

Firebrand

Chapter 23: Land or Sea

Land or Sea

The column of water rose into the air in the Hall of Elements. It held its structure against the laws of nature for several moments before it finally disintegrated, falling back into the channel. Sweating slightly from the exertion, Martel wiped his brow.

"Well done, boy," Master Alastair told him. He narrowed his eyes. "It takes its toll on you?"

"It's hard," Martel admitted.

"You haven't begun training your spellpower yet," the teacher considered. "I forgot. Usually, theory of magic is the first course a student has with Master Fenrick."

"Spellpower? How's that related to theory of magic?"

"Well, besides teaching you where your magic comes from, Master Fenrick will also train you how to unlock its potential. Increase your capacity for casting spells, like building up your strength."

"I see. Well, that'll be good. My focus breaks whenever I do magic for an extended while."

Master Alastair nodded. "That's how it is. But you seem to be doing well with water. We will soon move on to practising your skill with air. With those two covered, you are on course to be a weathermage."

Martel hesitated before he asked. "What about fire? Shouldn't I learn that?"

"Well," the Master of Elements considered. "All students are expected to have a basic grasp of every element to become an acolyte. But your innate talent for fire covers that. What matters is that you can control water and air well enough to impress your teachers in those subjects, that they'll agree to train you further."

"It won't be you?"

Master Alastair shook his head. "I only teach basic elemental magic. To be a weathermage, you need specialised training from our Master of Water and Mistress of Air."

"Oh. Well, I'd like to be well-versed in all the elements." Martel refrained from mentioning why he wanted to practise fire – he imagined Master Alastair would not approve.

His teacher gave him a scrutinising look. "Are you having doubts about your chosen path?"

Martel was not, but he figured it best to deflect. "Just thought about – seamages. Yeah, I was at the harbour, watching the ships. Looked exciting."

"Well, that would be the exact same skills you need. Weather or sea, it's all water and air," Master Alastair remarked. "I'll tell Mistress Juliana to have a talk with you."

"Oh – no, that's not needed. Really –"

"Nonsense, that's her job. Now, back to practising."

~

After lunch, a message summoned Martel to the overseer's chamber. As he ascended the stairs, he felt slightly apprehensive; while he had done nothing, the strict overseer made him feel guilty just by proximity.

Once admitted inside, he took one step beyond the door, but nothing more. Mistress Juliana looked up from the letter she was writing, set aside her quill, and turned her chair around.

"Martel. Have a seat."

He took the offered chair.

"Master Alastair told me you have been considering your choices."

"Oh, just – idle speculation. Not worth troubling you over."

"I am the overseer for the students, Martel. Nothing concerning you would be trouble," Mistress Juliana assured him; with her stern eyes on him, he did not feel particularly comforted. "Besides, you have been here nearly a month. Given you are here under unusual circumstances, it is only fitting that I check on you."

"Alright," Martel mumbled.

"Master Alastair tells me your elemental skills progress as they should. And I have no doubt you can pass your other courses, putting you on the trail to become a weathermage. If that remains your desire."

"Oh yes, for sure."

"But you have expressed an interest in becoming a seamage as well." The way she said it, her gaze locked on him, it felt like an accusation. "Understandable. You have seen a little more of the world than Nordmark, only to discover there is far more."

"I have," Martel replied, and to his surprise, he meant it. He thought about the ships leaving harbour and imagined where they might travel, and what experiences awaited. "But I still want to return home. Be a weathermage and help everyone there."

"Well, one doesn't have to exclude the other. You will be learning and using the same skills. Besides, your town currently has a competent weathermage in Master Ogion, if I recall."

"Yes, that's true. He moved in a few years back."

"You could conceivably spend some of your years of Imperial service as a seamage. If you did well, you could ask to be sent to Nordmark once the position in your town became available," Mistress Juliana suggested.

Suddenly, Martel found himself interested. He had not considered this angle. "That is possible?"

The overseer nodded. "It is. The only issue is that you cannot choose which vessels to serve aboard, not while you perform your dutybound service to the Empire. You could be expected to sail on a warship." If possible, her gaze became even more intense.

"Is that likely?"

"Hard to tell. The Khivans keep a healthy distance from our ships, I am given to understand. Their cannons cannot compete with the range of our wizards. But we do sail supplies up the Savena river, which is hotly contested territory."

Martel scratched his head. "I'm not sure about that. Sailing sounds interesting, but not into war."

"Well, you are not obliged to decide. Weather or sea, you can train as a watermage at first. You can make your decision once you finish your schooling," Mistress Juliana told him. "Who knows? Perhaps the war will be over at that time."

"Thanks. I'll give it some thought."

"My door is open should you require advice."

Martel could not imagine willingly disturbing the overseer. "Thank you, I appreciate that."

~

Although it was by happenstance, Martel found himself imagining a future as a seamage. Growing up inland, he had not been to a port city before Morcaster. He had never thought about seagoing vessels, or going to sea himself, for that matter. He remained committed to returning to Engby, but the overseer had been right; while Master Ogion lived there, Martel could not expect to be sent home. The Empire would require his services elsewhere; perhaps aboard a ship crossing the southern sea to Sindhu? Curious to know more, Martel did what seemed most sensible and went to the library.

"I need to read about seamages, and about Sindhu, please," he told the librarian.

"Expanding our horizons, are we," the scribe said with a dull voice. He left his seat to go through the shelves, locating a work on each subject.

Martel dug into the business of sea magic first. Most of it seemed obvious; the most important ability was to keep waters calm and the wind in the sails. Yet it did contain a few extra challenges. Earth magic to help repair a damaged ship. And a strong knowledge of astronomy that the seamage could serve as a navigator if needed. Martel's interest took a blow, and he set the book aside to look at the other.

Sindhu, the land of a thousand princes. All manner of wealth could be found. Diamonds, gems, gold, and silver. Spices, cotton, and the best wood for shipbuilding. More than that, the Sindhians had perfected the art of elixirs. In the spires of the Sindhian cities lived sages, who could make potions to grant immortality. Or draughts so powerful, one drop would revive a man at death's door, but two would stop his heart forever.

Engrossed in the descriptions, Martel almost missed when a door opened that he had hitherto only seen closed. Guarding the stairs to the upper floor, forbidden for a novice like him, the door slowly creaked open.

Glancing over, Martel was surprised to see Eleanor. In part because so few other students seemed to use the library; in part because he wondered what need a mageknight would have for the advanced topics.

As she entered the main floor, their eyes met. Always feeling awkward, especially around Eleanor, Martel raised one hand and waved. He immediately regretted it, knowing how foolish he had to look; yet she had helped him on two occasions now, and he did not wish to be rude.

She stopped, looking indecisive. Finally, she walked over to him. "Unusual to see someone else here."

"Right?" Martel glanced up at the tall shelves. "All this knowledge, and nobody here seems to care." Nearby, the librarian coughed, looking distressed.

"What are you reading?"

"Oh. Just about Sindhu. I was curious."

She leaned forward a little. "And seamages. Planning to sail the salt?"

"Just thinking about it." He shrugged. "What about you?"

"Me?"

Martel nodded towards the door leading upstairs. "What led you to the restricted floor?"

She laughed a little, which sounded enchanting. "You make it sound like a trove of forbidden knowledge. They are simply tomes on more advanced matters."

"Like what? What did you read about?"

"Oh. Magic of the mind."

He frowned. "That's a thing?"

"You do not remember from Master Fenrick's class on the theory of magic?"

"I haven't started it yet. I will after astronomy, I think."

"That explains it. Speaking of which, I will see you for class tomorrow. I have another I should get to."

"See you then." As she turned around and walked away, Martel gave another awkward wave she was unable to see, reproached himself silently for it, and finally turned his attention back onto his book.

Chapter 24: Sun or Stars

Sun or Stars

The first two bells after breakfast, Martel spent doing work for Master Jerome, making the most of all his spare time on Mandays. As his only class did not start until sixth bell, he had time after lunch to himself as well. With his new silver in his pocket, he went into town.

Setting a course west, he soon saw his destination rise against the sky. The glittering spires of the temple of the Sun beckoned him. As he approached, he saw more and more members of the clergy, filling the streets. Most of them seemed like ordinary folk, occupied with tasks or errands; only their clothing set them apart. The occasional inquisitor could also be seen, and Martel kept his distance as a rule.

Reaching the great square before the temple, Martel took it in with a deep breath. Tall trees lay scattered with circles of green surrounding them. The winter sun, weak as it was, reflected itself on the building to shine upon the area; Martel blinked and raised one hand to shield his eyes.

Given the size of the place, he had to walk around to find the person he was meeting. Just when he started to wonder if perhaps he was early, a slim hand grabbed his arm.

"There he is!" Shadi smiled. "The warrior mage."

Martel coughed. "Don't say it too loud, or people will think I know how to fight."

"Is that so bad?"

"There's always someone who doesn't believe it and wants to fight, just to check. In this case, they would be right," Martel explained.

"You think too little of yourself." Shadi shook her head. "Fine. I was going to shout it from the rooftops, but I'll refrain."

"Thanks," Martel laughed. He looked around at the square, the great temple, and the many people hurrying about. "Why did you want to meet here?"

"Why not? It's a nice place. Even if it's not for my beliefs, the temple is the prettiest building I've ever seen."

"Well, you like flames, right. No bigger flame than the Sun," Martel argued.

She gave him a lazy slap on the shoulder. "That should be considered heresy. Don't let the Sun-crazed Asterians hear you say such."

Martel could not help but glance around, just to check no inquisitors were nearby. "I'll keep my heretical thoughts to myself. Though while we're here, there's a nice place nearby."

"Oh? Show me!"

Leaving the square, Martel led her to the small shrine for the Stars. It lay in shadows, thanks to the buildings surrounding it, and the air felt noticeably colder.

"Hey, what's this place?"

"It's dedicated to the Stars. Well, not just any, there's lots of stars. The Triumvirate of the Heavens." Martel approached the small building with its statues.

"Whoa, I never heard of them before."

"You wouldn't, I guess. Malac, Perel, Glund." Martel pointed at each of the statues as he spoke the names. "Warrior, Jester, Sage."

"This is a strange place. Such a prominent part of town, yet hidden away."

He nodded. "You're not supposed to worship the Stars too much. But a little respect is deserved."

"This is your faith?"

Martel shrugged. "Sort of. I grew up with a temple of the Sun in my town, like anywhere else, I suppose. But the Stars, Father Julius – the priest back home – said they gave magic to humanity. So I always felt an affinity for them."

"Well, that was nice of them. I wish they'd given me some," Shadi considered.

"Hah. Yeah." Martel felt a little awkward talking about this, but he wanted Shadi to know more about him. "I think my magic is stronger at night. When they shine."

"Oh, that's amazing. How do you know?" She walked into the shrine and let her hand slide over the marble statue of Malac.

"Hard to tell. It just flows easier, like there's less resistance. Or like the wind is at my back, pushing me forward, rather than forcing me backwards."

"It's funny, isn't it. It's like I'm blind and you can see, and you're trying to explain to me what that's like." Shadi turned to look at him with her own dark eyes.

Martel returned her stare, unable to think of what to say. The moments passed; it felt as if something had happened, or could happen, or would have, but did not.

"It's cold here." Shadi shivered a little. "Let's get back to the sunlight."

"Sure. Let's."

As they left the shadow of the shrine, they strolled in the pale sun's light, already beginning to fade for the afternoon.

"It's weird to think that's always been there, and I've never seen it," Shadi mentioned.

"It's well hidden for sure."

"Nice to have more places to see. There's so little to do in Morcaster during winter. It's so dull." She dragged out the last word.

"Really? The city is so big, I thought there'd be lots going on."

"Nah, even the market is slow. Wait until spring, at least, and you'll see! The equinox festivities draw people from all over," Shadi explained. "You'll love it."

He glanced at her as they walked side by side. "Sounds good."

"Alright, wizard guy, I'm heading back home. See you another time?"

"Definitely."

~

Entering the classroom, Master Fenrick waved a bunch of parchments around. Martel sat on his spot, as did the six remaining mageknights in his astronomy class. They ceased their chatting to look expectantly at their teacher.

"I have examined your star charts. Six of them are near flawless. One has room for improvement." He looked at Martel and dug one out of the bunch. Stepping forward, he placed it on the desk before Martel. "Your calculations are off concerning the rotation of Malac."

A few of the mageknights snickered, including Cheval.

"Find your errors and show me. I don't require a new star chart. A simple parchment containing your new calculations will suffice, and I will consider you to have passed."

"Very well, master." Martel breathed a little sigh of relief. Finding a few errors should not be too difficult.

Returning to the front of the class, Master Fenrick raised his hand holding the other star charts. "As for the rest of you," he began to say, his voice growing louder, "you must take me for a fool!"

The acolytes exchanged looks.

"You think that you are the first to come up with the idea of buying a star chart from an older student?" Their teacher waved the maps around. "These are near identical! Do you foolish children understand that if you fail my course, you will not graduate?"

The looks turned shocked.

"Typical. You thought you could swim through this course without paying attention or doing the least work."

Eleanor raised her hand. "Forgive me, master, but –"

"No, I am in no mood for excuses," Master Fenrick told her curtly.

She lowered her hand with a frustrated expression.

Not happy about challenging a teacher, Martel steeled himself nonetheless and raised his hand. "Master Fenrick?"

The teacher turned his head. "What?" he snapped.

"Eleanor helped me with my chart. She didn't have to cheat. Her chart is flawless because her work is good," Martel explained.

Master Fenrick leafed through the maps until he found hers. He glanced over it before turning his eyes on Eleanor. "How often does the Triumvirate converge?"

She blinked. "Three times a year, master."

He pulled her map out and placed it on her desk. "Congratulations, Fontaine, you have passed astronomy. You still have to attend the remaining lessons, of course."

"Yes, master." She gave Martel a grateful look, and he felt his cheeks hurt from smiling.

"As for your fellow mageknights, you have one fiveday to turn in your own work before I inform the headmaster."

Glancing at Cheval, Martel's smile persisted. It faltered as it fell on Maximilian, sitting to his left. He leaned over. "I'll help you."

"Of course you will. If I was expelled, what would you do without me?" the mageknight jested.

"Quiet!" Master Fenrick barked. "Now, today we will discuss when Malac is retrograde, and what impact that might have on empowering magic..."

Chapter 25: Strength in Others

Strength in Others

After the first month, Martel began to feel settled. When he thought of home, he thought of his small chamber in the boys' dormitory rather than the crowded house in Engby, containing one large room where all his family members slept.

His circle of friends in and outside the Lyceum stayed narrow. Maximilian remained the one person from school he spent time with and whose company he could rely on. Some of the elemental acolytes did treat him with some cordiality, such as Henry, the airmage who manned the desk in the entrance hall. Most of his time, though, Martel spent alone, practising his art.

He did not venture much outside of school, unless assisting the artificer with tasks. While his own schoolwork kept Martel busy, Shadi spent her time helping her father in his workshop. As the weather grew worse, strengthening winter's hold, the city became quiet. Winter storms kept the harbour closed except for the most daring vessels with the bravest seamages aboard, bringing desperately needed supplies to the war front. Thus, one day following the next, Martel's life at the Lyceum became routine.

It was after Martel's first three months that two things of note happened. Spring arrived, bringing new activities to Morcaster; and Martel finished astronomy to begin learning the theory of magic instead.

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The classroom lay in the astronomy tower, just one floor below where he had learned about stars. As Martel arrived, he found a bunch of novices, even newer at the Lyceum than him, waiting to begin their first lesson.

Their teacher entered. "I am Master Fenrick. I am to teach you a basic understanding of magic." His eyes ran over the students without showing any particular recognition for Martel. "Let me begin by illustrating that while magic poses many questions, answers are few. But perhaps some in this room will one day dedicate their life to finding just one such answer."

Some looked at their teacher with curiosity or excitement; others seemed less enthused.

"Why do we have magic? Us in particular. Why do you sit here and not your brother or sister?" Master Fenrick asked. "How many of you have parents that are mages?"

None of the students raised a hand.

"We can conclude it is not our bloodline. The daughter of a pig farmer seems as likely to possess magic as the emperor's son," the master said, making some of the students giggle. "Nor is it exclusive to our lands, as the Sindhians and Tyrians prove."

"What is it then?" one novice dared to ask.

Master Fenrick shrugged. "We cannot say. The Archeans believed it was influenced by the positions of the stars at the time of our birth, but if they had proof of this, it has been lost. Not to mention, this could suggest magic to be entirely coincidental. Being born one day sooner or later could have robbed you of your gift."

"But – what does that mean?"

"It means you most likely will spend your lives never knowing why the greatest gift happened to be bestowed on you." Master Fenrick scratched his beard. "Now for another question that we can answer. Where does magic reside?"

"Around us?"

"In the air?"

"In our brains?"

Martel kept quiet; Master Alastair had told him of this, so answering felt like cheating.

"To answer that I must first take a step back and ask, what does a human being consist of?" Master Fenrick told them. "Again, and this time we do have more extensive materials, the Archeans tell us that a man consists of soul, mind, and body. Notice the order – it is not random."

Martel repeated the words to himself silently.

"In Archen, each of these three could power magic. How? We return to questions unanswered. But believe me, if any of you could ever unlock the magic of the mind or the soul, the emperor would bury you in gold. You'd be the most influential mage in the history of Aster."

Master Fenrick's words had an effect on even the most sluggish of students, and they all stared at him.

"The magic you can all do, which earned you your place at the Lyceum, comes from your body. There are different words for it, but energy or life force seems most fitting to me. As you draw on the physical life force from yourself, your magic takes effect."

"Is that why it's tiring to do magic?"

The teacher nodded. "Exactly. You can train your body to withstand the effects longer, but ultimately, that is the limit. Keep casting magic and your body will falter, much like whipping a horse to run until it falls down."

A question formed on Martel's lips that felt wrong; yet he could not help but be curious. "Can you use the life force of another to power your magic?"

Master Fenrick's eyes turned on him with a piercing gaze. "Yes. Thankfully, that knowledge was also lost in the fall of Archen. To do so would make you a maleficar. You would soon find the golden chain of an inquisitor strangling you to death."

The dire warning made the room fall quiet, and Master Fenrick continued with another topic.

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Unlike astronomy, which had only been one lesson a five day, theory of magic occupied two. And the second was not in the same classroom as before, but the gymnasium according to Martel's instructions.

A little confused, Martel went to the arena for the sixth bell. He found the other novices from the earlier lesson also present, so he assumed the instructions were true. He glanced around the amphitheatre, which held mixed memories for him already. He dearly hoped the location did not mean that Reynard was to teach the second lesson of the day.

As Master Fenrick walked in, Martel felt his fears dissipate. "Alright, listen," the teacher spoke, getting their attention. "While your first lesson will focus on the theory itself, this lesson will be more practical. Its purpose is to train your magical stamina, so to say, hence why we meet here. All of you, sit down."

They each found a seat on the ground.

"Earth tends to be the easiest element to work with. Most responsive. Maybe because it is heavier. All of you should be able to influence it at least a little. Look around and find a small pebble. The smaller, the better."

Every student did so.

Master Fenrick had found one for himself as well. Extending his hand for them all to see, the little stone lay on his palm. Slowly, it rose into the air. "The simplest of magical feats and thus useful for you to practise your endurance. Everyone, do the same with your own pebble. Keep it floating for as long as you can."

Martel looked at the small stone in his hand. He let his magic grab hold of it, rising into the air. Around him, the other novices did the same. For most of them, it quickly fell down again while a few, Martel included, could keep it floating longer until they also lost control.

"Magic may have been given to you, but mastery takes patience and discipline. Again," Master Fenrick told them. Over the course of the full bell, they practised to unlock their magic power.

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Due to his outings into town, spurred by Maximilian, Martel's small hoard of silver grew only slowly. Yet after months of working for the artificer, he finally had seventeen silver coins and a few more to spare. He poured the amount into a pouch, a gift from Maximilian, and left the boys' dormitory tower. He went straight north to reach its counterpart for the female students.

Martel had passed through its common room on the ground floor a few times, going to or from class. He had never had reason to stop or visit anyone there. As he entered it now without continuing through, he soon drew the attention of the girls congregated. Their looks ranged from questioning to dismissive or unfriendly.

Turning to one who seemed the most predisposed to help, Martel cleared his throat. "I'm looking for Eleanor Fontaine. Do you know her room?"

The girl, a watermage by her robe, glanced over Martel. "Aren't we feeling bold."

Not sure how to interpret that, he tried again. "Do you know her room?"

"Yeah. Fourth floor, eighth room. Good luck," she told him. As he walked away towards the stairs, he heard her mutter to her companion. "There goes another one."

Martel ascended three floors up from the ground and entered the corridor. Passing their water fountain, he found the eighth room and knocked.

A girl wearing the red robe of a battlemage opened. "What?"

Martel's eyes darted from the door number to the girl. "I was looking for Eleanor." He cleared his throat. "Fontaine."

"She doesn't live on this floor."

"I was told fourth floor, room eight."

"Then you're an imbecile who can't count. This is the third floor."

Martel looked towards the staircase. "I thought for sure I walked three floors up."

"Yeah, you did, so this is the third floor."

The novice blinked, perplexed. "But – the common room is first floor, and three up, that's four."

The girl gave the deepest sigh. "The common room is the ground floor, moron. After that comes the first floor."

Martel, who had never been inside a building with more than one floor until he came to Morcaster, simply stared. "That doesn't make sense."

"Yeah, well I didn't decide it." The girl slammed the door shut.

As debating with a closed door was futile, Martel decided to accept her words and try one floor up. Apprehensive, he knocked on room eight.

With a little relief, he saw Eleanor as the door opened. "Martel? What is it?"

Looking past into her room, he noticed it was larger than his, with more furniture. A wardrobe for clothes, and an extra chair. It took him a moment to remember the reason for his visit. "I came to pay you back." He grabbed his pouch and opened it, dumping all its silver into his hand. "For the balm you gave me. Back when I first arrived."

He held out his hand and let the silver fall into hers; being smaller, she had to cup both together to catch the coins. "Martel, I didn't expect you to pay anything back."

Because she considered him poor, Martel immediately thought, but he kept it to himself. "Well, I didn't want you to be inconvenienced."

She looked at him. "Martel, are you a friend to me?"

"I should like to be."

"In that case," she said and dropped the silver right back in his hand, "friends do not repay gifts. And I would rather have friendship than coin."

"Oh. Well that's very nice."

She smiled. "I am glad you agree."

"Do you want to go to the spring faire?" he blurted out. "With Maximilian and me. And another friend," he added, just so she would not think his goal was to be alone with her. "Tomorrow afternoon, at sixth bell."

"I was going to –" She paused. "Yes. That sounds entertaining. I will."

"Great! See you tomorrow!" One hand full of coins, Martel waved with the other as he walked down the corridor. Eleanor watched him with a wry expression before she closed her door.

Chapter 26: Faire Behaviour

Faire Behaviour

Typically, when Martel had to spend second bell on Soldays assisting the artificer as part of his schedule, time passed by easily. The work was monotonous, but if he let go of his thoughts, the two hours had soon passed.

Not so this morning. Today, the spring faire began. Martel did not know what to expect; in Engby, celebrating the arrival of spring lasted one day and mostly focused on eating the last of the winter pork. In Morcaster, the celebration centred around the marketplace

and would last for days, promising all sorts of entertainment. And with Eleanor forgiving him any sense of debt, his pouch was full of silver.

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"Calm your steps," Maximilian told him as they waited in the entrance hall. Martel, animated by excitement, kept pacing around.

"But there's going to be so much to see," the novice replied. "People from all over the Empire and beyond, selling goods and doing tricks. I saw a travelling jester once who conjured a bird out of nowhere!"

The mageknight gave him a look. "Nordmark, those are charlatans. You are a mage. You can perform a thousand feats more impressive."

"Right. Forgot I wasn't five anymore," Martel admitted. He opened his hand and ignited a small flame, letting it dance over his fingertips from one to the other.

"There you are. Ready to strike out and become a wandering conjurer of tricks yourself, sleeping in ditches and performing for pennies."

"You don't make it sound very glamorous."

Maximilian raised his eyebrows. "Wonder why. Ah, there she is." Eleanor appeared down the hallway, joining them.

She gave them both a cautious smile. "I am ready. Let us see what the spring faire may offer."

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It was a short walk from the Lyceum to the great marketplace. Rather than a single space, it consisted of a dozen squares connected by small pathways, all of them brimming with traders. Many of the usual vendors were gone, renting out their stall for the fiveday to the travelling peddlers and enjoying the faire themselves. Alongside those, countless carts filled whatever room remained vacant, acting as moving shops. Standing at the edge of this sprawling market, met by a plethora of colours, noises, and smells, Martel's excitement only grew.

They went down one of the small alleys crowded with stalls selling ribbons, buttons, combs, knives, shawls, scarves, handkerchiefs embroidered with a name for two extra pennies, and many more things. All throughout, Martel kept one hand on his purse by his belt; he had never walked around with this much coin on him, and the thought of theft constantly lurked in his head.

Pushing past the peddlers, all shouting to gain their attention, the trio emerged into one of the bigger squares dominated by food vendors and more unusual items for trade.

"Do we have a destination in mind?" asked Eleanor. "Our course seems determined."

"Martel has a friend we're meeting," Maximilian replied. They walked two steps behind the novice; as the latter spotted Shadi, he hurried forward. "She is Khivan, if you did not notice."

Eleanor watched Martel give Shadi a quick hug. "I did, but thanks."

The one pair returned to the other. "These are my friends, Maximilian and Eleanor. They're mageknights. I have classes with them," Martel said in introduction. "This is Shadi."

"Hullo!" the Khivan girl said. The two acolytes inclined their heads in greeting. "You're mages as well? I never thought I'd know one, and now the count is three!"

"Well, if Martel is your only impression of us so far, I certainly hope you do not hold it against the rest of us," Maximilian said light-heartedly.

"Hey!" Martel crossed his arms while the others laughed or smiled.

A moment of silence passed. "I see honey-cakes," Shadi ventured to say. "Anyone else want one? I'll pay."

"We will have supper next bell," Eleanor said.

"Come on, Fontaine." Maximilian prodded her. "We both had practice today. One cake will not spoil your appetite."

"I could certainly go for one," Martel added.

"I will not stand in the way, in that case," Eleanor conceded.

They gathered around the small cart, waiting behind a bunch of eager children. Maximilian tapped his foot impatiently. "One small push, we would not have to wait," he muttered. freew ebnove l.com

"Maximilian, behave," Eleanor reproached him.

"I am merely saying."

Martel looked at Shadi and rolled his eyes; a gesture he only dared because he stood behind Maximilian, but it made her laugh.

Suddenly, three of the group stiffened. As the last one, Shadi glanced around before looking back at him. "Something wrong?"

Martel nodded towards where a pair of inquisitors walked through the square.

"Those are from the temple of the Sun? Isn't that your faith?"

"It is complicated," Eleanor admitted.

"They hunt for renegade spellcasters," Martel explained. "To them, all mages are suspicious. We're not fond of each other, you might say." He remembered his encounter with them some months ago, being needlessly questioned and treated like a criminal.

"Martel here already had a run-in with them," Maximilian growled. "They grabbed him and interrogated him about matters that happened before he even came here. Fools, the lot of them."

"You never told me," Shadi said. "That sounds unpleasant."

Martel shrugged. "It was over quickly."

"Hah, thanks to Eleanor," Maximilian pointed out. "She ran like a rabbit to get Master Alastair when it became clear that Master Reynard would not lift a finger."

"I did not run," Eleanor retorted. "I walked. At a brisk pace."

Martel thought back on the day in question. He had never considered who had fetched Master Alastair for his sake. It had been his early days at the Lyceum; strange to realise that already back then, Eleanor had acted in his defence.

"Who's hungry?" Shadi held out a handful of honey-cakes, letting each of the mages take one.

~

They idled around the square or the nearby alleys, investigating the many peddlers. The occasional entertainer passed through as well, juggling fire or putting on puppet shows for the children. "Parlour tricks," Maximilian grumbled as one man swallowed fire, only for it to blossom once he pulled the rod from his mouth. The acolyte finished his mug of ale.

"Why don't you do better, master mage," Shadi teased him.

"It is beneath my dignity," the mageknight huffed. His gruff exterior cracked, and he drew his sword. Swinging it in circles around him, prompting indignant outbursts and

swift retreats, Maximilian demonstrated his skill with increasingly complex manoeuvres. Finally, he threw the sword high into the air. It fell straight down, with the tip first.

Just before it reached the ground, he lashed out with his hand to grab it by the hilt. A little sooner, he would have sliced his fingers open on the blade; a little slower, it would have gone past him. While the nearby children applauded and yelled, their mouths stuffed with honey-cake, Maximilian sheathed his sword.

Shadi clapped her hands. "I see they teach you valuable things at that school."

"Yeah, I am ready to join the theatre," Maximilian snorted, but the glint in his eye showed him to be pleased. "Excuse us for a moment. I have manly business to discuss with Martel." He grabbed the novice by the arm and pulled him away from the girls.

"What's going on?" Martel asked.

Maximilian nodded. "That old woman sells perfume. Good idea for a gift. Hurry and buy one while I distract your Khivan liaison." He gave Martel a push in the back.

Too taken aback to question anything, the novice approached the woman, who had a large box lined with cloth. Inside lay a dozen little clay pots.

"Come closer, young master! Here to buy something that'll give any woman a scent as sweet as she looks, eh? Or for your own use – very much the fashion these days among young men," the peddler claimed.

"What kind of scent?"

She dove into the box and pulled out one small jar, uncorking it. "Let your nose find out."

Martel took a deep sniff. A powerful scent rose, filling his nostrils to the point that his eyes watered. "Strong," he croaked.

She cackled. "Just a few drops will do. I don't sell watered down concoctions. How about this?"

The old woman took another and opened it. Cautiously, Martel inhaled a little. The scent of lavender filled him, giving him memories of butterflies and bumblebees in summer, flitting about flowers by the stream. "How much?"

"Five silvers, young master, and that's a bargain."

Martel had little knowledge of trading, but he knew you were meant to haggle. "Four."

"Fine. You'll send me to an early grave."

Given how old she looked, Martel felt that could hardly be possible. Had he been more experienced with peddlers, he might have been suspicious at how swiftly she agreed to his price.

He opened his purse and grabbed four silver coins, exchanging them for the clay pot. Placing it in his pouch, he cast furtive glances around as he tied it back to his belt, keeping one hand on it.

Martel returned to his companions, discovering Maximilian telling a tale that seemed to greatly entertain the girls, not to mention nearby listeners. He waited a few moments as his friend finished.

"Ah, he returns," Maximilian declared. "But the hour grows late, and supper beckons. A honey-cake only sustains my mighty form for so long, alas."

"What, you want to go back? But we've barely seen anything!" Martel argued. "And there's a theatre troupe playing tonight. I've never seen a play!"

"The faire is here for days," Eleanor reminded him gently.

"Fret not, my elemental-inclined friend," Maximilian continued. From his speech, Martel guessed that the mageknight had been drinking a lot more mugs of ale than he had let on. "We shall return tomorrow night and see your vaunted play."

"Oh, I can't tomorrow night. I have to help my dad. He's busy making the new clock for your school," Shadi chimed in.

"Day after tomorrow?" Martel suggested.

"I cannot, as I must attend my own family," Eleanor said. "But go without me. I am not much for the faire," she claimed.

"It is settled," Maximilian declared loudly. "We shall convene on Malday. For now, Martel, your honour demands that you escort your companion home. No, do not protest," he commanded, even though Martel had made no such inclination. "Her safety is paramount. I shall save you a slice of bread for supper, rest assured."

"Well, alright," Martel assented, a little perplexed. "I'll take you home, Shadi."

"It was nice meeting you," the Khivan girl told the mageknights.

"Likewise," Eleanor replied.

"A pleasure, assuredly," it came from the other acolyte.

The four split up, two walking south and two walking north.

"You are devious when drunk, if not exactly subtle," Eleanor remarked.

"My lady, I have no knowledge of what you intimate."

~

It took Martel and Shadi a while to extricate themselves from the market district; the later the hour, the more people arrived. Little work would get done elsewhere in the city for the next several days, as the nights would be spent with all manners of entertainment, helped along by strong servings of spirits.

His hand clutching his purse and feeling the clay jar underneath the cloth, Martel breathed a little easier once they were out of the crowded area.

"You alright?" Shadi asked. "You seem tense."

"Not used to so many people. And so close." He slowed down as they reached one of the broad streets that led towards the harbour.

"I'm guessing Engby doesn't have spring faires like this."

He chuckled. "No, it does not."

They continued in silence for a while. "Your friends are interesting," Shadi remarked.

"Yeah. They're nice. They helped me when I needed it."

"Maximilian is funny. And Eleanor is very pretty." She glanced at him.

"He's good company for sure. If expensive at times."

"Right."

"How's your father coming along with the clock? I can't wait to see it in the entrance hall."

"It's going fine. It's a lot of slow, careful work. One mistake, and it won't keep time. He drives me a little crazy sometimes," Shadi admitted. "Not sure he really needs my help tomorrow, or he just doesn't want me out of the house too much."

The road grew narrow, and they entered the Khivan enclave on quiet streets. To this eastern people, this afternoon was any other; their celebrations did not revolve around astronomy. Ahead, the small house with the sundial sign beckoned.

Shadi sighed. "Well, an evening of polishing tools awaits me. I hope yours is better."

"Just practising, I guess. My skills are still limited."

They reached the door. "You better hurry back. Or Maximilian will eat your supper." She laughed.

"Wait." Martel reached into his purse to dig out the perfume. "This is for you."

She accepted it, opening the lid. "Smells wonderful!" She gave him a quick hug, kissing his cheek. "Thank you."

Martel beamed. "You're welcome."

She slipped inside, throwing him a last look before closing the door. He turned to walk home, rubbing his cheek.

Chapter 27: Playing Hero

Playing Hero

Eleanor unfolded the cloth, revealing a handful of berries, which she dropped into her morning porridge.

"I wish my family sent me berries," complained the girl next to her.

"They would be rotten if so," argued a third girl sitting opposite. "Do not pretend your family has a cold storage or anything like that."

"They could have," came the offended reply.

"We both know they do not. You will have to contend with eating fruit actually in season."

Eleanor looked at the other two girls, mageknights like herself. "Clarissa, you do not even like these berries. Else I would have shared."

"Well, no, but it is nice to have the option to refuse."

"Eleanor, always so charitable." The third girl smirked. "Like helping the half-blood peasant boy. As if your goal was not transparent."

Eleanor raised an eyebrow. "Pray tell, what is my goal?"

Her friend shrugged. "It is obvious. Maximilian has befriended him, Stars know why, and so you do the same to get close to the count's son."

A tired sigh came from Eleanor. "That is not remotely true." f reeweb novel.com

"I do not judge," the other girl replied. "I would have done the same if I could hold my nose as well as you. Sadly, I do not have your patience with those of a lower station."

Eleanor ran her spoon through her bowl with sharp movements. "My patience does wear thin."

~

Maximilian glanced over the table at Martel. "Tell me all my good work was not in vain."

The novice stared down at his breakfast, feeling embarrassed. "She liked the present."

"And?"

"That's it. But we're going to see the play tomorrow night," Martel reminded him.

"Right. I vaguely remember. I look forward to being a third wheel."

Martel shook his spoon at the other boy. "As if you mind the attention. I saw you perform your little sword swinging, the whole square did."

"Yeah, yeah. Look, you owe me for all my invaluable help. So tonight, and I mean tonight, not afternoon, we are going out to properly sample the offerings of the spring faire," Maximilian declared, almost making it sound like a threat. "You and me, just two lads."

"That's fair," Martel assented.

Movement drew his attention, and he looked right to see Eleanor approach. "Martel, I would like to see the play tonight. Do you want to accompany me?"

"Sure," he blurted out. At a nearby table, the two girls from his empowerment class sent him disdainful looks.

"Good," Eleanor replied loudly. "I enjoy your company." She marched away.

Maximilian gave him a disappointed look. "What happened to the lads?"

"She took me by surprise," Martel admitted. "Just come along. We'll go out after the play." He glanced over at the table to find the female mageknights still staring at him. "What's going on with them?" he asked in a quiet tone.

"Girls. Who knows." Maximilian sighed and crossed his arms. "They better serve ale at that play."

~

After supper, the trio gathered up like yesterday and set out towards the market district. "I thought you were not much for the faire," Maximilian remarked quietly to Eleanor.

"I changed my mind."

"Tired of those wagging tongues, I wager."

"They are my friends," Eleanor reminded him.

"And yet you knew at once whom I referred to."

Martel walked a few steps ahead, still able to hear their conversation. He envied their easy rapport and felt like an intruder just for listening. Yet he could not blame anyone or anything. They had attended the Lyceum together for years; he had barely arrived by that reckoning.

They walked through winding roads to reach the square that hosted the theatre. A stage had been built, creating a raised platform. Large pieces of canvas shielded the ends and back of the stage, hiding what lay behind. In front, numerous benches stood to allow the audience a seat during the performance.

"Two silvers to sit, one to watch," a boy shouted dressed in bright colours making a patchwork. A few spectators had already grabbed the front seats.

Resolutely, Maximilian strode forward to claim a bench. "This one is ours. Well, three seats on it, anyway. I am not sitting further back."

The brightly clad boy trotted up to them, holding out his hand. "Two silvers for each of you."

"Let me." Eleanor opened her purse and counted out six coins.

Martel almost shivered at the thought of paying six coins just to sit down, especially since they could watch the same show for half price by standing up. Yet he did not know how to protest.

"Keep our seats," Maximilian told them, rising to his feet. "I need something to fortify me."

Eleanor did so, and Martel intended to join him, but something caught his eye. The actors could be seen and heard rummaging about on the scene, preparing for their play. Yet in front sat an old man on a barrel. In one hand, he held a pipe with smoke rising from it; the other had a wineskin. He looked like a vagabond with a wild beard and unshorn hair, wearing worn clothes.

The old man caught Martel's gaze and winked. The novice stepped forward without thinking, wondering what about the old trotter seemed so unusual. Nothing in his appearance nor the expected smell of tobacco and bodily odour that hung around him.

"What's your name, boy?"

"Martel."

"You're one of them wizard novices from the big school, aren't ya."

"How do you know?"

The old man smiled, revealing a few missing teeth. "I can smell the magic on you."

Martel frowned. "You're a mage?"

"Hedge mage, they call me. I learned my magic in the wild rather than surrounded by stone."

Martel had heard of them as a child without really understanding much. Coming to the Lyceum and occasionally seeing references to them in books, he knew a little more; primarily that they were rumoured to possess unusual magic and strange herblore. Some even had healing powers, the most elusive magic of all. Perhaps, Martel considered, here was a path to strengthening his own magic.

"Are you here to watch the play?"

The hedge mage laughed. "Seen it a thousand times, but from up there." He pointed at the canvas covering the back of the stage. "I help the spectacle along, you see. Bit of ominous thunder when the villain enters, that sort of thing."

Martel blinked. The thought of using magic purely for entertainment struck him as mad. With such powers at your command, why spend them wandering the land creating cheap thrills? Still, his curiosity proved stronger than any indignation.

"What's your name, master?"

"So polite. Never met a novice from that damned school of yours before who didn't look like they wanted to spit on me," the old man laughed. "But that wasn't your question, no. I'm Regnar."

A Tyrian name, Martel noted, though he spoke Asterian as a native. "I'm Martel."

"Well, Martel, enjoy the show." Regnar emptied his wine skin before he got to his feet and disappeared behind the stage, and Martel joined his friends on the bench.

~

The actors played out the old and familiar story of Roland and the wyrm. To those experienced with theatre and the story, the performance provided little to be considered new or exciting.

Martel was enraptured.

He had been told the tale a few times as a child, which did nothing to spoil his enjoyment. Watching Roland endure the seven trials captivated him entirely. He feared for the hero as he braved the ring of fire or passed through the howling gale.

"Surrender before I hurt you in ways you cannot imagine," cried out the villain as thunder broke the sky, and Martel shivered. Next to him, the mageknights seemed more amused by their companion's expressions than the play.

Martel's attention only wavered when he caught movement at the corner of his eye. Almost on instinct, he clutched his purse by his belt. So annoying they made them too big to fit into a pocket. He felt rather than saw someone move behind him. A small shape, that of a child. It passed by, and he breathed a little easier. Until he thought about his companions. Looking at Eleanor by his side, he saw only frayed strings hanging by her belt; someone had cut her purse strings.

Without thinking, Martel leapt to his feet and pushed through the seated people. A glimpse of a child running down an alley reached him, and he set off in pursuit.

~

Martel would not have expected to have any trouble catching up to a child several years younger. Yet the urchin had the advantage of familiar territory, weaving through narrow streets with obstacles to slow a larger pursuer.

Martel only possessed one way to even the field. Without thinking, he willed his magic to help him. Soon, his legs became stronger, moved faster, leapt higher. As they reached the end of the market district, he had almost caught up.

The thief, constantly switching direction, took a sharp turn into yet another alley. Surrounded by buildings, the moonlight struggled to illuminate it. Martel did not require it. He felt the heat from the child ahead of him; the little rascal had stopped. Either a dead end lay ahead, or maybe he hoped to hide in the darkness, unaware of Martel's extra sense.

In the boy's hand, Martel saw Eleanor's purse tightly clutched. "Hand it over."

Noise came from all around. Refuse and debris was pushed aside. Like scurrying rats, more children emerged. Some of them were even younger than the thief, who drew a

rusty, ragged knife. Well, if the cut did not kill him, the ensuing infection might, Martel considered. The other urchins also drew improvised weapons, surrounding him. They looked to be eight to ten years old.

"Why don't you hand over yours," the thief demanded, his eyes on Martel's purse.

The way Martel saw it, he had three options.

He could turn and run, trying to get past the street children unscathed.

He could hand over his purse, hoping they would be satisfied with that.

Or he could face them like a wizard.

Martel focused on Eleanor's purse with his magic and pulled it to him. It flew out of the boy's grasp and into Martel's right hand. He raised his left and let flames ignite to entwine around his fingers. "Leave before I hurt you in ways you cannot imagine," he threatened them.

Once again, it worked. Nobody was going to mess with a mage wielding fire, especially not a bunch of starving children. As they scrambled to get away, and with his fear dissipating, Martel took a closer look at them. Wearing rags that could barely conceal their bodies, he saw how their skin stretched over their bones.

In Engby, orphans would be taken in by farms that could use the extra labour; failing that, the temple would provide for them. If nothing else, they would be housed, clothed, and fed. Not so in Morcaster. With a lump in his throat, Martel guessed they were too many to take care of them all. Or maybe people simply did not care.

Thinking of starving children he had known, Martel grabbed his purse. He felt their eyes on him, gazing from the dark with a feverish shine from deep within the alley. He turned the pouch around, letting his silver fall to the ground. Turning around, he stalked away.

~

The audience clapped, some with more enthusiasm than others, as the play ended. "What happened to Martel?" Maximilian asked. "I thought he enjoyed the play."

"I cannot say. He stormed off like his shoes were on fire," Eleanor said.

"Maybe his last meal did not sit well with him," Maximilian snorted.

"Oh, there he is." As the crowd dispersed, the mageknights walked towards him.

Holding Eleanor's purse in one hand, his own deflated by his waist, Martel already regretted giving away his silver. It had taken him months to gather it. Yet seeing the

sunken cheeks, the hollow arms and legs, the sickly shining eyes – Martel knew the signs of starvation too well. Whether he had given the coins or not, he would have left that alley feeling ill for one reason or another.

"What happened to you, mate?" Maximilian asked.

Martel waved Eleanor's purse in the air, and her hand flew down to her waist, feeling only the cut strings. "A thief. I got it back, though the little fellow got away," Martel explained.

"You really should not have bothered," Eleanor told him. "I did not have much silver with me. Besides, chasing thieves through Morcaster in the dark invites greater danger than a few coins are worth."

"Now you tell me," Martel complained, returning the pouch.

"Bah. Our boy here is a mage. Who would dare to tussle with him?" Maximilian slapped his friend on the arm.

"Well, let me buy you something to drink or eat for your troubles," Eleanor suggested.

Maximilian nodded eagerly. "Best suggestion all night!"