

Firebrand 221

Chapter 221: A Hope and a Prayer

A Hope and a Prayer

Figuring he might as well get it out of the way, Martel approached Alain at breakfast the next morning. "I'm sorry, I won't be able to make the ointment for the sparring matches after all. Sorry," he reiterated. Having to retract his offer bothered Martel, maybe more than it should. But it had seemed like a good opportunity to both demonstrate his generosity and also his skill and knowledge, and maybe sow some seeds of friendship. Looking at Alain's disappointed face, all of that now seemed doubtful.

"Alright, I guess. Why not? You seemed happy to do it the other night."

"Mistress Rana won't let me," Martel lied. "She doesn't want me making it for anyone other than the apothecary." He felt a little guilty pushing the blame on his teacher, but given the situation, Martel's self-pity mattered more, and the lie made him feel less embarrassed.

"That is a shame. I guess we will have to pay Nora again. If you can spare any coin, we all try to contribute," the mageknight said.

"Definitely," Martel replied, possibly lying again. He had nothing to contribute at present, unless he got another task with the Night Knives. Where Jasper would appear again to take half. Deciding to leave before his frustrations got the better of him, Martel nodded at Alain and walked away.

With a jar of salve in his hand, Martel followed the main road north towards the temple district. He walked in light snowfall, making him occasionally shake his cloak. Although not the best of weather, he did not mind so much. Being away from the Lyceum made him feel better about his situation, getting some distance from his problems. And as the towers of the Basilica rose in the distance through the snow descending from the skies, Martel almost felt uplifted. To see such beauty, to know it existed in the world, comforted him.

Crossing the square before the Basilica, Martel noticed that the ragged preacher railing against magic was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps the cold weather had driven him off, or people had finally lost interest in his message. Martel hoped it was the latter.

Entering the temple itself, Martel spent a moment taking it in. Even if he had seen the vaulted halls before, they still amazed him. Approaching the great altar of Sol, a quandary presented itself. Normally, people left offerings of obvious nature. Money, food, clothes, maybe candles or the like. But the priests could not be expected to know what to do with a jar containing a smelly substance.

Looking around, Martel located the nearest clergyman and approached. "Excuse me, father."

Despite the title used by Martel, the priest was young, probably in his twenties. He gave a kind smile. "What is it, child?"

Martel held up his jar. "I have made this. I work in an apothecary. It is ointment to heal wounds and prevent infections. I would like to give it as offering."

The priest nodded with an understanding look. "Of course. Go ahead and present it on the altar and say your prayer. I will be sure to fetch it and put it to good use."

"Thank you, father."

"Of course. Sol bless you, child."

Martel made his way towards the altar. Plenty of other people had come for the same purpose, so he waited a little while rather than push through the crowd, out of respect.

Eventually, he could step forward and kneel. This was another altar than the one he had visited last; the Basilica held several to accommodate the many supplicants. This one consisted of an enormous statue, at least fifteen feet high, showing a bearded warrior in golden armour and with a solar crown of the same metal. It stood on an even bigger pedestal, with room for lots of people to position themselves and pray while leaving their offerings at the base.

Martel did the same, carefully placing the jar on the marble foundation. "Great and benevolent Sol, I bring you this gift made by my own hands. Salve to heal the hurt done to your servants. May it be pleasing to you. If so, I ask that you bless my brother John with good health. He is but seven years of age, dark hair with blue eyes, from the town of Engby where he lives with my mother, Hilda, and older brother, Keith. If you will grant him recovery from his ailment, I promise to bring another such offering soon."

The words to the prayer came easy. Martel had said nearly the exact same when his father had been ill, as instructed by Father Julius, back in the small temple at Engby. It had not made a difference, perhaps because his offering back then had been so meagre; just a bundle of reeds he had collected from the marsh nearby, which Father Julius had need of at the time to repair a leak in the roof of his shed. Martel hoped that this gift would prove more pleasing.

Martel considered whether to add a prayer for his recent troubles with Jasper, but he decided against it. Asking for two things might seem presumptuous, and he could end up with neither. Standing up, Martel bowed before the altar and left the Basilica.

It took Martel several hours to make his way to the copper lanes. The snowfall had subsided, at least, and he rested his feet as he passed through the market district before making the final stretch to Weasel's gang. None of the children were outside as he approached; the weather kept them indoors unless otherwise necessary, he assumed.

As he entered the house, Weasel appeared almost immediately. "You have my money?"

Martel extended his hand and let the silver coins fall into the boy's palms. "There you are."

"Better late than never, I suppose, though you really stretched my patience."

"Sorry. A problem showed up." Martel hesitated, unhappy to admit he was being extorted. He felt shameful about it. But he also needed advice. "Someone at my school found out about things I've done, in the city." That was as much as Martel was willing to elaborate. "He's extorting me for money. I don't know how to deal with him."

"Stab him."

Martel gave the little chief a look. "I don't want to kill him."

"Stab him a little, and warn him if he bothers you again, you'll stab him a lot." Weasel stared back. "Want me to do it for you? This time, I'll need payment in advance."

While frustrated, Martel was not at the point where he would pay a child for an assassination. "I'll think of something."

"You know where to go if you change your mind."

Chapter 222: Fits Together like Clockwork

Fits Together like Clockwork

Like yesterday, Martel said little during his hours in the apothecary. Nora seemed to sense his mood, as she made little attempt at conversation. As soon as the bell rang, he finished up and left with only the briefest of farewells. In some ways, he was angrier at Nora than at Jasper; she had pretended to be his friend all this time, gathering information to be used against him.

When his work for the day was done, Martel left the Lyceum, hoping to also leave such thoughts behind, if only for a while. It was Solday, and spending time with Shadi should cheer him up.

Walking through the market district, he noticed that like yesterday, fewer people were on the streets. It could not only be due to weather, as today was pleasant without snow or rain, if a bit cold. Trade was slowing down, he surmised; much like a bear, Morcaster was entering hibernation for the winter. The docks were far less busy as well; no ships sailed from the north to the city, nor did any depart for the Western Isles across the great, open sea, with winter storms on the horizon.

As he reached the Khivan enclave, Martel saw the same repeated, as the streets lay mostly bare. Yet he encountered an exception as he approached the small temple square. Lots of people had gathered, though he could not yet ascertain why. While he heard murmurs, people sticking their heads together or shaking them, nobody was shouting or brandishing weapons. Assuming no danger was afoot, Martel approached.

A pitiful sight met him. A Khivan family stood on the streets, several children huddled together with their mother. As for the father, he argued – or perhaps pleaded – with an Asterian man. Judging by his clothing and appearance, he did not worry about his next meal. He wore furs to ward against the cold, and he had an impressive waistline. Meanwhile, two others wearing armour with shields on their backs were busy hauling out furniture and belongings from the nearest house, piling it all onto the street.

Martel finally understood. The Khivan family was being evicted from their home, in the onset of winter. The Asterian man in furs, looking like a rich merchant and with no trace of mercy in his beady eyes, had to be their landlord. Martel understood why he had two guards with him; even if the crowd was peaceful right now, their expressions ranged from sympathetic to angry, and the novice could easily imagine them becoming riled up. Several of the Khivan onlookers began glancing at Martel, not in a friendly way; he realised that he was the only other Asterian present, which would make the Khivans inclined to regard him the same way they viewed the landlord. He hurried onwards.

Reaching the watchmaker's workshop, Martel knocked and glanced around. Nobody had followed him or seemed to show him any interest, but he was still glad when Shadi opened the door and

allowed him to slip inside. "I got something for you," she said with a grin. "Well, we do. And I guess it's not for you as such, but you get to carry it back."

"Well, now I am intrigued, though I'm not sure if I should be excited or not."

From the back room, Master Farhad appeared with a beautiful clock in his hands, same as the one ticking on Martel's drawer.

"Your friend's clock is finished!"

Martel had completely forgotten about that. It had only been a way for him to help Shadi with money. "It looks amazing! Max will be so pleased."

The watchmaker placed the fruits of his labour carefully on the table in the room. "More of your friends want clocks, you tell them."

"I definitely will."

Martel spent a merry while at the watchmaker's home, talking and laughing with Shadi while drinking tea. He still had a long way to go before he would enjoy the taste, but the company more than made up for it.

When he finally left, carrying Maximilian's clock inside a box, he walked the same way home. The gathering on the street had gone, as had the evicted family. Martel hoped someone else had taken them in, given the cold night ahead. Morcaster had plenty of homeless people already.

As he reached the docks, Martel did not continue straight home, but instead went to the insula playing host to the Night Knives.

Marcus gave him a surprised look as he opened the door. "Are you meant to come by today?"

Martel took a deep breath. "I need your help."

Sitting at the table in the apartment, Martel looked at Flora and Marcus. He had explained his predicament, though leaving out details that might incriminate Mistress Juliana or Master Alastair.

"Why did you not tell us before?" Flora asked.

"I was ashamed." And concerned that the more people who knew, the greater the risk for his favourite teacher to get sacked.

"Which is what this Jasper relies on. Marcus, stop staring at the box."

The warrior kept his eyes on the small crate containing the Khivan clock. "Boxes should not make noises," he muttered.

"But what should I do?"

"How did he find out about you? Our work together?" the earthmage asked.

"He works in the mail delivery. He must be reading all notes that don't arrive in envelopes. I think he also followed me here. And he might have had someone, who I thought was my friend, ask me questions without me getting suspicious."

Flora nodded. "Well, if he has no qualms about extorting you, and he has such access to information, I imagine he is doing it to others. And what's he spending this money on? I could well imagine he uses it to fund vices of his own. You must turn the tables on him."

"How? I don't have the access he does, and I can't follow him around when I have classes."

The earthmage opened her arms in a gesture conveying magnanimity. "What are friends for?" She looked at Marcus.

The warrior shrugged. "Why not? I'm bored anyway."

Chapter 223: Something Unexpected

Something Unexpected

After talking with the Night Knives about his problem with Jasper, Martel felt better, especially as he now had a plan. Granted, the plan consisted of gathering information and nothing else, but he had people on his side now, at least. He went to sleep feeling a little reassured that things could be solved, and the feeling persisted when he woke the next morning on Pelday. He still had to be patient; Henry had told him that Jasper had Maldays off, which seemed the most likely opportunity to follow him and learn anything of use, so Martel would have to wait until tomorrow to learn what he could about the earth acolyte.

The sparring group met tonight, and Martel felt less apprehensive about attending compared to last time. If Jasper was present, he might glean something from seeing who the acolyte associated with; if absent, undertaking tasks with the Night Knives meant that training for combat was always valuable for Martel. But that would happen later; he had something else to handle beforehand.

Towards the end of fourth bell, when Maximilian could usually be found in his room, Martel made his way there carrying a box. As the mageknight opened his door, he stared at both Martel and the object in his hands. "What is that?"

"A present for you." Martel handed it over.

"Colour me curious." Maximilian retreated back into his room, placing the box on his desk. Martel followed, as always noticing how much more spacious this room was compared to his own, though the wardrobe and other furniture made good use of it. The mageknight removed the lid and retracted the clock, staring at it once he held it in his hands. "What manner of device is this?"

"You don't recognise it? Look at the face with the numbers and hands, like the one they built in the entrance hall."

"But that once is enormous. This is also a... time measurement contraption?"

"Yes, a clock. Now you don't have to listen for the bell strokes," Martel explained.

Maximilian carefully placed it on his desk. "It is certainly – interesting, but what convinced you to give this to me?"

"I have one myself. They are very useful," the novice claimed. "And good craftsmanship, made by Shadi's father."

The mageknight looked at his friend with a knowing smile. "Now I understand. Nordmark, you sly hound."

"I don't know what you mean."

Maximilian looked back at the clock. "When does it stop making that noise?"

In the evening, Jasper was present in the Chamber of Earth, though Martel kept his distance. It would not serve his purpose to interact with the acolyte; besides how distasteful that would be to Martel, it would also get in the way of observing Jasper and thereby hopefully glean knowledge.

To that aim, Martel did not intend to fight tonight, but simply watch. Last time had also been beneficial, watching another acolyte raising that wall during a duel. Martel still needed to figure out how that could be overcome; perhaps Flora had ideas, assuming she would share vulnerabilities about her own defensive spells. Given that on their first encounter, she and Martel had tried to kill each other, they might still be some distance away from such levels of trust.

"Martel. Willing to face me again?" Eleanor stood five paces away, sword and shield in hand. Her challenge caught the attention of those nearby.

Martel hesitated. Getting into a fight had not been his plan, though practising against a mageknight was good training for the kind of tasks he could expect with the Night Knives.

"You're not afraid of someone you've already beaten once, are you?" Henry leaned in towards him with a taunting smile, extending the staff in his hand.

Grabbing the weapon, Martel took position in front of Eleanor. "Give the signal."

"Go!"

This time, Martel was better prepared for Eleanor's empowered speed. As she crossed the distance within moments to strike the first blow, he had his staff raised. It took all his effort just to defend against her swift attacks, leaving him no opportunity to cast an offensive spell. He remembered last time, his usual direct attack with wind had not worked; he had been forced to get her off balance first. She probably expected that, but he could use the same move on her as he had done with Alain.

Summoning his shield to protect himself, he allowed one blow to get past his parries, using the moment to launch his retaliation. After Eleanor had struck his magical protection, he swiftly sent a gust of wind against her hand, sending her sword soaring away from her grip.

Eleanor responded instantly. Martel saw the shimmer of magic surround her sword before she pulled it back through the air to once more grasp the hilt. In a fluid motion, she brought her arm down to strike at Martel again. Taken by surprise, he raised his staff to parry the blow, only for her to bash her shield against his knuckles, and the pain made him drop his weapon. A moment later, the tip of her blade rested against his throat.

For the first time in these sparring matches, Martel was the one to speak. "I yield."

The mageknight gave a short bow, smiling as she stood up straight again before she joined her friend, Elaine or Clarissa; Martel had trouble telling them apart. A few people murmured in discussion of the fight, though already another was underway; Henry slapped him on the shoulder before joining the circle of students watching the other match.

Left on his own, Martel quickly evaluated the fight in his mind. There had been time to raise his magical shield and protect himself against the shield bash; he had simply been taken by surprise, thinking the fight was won when in fact Eleanor was about to retaliate. She, on the other hand, had known what to expect. She must have witnessed his fight against Alain and practised her countermove. Martel was a little impressed, and it reinforced what he already knew, what he tried to do against Jasper; using the best of one's tricks and spells might provide victory one evening, but defeat another.

Chapter 224: Talking Pillows

Talking Pillows

Martel's morning shifts at the apothecary made him feel more and more uncomfortable. He had no interest in talking to Nora, and it seemed she had understood this, abandoning her attempts to make conversation. Now they only spoke as needed to coordinate their work while he was there. Once he had finished his chores and classes, he strolled through the entrance hall, noticing the empty desk where Jasper usually sat. Nodding to Henry, Martel left the castle and crossed the open square outside the gates, reaching a small tavern.

He quickly looked over the guests and saw Marcus, clad as he had been the other day when finding the thief for Lady Pearl. Martel quickly walked over. "Nothing?" he asked disappointed.

"Obviously," Marcus snorted, "or I wouldn't still be here. Come back at last bell, as we agreed."

"You're sure he hasn't gotten past you?"

"I've been here the whole morning, and I made sure to get a good look at him yesterday. Even if I hadn't, there's not been any boys in green robes leaving the castle." The warrior in disguise gave Martel an overbearing look. "How about you leave me to do my work before you attract any more attention?"

"Fine." The novice turned to walk away, though Marcus quickly reached out to grab him by the sleeve.

"Wait! Got any coin? This damnable tavernkeeper won't sell on credit, and I only got a few pennies left."

"If I had any money, I wouldn't be doing work with you Night Knives," Martel retorted.

"Get lost."

As Martel agonised over his plan with the Night Knives, hopeful it would yield something useful while also frustrated about his own passive role, others met without his knowledge to discuss his future. Sharing a cup of wine, the overseer and the Master of Elements held a meeting in her chambers.

"Is the boy ready?" she asked.

Alastair nodded. "He is certainly skilled enough. Tomorrow, I'll discuss spells with him for the examination."

"Good. We shall be five members of the faculty present. With that many witnesses, his promotion to acolyte will be guaranteed."

He counted them off on his fingers. "You, me, Fenrick, Vana, and Reynard. And if our Master of War objects?"

Juliana gave a shrug. "Four teachers against one. A lone dissenting voice will not have much credence. And the decision rests with me."

"I'll make sure the boy knows he might expect Reynard to give him trouble. As long as he impresses Vana, that should suffice."

"Agreed."

With no classes in the afternoon, Martel found the wait until last bell agonizingly slow. He passed through the entrance hall several times, just to make sure Jasper's desk remained empty, until Henry started to give him odd looks. Frustrated about doing nothing, Martel got an idea. While Marcus followed Jasper outside the castle, maybe Martel could accomplish something inside the castle. Namely, searching the acolyte's room. Someone might discover him of course, but there was no rule against entering someone else's chamber.

After asking around, Martel located Jasper's chamber, one floor above his own. He waited until the corridor was empty and turned his attention towards the keyhole. Made from metal, it responded best to earth magic, which Martel had limited skill with. But even so, manipulating a small lump of metal like that to unlock itself should be within his capabilities.

Placing one hand against the keyhole, just to make it a little easy on himself, Martel extended his magic into the metal.

Nothing. It felt like trying to squeeze air with his fist.

Martel knew earth was not his strongest element, but this was ridiculous. He tried again. But as he extended his magic, trying to direct its flow into the metal, he felt nothing. The whole area was dead, like – like gold.

Of course. In a school full of mages, how did you prevent students from unlocking any door they pleased? You added some bits of gold to nullify their powers.

Defeated, Martel returned to his room, waiting impatiently for the last bell to ring.

When his Khivan clock showed eight, Martel finally left his room. He returned to the tavern across the square, quickly finding Marcus. "Well?"

"Your boy left the castle this afternoon. I trailed him for a couple of hours. You won't guess where he went."

"No I won't, where did he go?"

Marcus's superior smile faded. "Not much fun with you. The boy went to the Pearl."

"What, the establishment or the woman?"

The warrior gave a snort of laughter. "Listen to you, 'the establishment'. Yeah, he went to the brothel. I can't imagine he'd have business with Lady Pearl."

Martel exhaled. "That's all well and good, but I doubt it's against the rules to visit such – places."

"Hold your horses, mate. I asked around. Your boy goes there every Malday, visiting the same girl by the name of Dawn. You want to know his secrets, you find out the pillow talk."

"The pillows at the Pearl can talk?" What manner of insane magic was that? Martel started to think about the pillow in his room, talking about him, and it made him feel mortified.

Marcus sighed. "When a man's head is resting on a pillow in the company of a girl, and he talks, that's called – never mind. The girl is the one to talk to."

"You didn't ask her anything yourself?"

"You're the one who knows the right questions, what could be important. Besides, you can't just walk in and interrogate one of Lady Pearl's wenches. Go tomorrow and see Flora. I'll let her know about your need, and she'll set up the meeting."

"Alright, I will. Thanks for your help," Martel told him. He felt better at the thought of this; now it was his turn to learn Jasper's secrets.

The warrior gave a shrug. "What else are comrades of loose association for? Wait, you got any coin? I'm hungry."

"No more than when you asked me this morning."

"Sod off."

Chapter 225: Tell a Hawk from a Heron

Tell a Hawk from a Heron

"Are you listening, boy? I assume you care about your examination." Master Alastair stared at his student.

Martel had been distracted thinking about his predicament with Jasper and the development of yesterday, but he snapped to. "Yes, master, I hear you."

"Hm." His teacher did not sound convinced, but he continued as his eyes glanced over the Hall of Elements. "It will take place in a fiveday or so, here in this place. Mistress Juliana will let you know exactly when."

"I see. What is required of me exactly?"

"I am not supposed to instruct you in specific spells, but briefly put, you'll be expected to demonstrate your control over different kinds of magic," Master Alastair explained. "A simple spell for each element should suffice. Much like you did when you passed the introduction course for water, earth, and air."

"I never took the one for fire, but I suppose that won't be an issue." At least not when it came to proving himself capable with fire. Never taking the class had already given Martel other troubles, but he pushed the affair with Jasper aside to focus on what his teacher said.

"Indeed. Just the fact that you can summon flames will suffice. The only thing you should be mindful of is that Master Reynard will also test you."

Involuntarily, Martel pulled a face hearing the name. "What should I expect?"

"Quite simple, given the possibilities. He will test your shield, which I hope you have honed. Else the time is now."

Martel had tested his shield plenty of times; he was not concerned about that. "Anything else?"

"He will ask you to demonstrate that you can empower yourself in different ways. But since you are not to be a mageknight, he has little grounds to make great demands of you. My advice is, use your spellpower on your water magic to impress Mistress Vana, but keep some in reserve for Master Reynard at the end." His teacher gave him a scrutinising look. "You have trained your spellpower sufficiently for several spells, right?"

Master Alastair had no idea, Martel thought. "I think I have enough, yeah."

Martel had to wait until evening before he could leave the castle. His second lesson with Master Alastair blocked his afternoon, and as impatient as Martel felt, he would not leave until he had eaten supper. Thus, on dark and cold streets, he made his way to the insula in the harbour district.

For once, Flora opened the door. "Come inside."

Martel did so. "Where's Marcus?"

"Out carousing, I assume. We won't need him for a simple conversation, after all." She pointed at the nearest dummy holding armour and a surcoat. "Get changed, and we'll go."

"If it's just a simple conversation, why do I need the armour?"

The earthmage gave him a glance. "You can't show up looking like a clerk. Nobody will take you seriously. Besides, the more you wear the chain shirt, the sooner you'll be accustomed to its weight."

Conceding the point, Martel removed his robe and began putting the armour on. Soon after, they set out towards the bridge district.

Snow had begun to fall on their journey, and Martel was happy when The River Pearl came into sight. Exuding light and warmth, it seemed the very picture of hospitality, even if its main offering was exactly what Martel's mother had warned him against when he left for Morcaster.

As they entered, various looks came in their direction, but by now, Night Knives were a sufficiently common sight that nobody raised an eyebrow. "Wait here while I speak to Lady Pearl," Flora told Martel and left him.

Feeling awkward standing on his own, in the middle of the room, Martel tried to look indifferent. Around him, at the tables and couches, customers were busy drinking and lavishing attention on the women serving spirits. Realising that nobody cared about his presence, too busy with their own pursuits, Martel relaxed a little.

Flora returned soon after. "She's agreed to let you question Dawn, though she'll be present as well. Stay on your good behaviour unless you want to be thrown out," she cautioned him.

"Of course." Martel had no quarrel with this girl, after all.

"Also, no matter what you learn, she expects you to keep quiet about how you learned it. And that you don't kill a regular customer," Flora added. "Lady Pearl is showing the Night Knives a great kindness. Do not make her regret it."

"Got it."

With the earthmage leading the way, the two wizards crossed the large common room, dodging patrons in elevated moods and weaving around furniture until they reached the study of the proprietress.

Lady Pearl, easy to recognise with her bald head and bold clothing, awaited them. Martel gave a deep bow, hoping that expressed sufficient respect, to which the woman smiled. She stood in the middle of the room, one hand on the shoulder of the young woman sitting next to her. Dawn, Martel surmised. He could not guess her age, though probably not much older than him, with cosmetics that accentuated her eyes and gave her lips a striking red colour.

"What's this about?" the young woman asked.

"Just some questions about a regular customer of yours," Flora explained.

"His name is Jasper. He's a student at the Lyceum," Martel added.

Dawn frowned before she laughed a little. "He's still a student? I guess we all lie a little."

"He must spend an awful lot to visit you every fiveday," Flora considered with a look towards Lady Pearl, who simply smiled and shrugged. "Has he ever told you how he acquires his means?"

The harlot raised her hands in ignorance. "He told me he had an important position in the Imperial administration."

Martel scratched the back of his head. One thing was certain, at least. Jasper would have other sources of income besides extorting Martel; evidently, he had been visiting Dawn on a regular basis long before. "He never bragged to you about the things he knew? About other students. You know, during pillow talk."

"Well I didn't know he was a student, did I? He mostly talked about his plans for the future. He did seem interested in you Night Knives lately. Asked me about the jobs you pulled for Lady Pearl. I didn't see any harm in telling him what everyone here knew," she quickly added, looking at her patron. The bald woman patted her shoulder.

That explained a few things, Martel considered. "Did he explain to you why?"

"Not really. But as thanks, he gave me gifts."

"What sort of gifts? Coin or other things?" Flora asked.

"Jewellery, perfume, sometimes clothes," Dawn listed. "He gave me this one." She presented her hand with a ring upon it. "He knows I like birds, especially eagles like this."

Martel furrowed his brow. Without thinking, he reached out and took hold of Dawn's hand. Her skin felt so soft, it distracted him for a moment, as did the scent of jasmine as he gently pulled her hand closer to inspect the ring. She giggled at his touch, a sound he normally found annoying in other girls, but it seemed strangely charming to him now.

"Master Martel?" Lady Pearl managed to convey both politeness and caution by simply saying his name.

Releasing her hand, Martel could tell that Dawn had been born in the city; the animal depicted was not an eagle, but a hawk. It was a crest he had seen before. "Lady Pearl, Mistress Dawn, thank you for your kindness."

Flora shot him a look. "You have what you need?"

Martel nodded. "I do."

Chapter 226: Athelings and Apprentices

Athelings and Apprentices

After leaving The River Pearl, Martel first had to return with Flora to remove his armour and change into his own clothes before he could walk back to the Lyceum. When he arrived home, he went straight to sleep. But the trip on the dark streets of Morcaster gave him the opportunity to consider the information from Dawn. The jewellery on her finger was more than it seemed. In fact, it was a signet ring, belonging to a scion of a minor house.

Martel remembered when Maximilian had lost his, and the lengths the viscount was willing to go to that he might recover it. The novice did not imagine Jasper had stolen this particular signet ring, as that was not his style; it seemed more likely he had obtained it from the owner by the same means that he took Martel's silver. And although every important member of that particular house would have such a ring, Martel had a good guess as to whom Jasper had extorted; the only student at the Lyceum who had a hawk for a crest. But such would wait until tomorrow; satisfied with the outing, Martel slept soundly.

The next day, Martel considered how to make his approach. He had himself felt rather embarrassed about Jasper extorting him, and he imagined the acolyte's other victims shared the sentiment. He spent a long time planning the conversation, how to broach the subject and how much he was willing to reveal about his own predicament. In the end, his contemplations became an excuse to delay what could be a most unpleasant moment, especially if the conversation took a bad turn. Steeling himself, Martel went to the third floor of his dormitory tower, knocking on the door.

Alain opened, looking at him with surprise. "What is it?"

"Can we speak in private?"

The mageknight gave a frown but opened the door fully and stepped aside to allow Martel entry. "What is amiss?"

"I'm having some trouble with Jasper. You know, the earth acolyte." He watched Alain's reaction and noted that an expression ran across the young nobleman's face, indicating displeasure, annoyance, or something to that effect. "I think you may have the same issue with him as I do."

Alain crossed his arms. "What makes you say that?"

"I've been following Jasper. He has a girl in town, and I saw your signet ring on her finger."

The mageknight grabbed one hand with the other, though Martel noticed both of them were bereft of jewellery. "He gave my ring to some – strumpet?"

Martel nodded. "He has a good amount of my silver as well. And I suspect there are others."

Even though alone in the room with a closed door, Alain whispered his next question. "What does he know about you?"

"I think we both prefer to keep our secrets," Martel pointed out.

"Oh, of course. Forgive my impertinence."

"To that end, we must deal with him. Can I count on your support?"

The mageknight seemed hesitant, weighing the decision. "What should we do?"

"I have an idea."

One part in play, Martel crossed the castle to find another. Although it had taken him a while, everything had fallen into place after his conversation with Dawn. Jasper reading his messages and following him around could explain some of the information the acolyte had gained about Martel, but not everything. For instance, the exact sums he was paid for his work with the Night Knives would only be known to himself, the mercenaries, and the people at The River Pearl.

The conversation had also illuminated matters left unspoken, which Martel now saw in a different light. He ran through this in his mind as he approached the apothecary. He had been convinced of Nora's guilt, that she had been complicit in Jasper's extortion, perhaps because the acolyte's threat to expose his secrets had made Martel inclined to view everyone in the worst light. Also, he had assumed he was Jasper's only victim, and so when the acolyte protected Nora's trade with apothecary remedies, Martel's next assumption had been that Nora somehow benefited from this; he had not considered that she could be a victim too.

Stepping into the small workshop, where the smell of drying herbs greeted him as always, Martel prepared himself for the second difficult conversation of the day. He cleared his throat until Nora noticed him. "What are you doing here?"

"You've probably noticed my mood hasn't been the best lately," Martel began. He felt guilty about how he had treated Nora with almost contemptuous silence, but apologies would have to wait until afterwards. "I have had some troubles. With Jasper, the earth acolyte. I think you're familiar with him?"

"What sort of trouble?"

"The kind where he forces me to do as he demands. And I think he does the same to you." Martel stared at her with his blue eyes.

Her voice grew soft. "How did you know?"

"The mageknights buy their remedies from you. When I offered to make some for them, Jasper threatened me to stop. Because I think he benefits from you selling to them," Martel suggested, searching her face for any clue that he was right.

"I only meant to do it once or twice." Her voice grew thick. "My father can't find work. I already make it for the apothecary, so there could be no harm in me selling a few, right?"

"And Jasper found out?"

She nodded. "He threatened to tell Mistress Rana unless I kept doing it, giving him most of the money. I don't want to do it, I don't want to risk my apprenticeship, but what else could I do?" She shivered and looked to be on the verge of tears.

"You are not alone in this," Martel reassured her. "You know how some of the acolytes gather each Pelday evening, in the Chamber of Earth?"

"Yes, but I'm not a fighter. I never go." Nora looked at him with wide eyes.

"This coming Pelday, you should."

Chapter 227: It's All About the Money

It's All About the Money

Thinking about his planned confrontation with Jasper gave Martel the by now familiar mixture of anxiety and excitement that accompanied all of his schemes. Unfortunately, today was Solday, and he would have to suffer these emotions until tomorrow night.

Working alongside Nora in the morning happened quietly as it had for a fiveday or longer, but the silence no longer felt strange or uncomfortable. Now that they both knew the truth, they exchanged looks and little smiles, at ease with each other once more. The only thing that dampened conversation was the anticipation of tomorrow night, which Martel assumed that Nora shared.

His chores done both in the apothecary and the workshops with Master Jerome, Martel thankfully had something to keep him busy in the afternoon and make time pass by faster. Cloak and gloves on, he left the Lyceum to visit Shadi.

The weather remained cold, but nonetheless, a shift had occurred. The recent snow had begun to melt due to unexpected warmth, aided by occasional rainfall; winter's grasp remained loose. This meant the streets overflowed with water, making for a wet and slippery walk. Martel silently praised the cobbler in Littleborough, who had made the boots he currently wore, which had carried him all the way from Engby to Morcaster and served him well since. He was also grateful that his feet had not grown in the past year, at least not sufficiently to make the boots too small. He wondered if he would have to pay for a new pair himself, or if the quartermaster might provide for him as she did with his clothes and a few other supplies.

Reaching the Khivan enclave, Martel saw even fewer people on the streets than in the other districts he had passed through. Yet as he continued, he remembered the event of his previous visit; just as the thought had entered his mind, he noticed a gathering of people ahead, exactly like the last time he came this way. His heart sank. Part of him wanted to hurry past, simply ignore what was happening; after all, it did not involve him. Hailing from Nordmark, none could argue that Khivans were his people, Shadi excluded. Yet they were people.

Approaching the edge of the small crowd, Martel saw a similar sight as last fiveday. A family stood in front of a house, their belongings piled onto the cobbled stones. Children crying, a mother trying in vain to comfort them, and a father pleading to no avail. Their landlord, wearing a fur hat and heavy cloak, looked implacable.

His two guards were present as well, emptying the house as before. In addition, a patrol of five legionaries from the city guard stood around the landlord, eyeing the crowd. Martel could see why;

compared to last fiveday, more spectators had gathered, and an angry mood lay in the air. Conscious that as an Asterian, their ire could fall on him as well, Martel pulled the hood on his cloak tight around his head and continued.

He reached the watchmaker's workshop soon after without incident, his heart full of pity for the evicted family and his mind relieved to have avoided trouble. Spellcaster or not, Martel did not feel equipped to fend off an entire mob of angry people. Shadi greeted him at the door and invited him in.

"Have a seat. I'll boil some water for tea," she suggested.

Martel cleared his throat. "Wonderful."

"What did Maximilian say about his new clock?"

"Oh, he was floored! Used a lot of fancy words to describe it. Amazing work of craftsmanship, stupendous, expressions like that."

Shadi grinned. "I'll be sure to let dad know."

Martel leaned to one side, peering into the workshop of the inner room. "He's not at home?"

"Upstairs, asleep. No work for him at present."

He thought he detected hesitation in her voice, but he was unsure whether to inquire.

"Anything going on at that school of yours?" she continued.

"My examination is next fiveday. Or thereabouts, I don't think they've told me the date yet." Martel gave a broad smile. "Maybe next time we meet, I won't be a novice anymore."

"What will you be instead?" Shadi deftly removed the pot of boiling water from the wood stove and scattered tea leaves into the liquid.

"Broadly speaking, an acolyte. More specifically, I don't know. Either I'll get a blue robe as a watermage to eventually become a weathermage, or a white robe as an airmage to become a seamage. I haven't decided."

"Such an exciting choice."

She sounded absent-minded as she spoke, making Martel wonder if something was on her mind.

"Is anything troubling you?"

She bit her lower lip. "Some friends of ours, they lost their home yesterday. Couldn't pay rent any longer."

That seemed to be a common occurrence. "That's awful. Where are they now?"

"They found shelter with another family, but that won't be enough. They still won't have money for food, and nobody can find work."

A truly desperate situation, which Martel could recognise. He felt terrible, yet at the same time relieved that Shadi was not threatened by the same. Or was she? Her father did not seem to have work either. "Is there nothing to be done?"

"Those families that can scrape coin together usually get passage back to Khiva. Those that can't end up as indentured servants bound for the Western Isles. Either way, they aren't staying," she explained.

"What about you?" Martel asked cautiously. "You've got enough for now, right?"

Her eyes looked away. "For this month. But our landlord has already told us rent is going up next month, another ten pieces. Fourth time this year, every season is another increase."

"That can't be allowed," he protested, though it struck him he had no idea how the law worked.

"My father said the same, and he tried to go to court. But they don't care much for Khivans," Shadi said with bitterness. "The judge wouldn't even see him because he doesn't have our contract, the landlord has the only copy. And we can't afford a solicitor to argue on our behalf."

Martel sat quiet, feeling defeated. It did not seem feasible that he might gather enough money for next month's rent, pretending to buy more clocks. He could not keep borrowing, and working for the Night Knives would not be enough either, doing the small tasks they had so far. The only way would be on the wrong side of the law, such as the prize fights or, Stars forbid, getting involved with Kerra again.

"Tea's ready." Shadi poured a cup for each of them.

"Great."

Chapter 228: Strength in Numbers

Strength in Numbers

Martel knew he would not allow Shadi to become homeless. Having seen the despair of those evicted, cast out to live on the streets, and aware of how Morcaster treated people in such a situation, Martel would find a way to prevent that. He would need a new strategy, though. Just getting money to pay the rent would not work; partly because their landlord kept increasing it, partly because Martel had none. But he had other ideas that he would pursue, tomorrow. Today was Pelday, and Martel had another issue to deal with.

Not until tonight, however. First, he had two classes with Master Alastair and one shift in the apothecary to work. As before, the latter took place quietly. Neither he nor Nora mentioned their plan, though Martel assumed it weighed on her mind as much as his.

As for Master Alastair, he had other matters worth mentioning. "I have spoken with Mistress Juliana. Your examination will take place the day after tomorrow, on Glunday. During your usual first class with me."

Another concern to add to the others, though Martel was not truly worried about this. He knew by now his spellwork exceeded what any other novice at this school might achieve. "Great."

"Now, I'm not supposed to instruct you specifically," his teacher said with a wry smile, "but I will allow myself to ask whether you feel confidence in your chosen spells?"

Martel nodded. "Yes, master. I'll do you proud."

"You already have, my boy, but that's good to hear."

Passing through the entrance hall, a voice that Martel disliked called out to him. "Letter for you."

The novice looked to see Jasper approach him, waving something in his hand. At least this message came in an envelope, preventing the acolyte from reading it. Martel grabbed it and looked down to see the seal of a horse, and he immediately felt worse recognising the crest of Cheval.

"Mingling with the nobles, eh? You really wasted no time licking the boots of your betters," Jasper said with a mocking voice.

Martel stared at him, and all his anger and frustrations rose up in him. His hands felt hot, ready to burst into flames. "What did I ever do to you? Why do you treat me this way?"

A sneer ran across the acolyte's face. "You pretend you don't know? You came here, gangly and awkward, pitiful. Far too old to be a novice. Yet I showed you friendship, I let you sit at my table. And in return, you ingratiated yourself with the mageknights, the nobles, thinking that makes you better than me?"

Jasper turned on his heel, stalking away. Confused, Martel tried to make sense of what he had just heard. The way he remembered it, Jasper had been reluctant to show any kind of cordiality. And why would Martel's friendship with Maximilian preclude him from being friends with anyone else? Shaking his head, Martel left. Given Jasper's behaviour in general towards him and others, he did not feel guilty about any missed opportunity for friendship with the earth acolyte.

Returning to his room, Martel finally remembered the letter in his hand. He broke the seal and let his eyes run over the brief missive.

To Martel of Engby,

You are cordially invited to the winter solstice celebration at the house of Duke Leonard of Cheval on the fifth Solday of the first winter month.

Not this again. Unlike what Jasper might think, Martel desired to tangle with the nobility as little as possible. He opened the drawer of his desk and threw the letter inside.

It was finally evening. Martel made his way to the Chamber of Earth, arriving as one of the first. He declined any invitations to spar, waiting in the corner to see who else arrived. Jasper might not show, of course, in which case Martel would have to confront him at another time. But tonight, under the guise of a training match, seemed the best. Alain arrived, and they exchanged nods but otherwise kept their distance. Nora appeared as well, looking nervous and out of her element.

Martel noticed the green robe first. With satisfaction, he watched Jasper enter. Quickly, before anyone else could get in the way, he walked over to the earth acolyte. "I challenge you."

Jasper snorted with laughter. "Gladly." He stepped forward and leaned in to whisper, "You better lose."

They took position. Henry offered his staff for Martel to borrow, but the novice shook his head. Pure spellcraft was all he needed.

Alain appeared and gave a signal for them to begin.

As Martel expected, Jasper raised a wall of earth as his first defensive move. Martel was not the only one who had studied the spells used in this chamber. Even as Jasper's defence rose into the air, reaching the height of a man, Martel retaliated.

Sprinting forward, he raised a small mound of earth to act as a step ladder. With an empowered jump, he leapt over the wall. All eyes turned to the novice soaring through the air, though the obstacle on the battlefield prevented most of them from seeing what happened next.

As Jasper stumbled backwards in surprise and panic, Martel landed in front of him. Clumps of earth rose up in the air to push the novice away, but before Jasper could finish his attack, Martel grabbed the acolyte by the throat and slammed him to the ground with empowered strength.

Keeping his grasp around Jasper's windpipe, Martel knelt to whisper in his ear. "I know about Alain, Nora, others." As he spoke, those mentioned by name appeared in the background, filling Jasper's vision. "I know about Dawn."

"Let me go," gasped the acolyte.

"You try anything against one of us, all of us will come for you. We'll haunt your every step inside the castle." Martel allowed his magic to heat up his hand. Not sufficiently to burn into Jasper's throat, but enough that he could feel the latent fire.

"Please —"

Someone approached, but Alain held them back. Martel kept his attention on the terrified acolyte in his grasp. "If you try to get rid of us? Every time you leave the castle, my Night Knives will be waiting for you. You go to see your girl, they'll leave nothing but a bloody mess." He increased the heat in his hand. "You understand?"

"Yes! Stars, yes!"

Martel finally released his grip and stood up. As Jasper coughed and massaged his throat, he could look up to see three vengeful faces staring down at him as Alain and Nora joined the novice. "Don't forget this moment," Martel cautioned him.

As people stared and muttered among themselves, the novice, the mageknight, and the apprentice left the chamber. Behind them, another acolyte demolished Jasper's wall and made the floor smooth again.

Chapter 229: Lessons in Law

Lessons in Law

When Martel woke in the morning, and the rush of emotions from last night had faded, his first thought was whether it had worked. If Jasper did not believe his threats, he might reveal his knowledge to punish Martel and the others. But as the day progressed with no sign of this, Martel allowed himself to relax. The nagging of constant concern over whether his secret would be revealed began to fade.

Yet its place was soon taken by his worry over Shadi's situation. This could not be solved through magic, whether used as force or to make coin. Just like with Jasper, Martel needed to gather

information before he could determine a course of action. Fortunately, Malday provided an opportunity to draw from the source that seemed most likely to yield anything of value.

"Father Andrew, seeing as you know so much about different things, are you also familiar with the law?"

"I am no solicitor, if that's what you ask. Nor am I an expert of religious law, never cared much for the Inquisition," the old priest mumbled. "You in trouble?" He whipped his head to look at Martel with surprising agility.

"Not at all, father. Someone I know is having trouble with their landlord. He keeps raising their rent."

Father Andrew nodded a little, though Martel could not tell if that was because he agreed or felt drowsy. "Not many know the law, which some people exploit. Their contract should state the terms, though I don't believe raising the rent more than once a year is legal no matter what."

"What would happen if a landlord did that anyway?"

"If a court finds him guilty, he'll have to pay back what he took along with a hefty fine, I imagine. But if someone can't afford rent, nor can they afford a solicitor," Father Andrew pointed out. "Though this talk gives me an idea."

"What's that?"

"It will do you some good to practice your arithmetic. Now write down the following. A man pays twenty silvers a month in rent..."

Groaning in his mind, Martel grabbed the quill on the desk.

Afternoon saw Martel continue his exertions, except they changed to a physical and more voluntary nature. In the alleyway behind the insula, his staff met Marcus's sword, teaching him how to fight without magic but while wearing chain armour. While it still tired Martel, he no longer found the weight unnatural or a hindrance to his movements.

After perhaps half a bell or so, Marcus stepped back and sheathed his sword. "How did it go, your problem with the boy in the green robe?"

"I haven't had trouble with him yet. I think he got the message."

The warrior nodded. "People who wield fear as a weapon will also easily be subjugated by fear, once you turn it back on them." He spat on the ground, perhaps due to exertions, perhaps due to disgust. "Meet a man with steel, not trickery, I say."

"And what about magic? Does that count as steel or trickery?"

"The second, I would argue. But if you are on my side, I won't complain." He gave a wry smile. "As long as our enemies do."

Martel laughed before his mind turned to serious matters. He still had debts to repay, all of them to people he respected and cared about, and it bothered him to strain their leniency. "Any new tasks on the horizon?"

"Could be. Flora is always talking to someone. Think we might get something next fiveday, but she'll send you a message. That won't be a problem anymore, I take it."

"Indeed."

Afterwards, Martel continued southeast towards the Khivan enclave. This time, he was grateful to avoid seeing any more evictions, even if he feared they still took place regularly. At least he was spared the sight and any potential trouble, though he kept his hood up and his face down in case anyone with a grudge against Asterians passed him on the street.

As she opened the door, Shadi looked at him in surprise. "Martel! Is something wrong?"

"On the contrary. I hope. Can we talk?"

She allowed him entry and closed the door behind him. "My dad's not in a good mood," she spoke quietly, glancing towards the workshop in the back room. Following her gaze, Martel saw the watchmaker sitting by his bench, polishing tools with angry motions. "Let's go upstairs," she suggested.

Martel followed her to the upper floor, where he had never been before. It was a single room underneath the slanted roof, forcing him to be careful with his head. Two beds stood in either end with a large chest as typically used for clothes or linen and a few other pieces of furniture.

Shadi sat down on what he assumed was her bed, and he did the same. "I've been thinking about your situation. With the rent and your landlord."

Her shoulders slumped. "Martel, that is not your problem to solve. Please, don't trouble yourself."

"You're being exploited by a ruthless, greedy man who I suspect is breaking the law. He doesn't care about your plight because he thinks you're powerless." Martel felt himself getting angry at the thought. "I won't let him get away with it."

"But what can you do? I don't see how magic can do anything. He's rich, with guards. If you threaten him or steal from him, the city guard will protect him. And I don't want you getting into trouble," Shadi impressed upon him.

"I won't," he promised. "Probably. But I think he is breaking the law, and if we can prove that, it should go a long way towards handling your problems."

"How? I told you, the courts don't care about the word of a Khivan."

Her distraught demeanour made him feel awful and only strengthened his resolve to do something. "Which is why we need more than your word." Martel looked straight into her eyes, his expression serious. "We need the contract he signed with your father. To that end, I'm going to break into his house."

Chapter 230: Examination

Examination

Martel continued to go over his plan with Shadi in his head, even after he woke the next morning. It took him a while to remember the significance of this particular Glunday; the most important date

since his arrival to Morcaster, only to be eclipsed by his eventual graduation day. Today, he took the novice examination and became an acolyte. Soon, he could lay aside his brown robe.

He still had yet to decide whether he wanted the blue colour of a watermage, treading the road of a weathermage, or the whites of an airmage to eventually set sail as a seamage. He would have to make a decision before he could change attire, but at least it would be within his grasp. Once the examination had ended and no longer weighed on him, he would sit down and make his choice. And if he ever changed his mind, the similarities in spellwork between the two paths should allow him to move from one to the other.

But first things first. Before Martel made his decision about being an acolyte, it was time to pass his examination as a novice.

Thanks to his Khivan clock, Martel arrived just before the bell rang, entering the Hall of Elements. He immediately felt a little unsure of himself, perhaps almost intimidated, seeing no less than four members of the faculty turn and look at him. Mistress Juliana, for all the help she had given him, still made Martel feel nervous by her very presence. He felt less apprehensive about Mistress Vana, though he was keenly aware that she was the one to impress. .com

As for Reynard, Martel only felt anger, which he knew would not help him with the exacting spellwork he was about to do.

Lastly, he looked at Master Alastair, and the short man's smile helped to reassure the novice. Yes, Martel knew he was up to the task. He would not let distractions get in the way.

"Martel, exactly on time," Master Alastair remarked as the bell began to toll. In response, the novice bowed his head. "Once Master Fenrick arrives, we'll begin."

"An awful lot of teachers to evaluate one student," Reynard spoke gruffly. "Does the boy need all the help he can get?"

"Given how swiftly Martel has progressed through his studies, I thought it prudent to have more eyes for his evaluation," Mistress Juliana retorted. With her hair tightly bound, her face nearly expressionless, she looked stern as always. "Besides, you might all find it interesting to witness how far he has come. He is a testament to the Lyceum and its qualities."

His confidence bolstered by hearing this, Martel stood with his back straight, forgetting about Reynard to focus on his spells instead. He had practised and prepared; he knew what to do.

The door to the chamber opened, and Master Fenrick shuffled inside. He gave a surprised glance across the gathering, adjusting his spectacles. "I didn't realise we'd be a crowd."

"It makes you wonder," Reynard murmured.

"Now that we are all here," Master Alastair interjected, raising his voice, "we can begin if Martel feels ready." He looked expectantly at the novice, as did the others.

Martel nodded and walked to the middle of the hall, standing on the earthen floor with the ring of water circling around. The five teachers all took a few steps back, arranging themselves to observe him.

Holding out his hands, palms downwards, Martel called upon the wind. Rather than push it into a direction, he let it circle itself endlessly, creating a small whirlwind. "The opposite of air is earth, yet with a little persuasion, the two may still meet." As he spoke, a pillar of earth rose up in the middle of the whirlwind until he scattered the dirt, allowing the pieces to be caught up in his maelstrom of air.

Letting the wind slowly die down, Martel caught the earth and pulled it back together into the pillar before he slowly allowed that to sink as well. It had cost him some of his spellpower to create and maintain such an effect, but looking at the faces around him, it seemed to have been worth the effort.

Walking over to the edge of the canal, Martel held out his hand in the same gesture as before. From the quiet waters, a column of liquid rose up to meet the tips of his fingers. Almost sweating with effort, Martel continued with the spell. "Water and fire are opposites, yet here they already are together. But when you remove one from the other, you are left with this." Clenching his other hand and slowly pulling it back, Martel drew out the heat from the column of water, turning it into ice. He held the effect for several moments until he released the cold block, and it descended down into the canal.

"I believe we have seen enough," Master Alastair declared while looking at his fellow teachers with a satisfied smile. "Certainly as Master of Elements, I feel impressed with this performance."

Some of the others nodded and mumbled in agreement. "No reason to prolong this unnecessarily," Mistress Vana assented.

"The boy might be done with your part, but I have yet to begin," Reynard growled. He walked over to the doors and grabbed two staves, leaning against the wall.

As the Master of War returned to the middle of the hall, the other teachers stepped back to provide more space. Martel extended his hand to take the closest staff.

Reynard pulled back. "That one belongs to me personally," he spoke in the same tone of voice as before. "This one is good enough for you." He threw the other quarterstaff, which Martel caught. "Take position, novice. Show us what you can do."

Martel hefted the weapon a few times and let one hand run over the wood. Normal weight, no obvious cracks or weaknesses; it seemed to be like any other weapon from the school's armoury. Placing one foot behind the other, presenting a smaller target while holding his weapon ready to parry, Martel stood ready to fight.