving curt answers to Nora's chipper attempts at conversation.

His thoughts kept returning to the conversation with Jasper, and running it through in his mind left Martel incensed every time. He had lost his desire to go to market, get the herbs for the salve, and take the finished product to the Basilica. Martel's only interest was to hurt the earth acolyte, punish him for causing all this anguish.

Eventually, as the day progressed, Martel managed to feel less frustrated and angry. He chided himself for letting his emotions interfere with his decisions. No matter his current situation and resentment of Jasper, Martel had a responsibility towards his little brother. If delivering a valuable offering such as a balm might bring Sol's blessing on John, it was obviously worth doing.

Counting his wealth after what Martel would consider Jasper's theft, he had seven eagles and four pennies. If he haggled a bit, Martel ought to have enough for the herbs and five silvers left to repay

Weasel. Maybe the young chief could even offer Martel some advice about Jasper; he might have experience with this kind of sordid business. It would probably be beyond Martel's powers to receive counsel from Weasel for free, though.

Martel did his best to suppress his bad mood as he went to buy the needed herbs. He and the old herbalist had never spoken about the time when a group of thugs had chased Martel through the streets simply for buying some common plants; just another day in Morcaster, perhaps. Though Martel did not bear the old man any ill will; he had hardly been in a position to intervene. And perhaps because the herbalist felt sympathy towards Martel, he barely haggled and allowed Martel to buy what he needed with his remaining coin.

Trying to be thankful for small blessings, Martel returned to the Lyceum. He would begin the process of making the salve now so that it might thicken overnight. Tomorrow was Manday, and while Soliday might have been a more auspicious day for his purposes, the day of the Moon would have to do. Afterwards, he could swing by Weasel's place and repay his debt. That would make for a long walk, going north to the temple and afterwards south to the copper lanes. But Martel felt less at ease at the Lyceum these days. Getting some distance between himself and Jasper suited Martel fine.

He went to the apothecary to begin his work. Nora was there as expected, mixing ingredients into what might be real potions, not just the simple remedies Martel had learned. A little envious, he set to his own task.

"Back again today? You didn't get enough of grinding powder this morning?" Nora asked with her usual cheerfulness.

"Just making a blood salve. As a gift for the Basilica." Martel did not explain the deeper reason; he was not in the mood for explaining about his little brother and answering follow-up questions.

"That's very nice," the apprentice replied. "I've done that a few times."

Their conversation dwindled into silence. As Martel went through the monotonous tasks, infinitely familiar to him through countless repetition, his mind was free to speculate. Glancing at Nora, he wondered once again why Jasper had forbidden him from making salves for the sparring mages, forcing them to buy from Nora.

Martel saw no benefit in this for Jasper, only her. She could continue selling the remedies, earning a nice bit of coin on the side. How did Jasper gain? He did not, unless... He and Nora worked together.

Martel started to think back on all the conversations he had shared with Nora. Working a full bell every single day, with her always being talkative and asking questions. Martel had never suspected anything other than a desire to pass the time, and he had willingly answered her questions and told her many things. None of his secrets, obviously, but who knew what she might have pieced together from all the little morsels he dropped?

Jasper had uncanny knowledge about Martel's affairs, such as his work with the Night Knives and the exact amount of payment received. That could not be explained by his access to the post arriving at the Lyceum. Glancing again at Nora, Martel wondered if all this time, her friendly behaviour had been an act.

"You're quiet today," she remarked.

"I've got a lot on my mind."