

Firebrand 231

Chapter 231: Deliberations

Deliberations

Reynard stood with his staff, a faint smirk outlined on his face. Of course – his only experiences with Martel had been in the first few months after his arrival, where he knew nothing of magic or weaponry. But since then, Martel had been in a dozen scraps or more. He had been ambushed by assailants wielding magic or golden protection and held his own against them. Considering the number of people who had tried to injure or kill him, Martel was not worried by simple sparring with all these witnesses. He raised his weapon, giving his former teacher a challenging look.

Reynard stepped forward and swung his staff. Martel parried and retaliated. This pattern now continued, neither able to get through the other's defences. As the moments passed, their speed picked up.

Martel began to sweat, both from physical and magical exertion. To keep up with his opponent, he could not rely on the small bursts of magic that required little of his strength; he had to expend his spellpower, letting it flow through his body to lend him empowered speed.

As could be expected, Reynard was a highly skilled warrior. Not a surprise to Martel, but it still unnerved him to realise. The Master of War surpassed any of the staff fighters that Martel had fought, such as Lothar and the others whose livelihood depended on it. Added to that, Reynard possessed magic.

None of Martel's blows even came close to landing. And while he sweated with effort, Reynard seemed at ease. If Martel had ever entertained beliefs to the opposite, it became clear to him that on these terms, he stood no chance of defeating a mageknight. But he did not have to, he just had to hold his own. Using more of his spellpower, he sped up his movements to keep pace.

Finally, despite his efforts, his defences failed. Reynard's staff struck him hard on the shoulder, hurting even through the leather armour underneath his robe. With a grunt, the Master of War stepped back and planted his staff in the ground, signalling an end to the fight.

"That should suffice," Master Alastair declared, stepping forward, but Reynard swiftly raised a hand in objection.

"I am not satisfied yet. Boy, attack me as swiftly as you may. Break through my shield if you can," Reynard challenged.

Seeing his teacher standing still, no sign of raising his weapon in defence, Martel gladly followed orders. He lashed out with his staff against Reynard's empty side, only to find his assault stopped an inch away, the shimmer of magic showing why. Using what remained of his spellpower, calling upon the last of his magic, Martel empowered himself to strike swiftly. Yet nothing broke through.

"Enough," Master Fenrick chimed in. "No novice can be expected to break through a mageknight's shield. Surely we are done now."

Reynard shook his head. "I still have to test the boy's shield. Prepare yourself, lad. Hold off my attack if you can." He raised his weapon in threat.

Martel felt the weariness that came from straining his magic to its limits. But he needed more. Delving into his reserves, hoping such existed, he summoned his magical shield.

Two things happened next. Reynard's staff came swinging through the air to smash against Martel's temple, and magical exhaustion set in. Pain erupted in his head, and nausea filled his stomach. Even so, instinct honed from many a fight with staves, told him that Reynard's weapon would come swinging back a second time. In response, his hand shot up and grabbed it by the tip, intercepting it. For a moment, his palm felt cold, like grasping ice, before the blow smarted on his skin, giving a burning sensation.

"Enough!" Master Alastair called out.

"Agreed." Mistress Juliana stood behind him, preventing Martel from seeing her expression, but her voice would give him chills if directed at him. "Martel," she continued in a gentler tone, "will you wait outside for a moment as we deliberate?"

Fighting hard to keep his breakfast from resurfacing, the novice simply nodded and stumbled outside the Hall of Elements.

"The decision seems easy to me," the overseer spoke. "With his advanced elemental magic, he is more than capable of being an acolyte."

Vana nodded, as did Alastair. "Agreed," they both said, one after the other.

"The boy has taken all my courses and performed adequately," Fenrick assented.

"Well, I am afraid I must disagree. I find the boy severely lacking when it comes to empowerment magic, and it would be a stain upon our school to make him an acolyte." Reynard let a defiant gaze sweep over the others.

"Preposterous," Alastair protested. "The boy defended himself admirably against you. Besides, as an elemental mage, it would be ludicrous to demand he excel in empowerment."

"I disagree. His shield failed against me. It was not just weak, it was completely absent. I have never seen such a failure, and I will not overlook his poor performance," the Master of War declared.

"Your disagreement is noted." The frosty tone had returned to Juliana's voice. "But as overseer, the decision is ultimately mine. As I have three other teachers all expressing their faith in Martel, I see no reason to deny him his progression."

"I do not accept that!" Reynard swiftly exclaimed. "The headmaster will hear of this. If you promote the boy before I have had my say, before this case is heard, it will only be another stone to your mausoleum." He turned around and strode out of the hall.

"He does not have the power to decide that – does he?" Alastair looked at Juliana.

"I did not expect him to persist in his objections," she admitted. "Perhaps we best delay for a day or two until this has been cleared up."

Once outside the hall, Martel sank down to the floor while breathing heavily. The worst of the unpleasant feelings subsided, but he was in no condition to do any magic, let alone complex spells. He looked towards the closed doors; it was strange to imagine that right now, his teachers discussed him and his performance, while he sat here, waiting.

Soon after, Reynard pushed the doors open and stalked away without even a glance at Martel. Seeing the other teachers follow, he got on his feet. Mistress Vana and Master Fenrick nodded towards him but also hurried past, leaving him with Master Alastair and Mistress Juliana. He looked at them expectantly.

"Things have become complicated," the overseer admitted.

It felt like a punch in Martel's already hurting stomach. "I'm not an acolyte?"

"Not yet," Master Alastair hurried to say. "We have something to clear up. Most of us agreed you are more than ready to be an acolyte. We just had to handle some administrative affairs."

Martel looked from one to the other, confused. If that was all standing in the way, could they not simply tell him he had passed and handle the administration of it later?

"Don't worry, it will all be sorted soon," his teacher promised him. Martel hoped that was true, though he could not tell how to interpret the apprehensive expressions he saw on their faces.

Martel slept as soon as he got the chance. When he woke, his nausea and discomfort had gone, though an inkling of the headache from Reynard's blow remained. Something had been strange about that, but he could think about that later. For now, he had another matter to swiftly attend. Tomorrow, he would break into the home of Shadi's landlord, a man named Oswald, and as the Night Knives had taught him, gathering reconnaissance beforehand could prove to be crucial.

So, he pushed aside his ambivalent feelings about his examination and dragged himself to the bridge district, investigating a specific house, the surrounding alleys, and various ways inside the building. Once satisfied, and before any neighbour might grow suspicious, he returned to the Lyceum.

Chapter 232: Some Light Breaking and Entering

Some Light Breaking and Entering

As Martel got out of bed and saw his brown robe hanging on the dummy, over his leather armour, he hesitated before putting it on. It felt like, if not a defeat, certainly a setback. He assumed the matter of his examination would be resolved soon, but waiting without knowing for how long was never easy.

At least he had something else to focus on and keep his mind occupied. Once his work in the apothecary was done, his only chore for the day, Martel left the castle and walked towards the bridge district.

Martel did not go straight to the house of Oswald; instead, he met Shadi at a fountain in one of the squares. It was some distance from The River Pearl, just to minimise the risk that someone might recognise him.

"Are you sure about this?" she asked him while biting her lower lip.

"Don't worry," he tried to reassure her. "You just have to keep an eye out. If there's trouble, you can easily run away."

She slapped him on the arm. "I know that, I'm not afraid for me. You're the one going inside." She continued with a softer voice. "I don't like that you are taking this risk for my sake."

"Of all the things I've done in Morcaster, this ranks surprisingly low in terms of risk." He gave what he hoped was a comforting smile. "What about our landlord?"

"He left his house maybe a quarter bell ago, headed towards the Khivan district with his two guards as usual."

Just as Shadi had predicted he would, to collect rent and perhaps evict a family. As much as Martel loathed this man without having met him, he appreciated someone who stuck to regular routines. "Let's be on our way. Just in case he comes back sooner than we expected." free(w)ebnov(e)l

Walking through some winding streets, they reached their destination. Oswald's house looked typical for a local magistrate or perhaps a high ranking clerk in the Imperial administration. It had no courtyard for goods or carts, only a front door directly on the street, else it could also have seemed the home of a respectable merchant.

Martel and Shadi stayed in the alleys behind. While the building did have a backdoor, such would usually be bolted from the inside, and Martel was unsure if his magic could reach through the planks of the door to manipulate something on the other side. Instead, he had looked for another path of entry.

Shadi followed his gaze up to a shuttered window on the second story. "That?" she exclaimed in disbelief.

He only nodded in response before glancing around to see if they were alone. Satisfied, he reached up a hand and let his magic extend like a vine, entangling itself around the shutter. He could not reach the hasp on the other side, but he could yank the shutter open, pulling the frail hasp apart. "Give me a leg up."

Still looking sceptical, Shadi clasped her hands together. Martel placed one foot on top, and with empowered strength, he used it to leap upwards. His hands caught the edge of the window, and with another jolt of magic, he pulled himself up and fell forwards into the chamber.

Getting to his feet, he found himself in a supply room of some sort. Bedlinen, clothes, various pieces of furniture and the like littered the space. He quickly stuck his head out the window. "I'll go look," he said as quietly as he could. "Give me the signal if you see them return." She nodded and disappeared around the corner to keep watch of the street.

Turning his attention inwards, Martel carefully opened the door to leave the room. He stood in a hallway with several other doors. A quick glance told him that only one possessed a keyhole and could be locked.

Figuring that would be his target, Martel crossed the corridor and placed one hand against the keyhole. Unlike at the Lyceum, the metal contained no gold. His magic flowed easily through the

material. While not as malleable to his will like fire, Martel could still sense the tap that extended into the doorway, keeping the door locked. Exerting his spellpower, he forced the tap backwards into the locking mechanism, allowing him access.

Once inside, with the door closed behind him, Martel looked around. One half of the chamber held a bed and wardrobe, while the other had a desk, drawer, and more of such practical furniture. Oswald's bedchamber and study in one. Martel went for the desk first, rummaging through each drawer.

The first held correspondence, from the look of it. The second had ledgers, presumably his accounts of his businesses. The third seemed more promising as Martel pulled out a sheet of parchment. He had never seen a legal document before in his life, but the different seals and signatures at the bottom convinced him he was on the right path.

Excitedly, he glanced over every piece of parchment, thankful for his ability to read quickly. However, he was soon disappointed. Judging by the wording, difficult though it might be to understand, none of these were contracts between landlord and tenant. They seemed to be deeds for buildings, all of them in the Khivan quarter.

Martel wondered briefly if, assuming he found the right deed, he could simply present it to Shadi's father, making him the owner of the house. It probably did not work that way; especially, as he now remembered, Khivans could not own property in Morcaster.

Frustrated, Martel went through the pile once more. No contracts of any kind; in fact, as his second glance informed him, these documents were not even the actual deeds. They were simply receipts from a notary, confirming the lawful sale and transfer of ownership. At the bottom, Martel saw scribbles he assumed belonged to Oswald. As for the other signatory, he suddenly felt cold as he recognised the seal of a horse.

Standing up straight, Martel frowned in contemplation. Why would the duke of Cheval buy properties in the Khivan enclave? Looking through the other documents, Martel found the same repeated. The dates ranged from recent to one year ago. From what Shadi had told him, this Oswald had bought the home where she lived only last year, aggressively raising the rent since then.

It did not make sense that he was buying and selling these properties if he intended to make his livelihood from renting them out. But if he had acted on behalf of the duke all along, it begged the question why Cheval wanted to hide his involvement.

The shrill sound of a bird interrupted Martel's speculations. He wondered for a moment what manner of fowl living in the city sounded like that until he remembered – the signal. It came again, urgently, but barely audible through the closed door. How much time had passed since she first tried to warn him?

Martel eased the door to the hallway open and immediately heard heavy footsteps coming up the stairs. Making a swift decision whether to hide or run, he chose the latter. Bursting out from the room, he looked towards the stairs and saw a surprised guard staring back at him. A swift blast of wind sent the man tumbling back while Martel crossed the hallway to stand in the supply room again. He climbed out of the window and lowered himself until he hung by his fingertips before finally letting go.

He landed with little grace, and Shadi grabbed him by the shoulder to pull him up. As the guard stuck his head out the window to yell at them, they ran away.

Catching their breath, once they felt secure in their flight, the pair looked at each other and laughed with relief. "I'm sorry it got so close," Shadi said. "One of the guards returned, I don't know why. I tried to warn you, but I was afraid of drawing his attention if I was louder."

"Not your fault. I closed the door behind me, making it hard to hear."

She looked at him with open eyes. "Did you find it?"

It hurt him to disappoint her. "I didn't. It wasn't there." If the duke of Cheval was behind all of this, he would keep the relevant documents in his own place. Specifically, his study with his Khivan clock, which he had once shown to Martel during the summer celebration. "But I think I know where it is."

"Where?"

"In a nobleman's palace."

She looked crestfallen. "That's the end of it, then."

Martel thought about the invitation lying in his desk. "Not yet. There's one more thing to try."

Chapter 233: Tribulations and Tribunals

Tribulations and Tribunals

The duke of Cheval's solstice celebration would not be held for another five days. Martel did feel apprehensive about the prospect – breaking into the study of a landlord in the bridge district was a far cry from doing the same in a duke's mansion – but he had time to consider. For now, other matters drew his attention. Martel had yet to hear word from the overseer, and he wondered how long he would have to wait until he could don the robes of an acolyte. At the same time, it seemed impertinent to approach Mistress Juliana and demand some kind of answer.

So he went to see Master Alastair instead. "Master, any word on my situation?"

Standing in the doorway of his chamber, his teacher gave an evasive look. "Not yet. But I believe Mistress Juliana is working hastily to get the matter resolved."

"But what exactly is there to resolve? I thought I did well on my examination."

"You did," Master Alastair hastily replied. "Look, I will see the overseer tonight and ask her. As soon as there is something to tell, you'll be informed."

A less definite answer than Martel had hoped, but it raised the possibility that by tonight, he would know more. Forced to be satisfied with that, he gave Master Alastair his thanks and left.

Walking away, Martel's thoughts drifted back to the examination. It bothered him how Reynard's staff had cut through his shield without any resistance. At first, Martel thought the spell might have failed; exhaustion had set in right after. But something else nagged him, though he was hard pressed to determine what. Pacing around in the corridor, he went through every moment as he remembered them. Reynard had struck him, staff melting through his shield with ease. Exhaustion had overcome him, but he still had the forethought to grab Reynard's weapon before it hit him a second time. The

impact had hurt his hand – no, more than that. Before the pain, the staff had felt cold. Dead. And Reynard had been particular about which staff to give Martel.

It was difficult to imagine such duplicity from a teacher, but a small piece of gold, embedded and hidden in the tip of the staff, would allow it to pierce his shield.

Martel clenched his fists in anger. The worst part was that his realisation came too late. By now, Reynard would have removed the evidence. He had no proof to accuse a teacher.

The novice would have to put his faith in Mistress Juliana to sort this out and ensure his promotion to acolyte. No doubt if anyone could, it would be her; at the same time, he found that his faith in the faculty had suffered a blow.

On his way back to his room, a familiar voice with a familiar message caught Martel's attention as he crossed the entrance hall.

"Got something for you," Henry called out, raising one hand holding a folded note.

Martel walked over, glad to see Henry had resumed the duty of handling his post. He glanced towards the other desk where Jasper sat, studiously staring at a pile of parchment in front of him.

Opening the note, Martel quickly read the words.

Master Martel, please visit us in our new home

either today or tomorrow.

Flora

Below her name, an address was scribbled. In the bridge district, he noticed. While their first location in the harbour district, near the market, seemed more central, Martel assumed that the patronage of Lady Pearl was the reason for their move. He hoped that the invitation was not only to see the new place, but also held the promise of a new task. He had made no progress on repaying Maximilian, Eleanor, or Master Alastair.

He considered leaving immediately, but a glance outside showed heavy snowfall. Not in the mood for company either, Martel decided to postpone until tomorrow, as the note had made allowance for. Instead, he retreated to his room, practising his shield spell.

As he had told Martel, the Master of Elements went to visit the overseer in the evening. She gave him entry and poured a cup of wine for him, which he accepted with an absent-minded expression. "What have you heard?"

Juliana sat silent for a moment before she finally picked up a letter from her desk. "I misjudged the situation."

"How so?"

"I thought the headmaster would seek a reason to have Martel fail, perhaps even fabricate one. And use that to dislodge me from my position. I figured, with the final decision of Martel's examination resting with me, and three teachers as witnesses to his examination, this could not work."

Concern, hitherto vague on Alastair's face, became obvious. "What has he done?"

"Rather than go after Martel and afterwards use that to attack me, our good headmaster has done the reverse by tying the two actions together." She handed over the letter. "He accuses me directly of incompetence. Instead of me deciding whether Martel is fit to be an acolyte, a tribunal will be assembled to judge whether I am fit to be overseer, using Martel as a pawn."

Alastair looked from the letter to Juliana and back. "And who will be on this tribunal?"

"That is the salient question. He will undoubtedly attempt to fill it with his cronies, perhaps even petitioning the High Council for the right to choose. I may have to do the same – hope that I have more allies than he does."

He placed his still full cup on the small table in front of his seat. "If not..."

She pursed her lips before they turned into a thin smile. "I will be sacked and replaced by someone willing to support the headmaster's political ambitions."

"And Martel will be expelled. Should we tell him of this possibility?"

Juliana drummed her fingers against her desk. "Let me test the waters. If I can influence the choices for the tribunal, there is no need to worry him needlessly. But if I can't, you may have to counsel him on what his future looks like."

Chapter 234: New Stomping Grounds

New Stomping Grounds

It was strange to have no classes while he waited for his graduation to acolyte to be sorted out. Martel still worked one bell every morning in the apothecary, but compared to his schedule since he first arrived to Morcaster, that felt like nothing.

Tonight was an exception, being Pelday when the sparring guild met, and he also had to visit the Night Knives in their new location. But first, remembering that Master Alastair had promised to speak with the overseer yesterday, Martel went to ask for news.

"Oh, Martel. I can guess why you have come." Keeping the door to his chamber ajar, Master Alastair stayed inside as his student stood in the hallway.

"Did you speak to Mistress Juliana?"

"I did, my boy. It will be a few more days, probably."

"I don't understand. What's the cause for all this delay?"

Master Alastair looked towards the floor. "Your situation is unique, Martel, with just one year of schooling as a novice. I'll let you know as soon as I know anything for certain."

No wiser than yesterday, Martel walked away while his teacher quickly closed the door.

The new address for the Night Knives in the bridge district belonged to a stone house with the typical two stories. In size and appearance, it reminded him of Oswald's home; probably built around the same time given the similarity of location. The only difference was that the Night Knives had a small courtyard between the street and the front door, typical for small merchants where they

might store goods and other materials for their business. As for the mercenaries, it would provide them with a small area for training, and all in all, clearly an improvement to the apartment in the insula.

He found the door to the yard open; with only two inhabitants, they probably did not bother keeping someone outside at all times to respond to knocking. They did watch the front entrance, Marcus opening the door as soon as Martel had rapped his knuckles against it.

Martel stepped inside to enter the main chamber of the ground floor, containing a large table and numerous chairs. Beyond, he could spy a small back room that served as kitchen and probably had the door that led to the alley on the other side of the house. By the wall stood the implements of war, dummies holding armour alongside a weapons rack.

Flora appeared, walking down the stairs; for an eerie moment, Martel was reminded of how Weasel always showed himself, during the former's visits to the copper lanes. "Master Martel, what do you think of our new home?"

"Certainly more room than the last."

"Indeed. Space to train in the yard, where I might do some earth magic without disturbing the neighbours. And when Marcus annoys me, we can stay on separate floors. At least until others arrive."

"You're expecting more of your people?"

Flora shrugged. "Not imminently, but with this progress, I believe our captain may soon feel comfortable that our position in Morcaster can be considered permanent. It was a bit precarious staying at the docks, considering our arrangement was with the previous master of that district. Fortunately, Lady Pearl has seen fit to grant us patronage and permission to stay here."

"Well, I don't mind the lack of stairs going to visit you," Martel remarked. "Was there another reason you invited me here? Besides your new lodgings."

She planted her hands on her hips. "Why, is that not enough? You only care about business?" She shook her head and assumed a more relaxed post. "So be it. As you surmise, we have a new job, finally. This time, the client is Lord Ironside, if you know of him. Master of the market district."

Martel vaguely recalled the man from the meeting of the Nine Lords, looking more like a warrior than anyone else at the gathering. Purely from appearance, he seemed dour and not to be trifled with. Martel certainly felt more at ease with Lady Pearl, but the task and payment was what really mattered. "What's the assignment?"

"A simple one, on the surface of things. Tomorrow, he has a shipment landing at Smallport. He wants us to receive it and bring it to his place in the market district," Flora explained.

"If he's hiring the Night Knives, I imagine there's more to it."

Marcus gave his customary snort.

"Without doubt, the value of the shipment must be great. If luck is poor, it could arrive late in the day, meaning we would have to transport it through the city after dark. Lastly, controlling the central district means that Lord Ironside has no gate of his own. He must pay a tax to bring something through, and our good relationship with Lady Pearl helps to facilitate that."

Of all the tasks Martel had done with the Night Knives, this promised to be the easiest. "When do we meet?"

"Come by as early as you can tomorrow. We'll go to Smallport together and wait for the shipment."

"See you tomorrow."

Arriving at the Chamber of Earth, Martel looked around to see who else had come to spar. He was eager to try his shield spell; while it was too late to prove anything in regard to his examination, it would be good to confirm that his spellwork was still in order. Given his labours with the Night Knives, his magical shield might very well save his life at some point.

Henry approached him, slapping one hand down on his shoulder. "Come for another scalp? Physical conquest during the day, magical conquest at night."

Maximilian joined them, apparently having overheard the remark. "What now? Nordmark, have you been involved in scraps without me in the city?"

Martel stared at Henry, making vague protests while wondering what the air acolyte knew.

"Our good novice keeps getting messages from women in the city," Henry shared with a glint.

Feeling mortified, Martel glanced around until he saw Eleanor across the room, hopefully out of earshot.

"That reminds me, why are you still in brown?" Maximilian muttered. "Did you not have your examination last fiveday or something?"

"I did, it went fine," Martel quickly explained. "They are just sorting out some administration before I get my new robes."

"In that case, if this is my last opportunity to beat the novice, what say you to a round of sparring?" the mageknight said in challenge.

"More than happy to oblige."

Chapter 235: Smallport

Smallport

With no chores other than his work in the apothecary, it was early in the day when Martel went to the bridge district. Like yesterday, he could enter the unlocked yard to knock at the front door. Once admitted, he saw Flora and Marcus dressed in the garb of commoners, though he also noticed a glint of steel underneath until Marcus adjusted his sleeves.

Flora nodded towards the chain shirt hanging on a dummy. "Get your armour on. But keep the robe on top."

"We're doing this in disguise?"

"If we wear surcoats, it'll be obvious that we are guarding a cart. And if a cart has three guards..." Flora looked at him with expectation.

"... It must be valuable." Martel pulled off his robe to put the armour on.

Soon after, with the mages wielding staves and Marcus with a short sword hidden underneath his cloak, the trio set out. They followed the main road east until they passed through the gate and stood outside Morcaster. Ahead lay the bridge that crossed the river Alonde, but they turned right and walked on the road that ran alongside the city walls, going south.

They walked for more than an hour until they approached Smallport. As the name suggested, it was the lesser of two harbours. The main docks lay inside Morcaster, providing anchorage for the great vessels that traversed the open seas, whether arriving from Aquila, Sindhu, or the Western Isles.

In comparison, Smallport provided docks for the barges and boats transporting goods and people up and down the river.

Like a little town in its own right, Smallport was surrounded by walls not quite as impressive as those of Morcaster, more to deter brigands and raiders than any military assault. Walking through the gate, they were observed by a few guards, whose presence seemed mostly for show; nobody charged toll for going in or out.

Once inside the walls, the place seemed to Martel much like the harbour district. A few small warehouses took up space in between ordinary houses and numerous taverns, supplying either food, drink, or both. To his left, he saw a large array of wooden piers crossing the river, acting both as mooring for the riverboats and also as a bridge to the eastern side of Smallport.

After Flora had confirmed their shipment had yet to arrive, they found a table at a small tavern, where she bought lunch for them, and they settled in for the wait.

Marcus casually let a card fall from his hand to the table. Martel stared at the revealed legat, taking the point from his own prefect. "You've taken the last five points!" the novice complained. "How do you always know what card to play?"

The warrior shrugged, collecting the small pile of cards on the table.

Flora appeared. "The goods are here." She glanced at her companions playing cards. "You up to that again?"

Marcus scowled. "Don't spoil my fun."

"What?" asked Martel.

"Look at how tattered those cards are," Flora pointed out. "He's played with them a thousand times. He knows their value just by looking at the back."

Martel looked at the cards in his hand. Opposite him, Marcus broke into a grin.

"Alright, enough. Marcus, get the cart. Martel, with me."

As the warrior went one way, Martel followed Flora from the tavern to the small docks. A crane was unloading barrels from a barge.

"What's in the barrels?" Martel asked.

"That's a question you never ask the client," Flora told him. "But if anyone asks us, the answer is obvious." She took a deep breath through her nose. "Salted fish."

Martel did the same, discovering that if nothing else, the barrels certainly had the smell.

With Marcus holding the reins, Flora next to him on the driver's seat, and Martel in the back with the barrels, they began the return journey to Morcaster. This close to winter solstice, they encountered little traffic on the road between Smallport and the bridge gate. Looking left and up at the city walls, they could occasionally glance at the legionaries keeping watch, watching their progress.

Reaching the gate itself, one of the guards raised a hand to signal for them to stop. Unlike their colleagues patrolling the streets in the city proper, those manning the gates and walls wielded spears rather than staves. One legionary, whose uniform and helmet showed him to be an optio in rank, approached them. "What you bringing into the city?"

"Just some barrels of fish, good master." Flora opened her purse. "Happy to pay the toll."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," the optio grunted. "Open the barrels and let me see."

"We are happy to pay more," the earthmage quickly added. "Worth a pearl to some."

The soldier gave her a look. "Fine." He held out his hand, and Flora released a bundle of silver into it. "On your way."

Marcus spurred the oxen onwards, and the cart set into motion again. With some distance between them and the gate, Martel leaned forward from his position in the back. "That legionary quickly changed his mind."

Flora looked back to give him a sly smile. "One of the reasons I was keen to befriend Lady Pearl. The bridge gate is the best entry into Morcaster in our line of work. Except the harbour itself, of course."

The cart rumbled on.

Darkness had fallen by the time they reached the market district. Already a cold day, Martel pulled his cloak tighter around himself as it turned into a cold night. The streetlamps lit the way for a while, as long as they could follow the main roads that crossed the different districts of the city. Getting closer to the destination, however, they had to turn the cart down the smaller streets and alleys, where light was scarce.

Martel felt tempted to summon light of his own, but he knew that would only attract attention. Besides, it could not be much further.

Suddenly, Marcus pulled on the reins to stop the wagon. Wondering why, Martel turned his head to look forward. They were in a tight alley, too narrow for them to turn. Ahead some thirty paces, where the alley met the next street, another cart stood across to block the way.

Arrows began to fly.

Chapter 236: First Blood

First Blood

"Ambush!" Marcus pushed Flora down from the driver's seat before tumbling off to the other side.

Summoning his shield, Martel ducked, hiding between the barrels in the cart. Fighting to contain his panic, Martel tried to think. They were trapped inside the alley, but he had a good position at the moment, mostly hidden. And he did not have to go into close quarters to deal some hurt.

Only problem was who or where to attack. The tall buildings on either side prevented moonlight from reaching them, and he could barely see anything. He might be able to set the cart blocking their escape on fire, but that would simply leave a burning obstacle, accomplishing nothing, as the arrows came from that direction; they could still shoot.

Martel tried to reach out and get a sense of the archers, hoping to burn their bow strings, but his magic struggled to locate them without sight and across the distance.

He felt a burst of magic released nearby. He panicked for a moment until he realised it had to be Flora. The darkness made it difficult to see, but he sensed what she had done. A wall of earth, some seven or eight feet tall, rose to protect them from one side, blocking out any more arrows from that direction.

To the other side, Marcus drew his sword and grabbed a lid from a barrel to use as a shield. Down the alley towards them came five or six assailants, wielding a variety of weapons. Realising the opportunity afforded by the long and narrow path, Martel called out, "Marcus! Stay left!"

The warrior did so without hesitation, planting his left shoulder against the wall of the building. Down the right side, Martel released a ray of fire. It struck the first brigand in the stomach, and as he fell to the ground, rolling around to put it out, the flames continued to strike a second target behind.

Marcus quickly advanced, and he stabbed the nearest bandit as he lay on the ground. Some of the dead man's comrades held their ground, preparing to fight. In response, Martel launched bolts of fire in swift succession; none of them hit, as he was afraid to strike Marcus, but seeing the magical fire on display yet again proved too much. Losing their nerve, the brigands retreated.

All of them catching their breath, the trio gathered at their cart, staying vigilant. "Think they'll be back?"

"I don't think they counted on mages. All the same, let's not afford them time to reconsider their strategy and return," Flora considered.

Martel looked at the shape of the earth wall ahead, faintly visible in the dark. "That might give us some trouble."

The earthmage rolled her eyes. "I'll deal with that. And with a bit more spellwork, I should be able to push the other wagon out of our way. Collect the body and let's be gone."

Once underway, with Marcus driving, Flora sat in the back of the cart looking at the body. "Could you provide me with a little bit of light," she asked of Martel.

His eyes darting in every direction, Martel summoned a weak flame. He turned his attention towards her as she examined the corpse. "What are you looking for?"

"Anything to shed light on the identity of our attackers." She took hold of the dead man's hand, noticing half a missing finger. Grabbing the knife from his belt, she sliced open his clothes to look at his neck and shoulders.

"What do you expect to find?"

"Often, gangs like those plentiful in Morcaster mark their skin with paint. No such luck here." She moved to place the dagger back in its sheath when she suddenly arrested her movement. Examining the hilt of the weapon, her expression grew pensive. "Curious."

"What is?"

She finally placed the knife back where she had taken it. "You see where the pommel says VII? This is the weapon of a former soldier from the seventh legion." Flora gave him a look. "We have our clue."

A quarter of an hour later, the cart rumbled into a small courtyard. A few guards received them, as did a short, bald man. Looking into the back of the wagon, seeing the body, he grinned at Flora. "I see you had a few obstacles."

The earthmage jumped down from the cart. "Nothing we couldn't handle."

Martel looked at the dead man with the awful wound on his chest, stabbed all the way through to his back. In a sense, Martel was complicit; his magic had made the man an easy target for Marcus. He felt eerie about it, almost guilty. Yet the brigand had attacked them, and given his skill as a warrior, Marcus probably would have killed him anyway. Trying to dull the nagging sting of guilt, the novice looked away.

"You got the full shipment through?" The bald man eyed the barrels.

"Of course."

Martel climbed down as well, and so did Marcus. Money was handed over, the two mages collected their staves from the bottom of the cart, and they left.

"Let's keep our eyes open," Flora suggested, "and we'll follow the kid home." She glanced at Marcus as she said this, to which he nodded. Looking at Martel, she continued, "Got time tomorrow morning?"

The novice quickly thought about his schedule. He only had apothecary work right now, second bell on Glundays. "Once third bell rings, I do. Why?"

"Something feels wrong. It looks like we were attacked by a small, independent band, probably former legionaries. Morcaster is lousy with them."

Martel could vouch for that.

"On the other hand... They knew this shipment was valuable, the day it would arrive, and our route. No small gang of half-handed veterans have that kind of information," Flora speculated.

"And if they knew all of this, they surely also knew it belonged to Lord Ironside," Marcus added.

"Hard to imagine they'd risk the wrath of one of the Nine Lords without the backing of another."

"At the same time, they can't have known about our involvement specifically," the earthmage continued. "Else they would have worn gold."

"So, what do we do?" Martel asked.

"Tomorrow morning, Marcus and I will do some gentle asking around. You join us when you can, and we'll switch to less gentle asking."

Chapter 237: Silence Is Silver

Silence Is Silver

Yawning over his morning porridge, Martel rubbed his eyes. He had gotten a decent amount of sleep, but it still felt early to be up. Especially since he would soon be back out in the city, chasing the same kind of trouble as last night. At least he had no classes, in fact barely any chores except apothecary work; the only good thing that came from the stalemate with his advancement to acolyte. In fact, the lack of lessons made it harder for him to remember what day it was. And, he suddenly remembered, he had an engagement on Solday. He still felt apprehensive about going to the duke of Cheval's celebration, just for the chance to rummage through his study, but what was the point of magical powers if he could not use them to help those he cared about?

He turned towards Maximilian, likewise looking slow this morning. "Max, what day is it?"

"You are asking me?" The mageknight gave some manner of pensive growl. "Glunday, I think."

Still two days until Solday. It occurred to Martel that he had no form of transport, and he could not imagine walking across the city in the kind of shoes expected for such an event. "Are you attending the duke of Cheval's solstice celebration?"

"My father would whip me if I did not. What makes you ask?"

"Can I travel with you?"

Maximilian looked at him in surprise. "I had to drag you to the feast in the Imperial palace, yet this you attend freely?"

"The duke invited me. I don't feel like I can refuse to show," Martel claimed.

"Well, you're welcome to travel with me on one condition."

"Which is?"

"Tomorrow night, my father hosts our solstice celebration. You are hereby invited. Surely you will not refuse?" The mageknight grinned at him.

"What? Why do you even want me there?" Martel complained.

"Certainly not for the kind of company you presently offer," came the dry response. "But if the duke of Cheval has shown an interest in you, and I failed to bring you to my father's celebration, it would reflect poorly on me. We are friends, after all."

An argument the novice could not refute. "Fine. Tomorrow night?" .c(o)m

Maximilian nodded. "Be ready at fifth bell."

Martel sighed.

Once third bell rang, Martel finished his work in the apothecary and left the castle soon after. He waited a brief while, shielding himself from the cold wind with his cloak, until Flora and Marcus appeared at the open square outside the school.

Martel could tell that neither of them had seen sleep for more than a few hours. He felt almost well-rested in comparison by looking at them. "What are we doing?"

"We found the hideout of the gang that assaulted us. We are going to get some answers, same tactics as when we cleared that house for Lady Pearl," Flora explained. "I know that's two fights for the price of one, but we need to find out how they knew about us. Can we count on you?"

Martel was never eager to jump into a fight, but he could hardly leave the Night Knives on their own. Strangely enough, considering how they first met and the general reputation attributed to mercenaries, the sell-swords had proven steadfast in their friendship towards him. "Let's go."

"We should expect seven or eight inside," Flora explained as they looked towards the building housing the brigands. Small and unassuming, it lay directly against the neighbouring structures. "No guard outside, so they're probably watching from the upper floor. No bodies if it can be avoided," she impressed upon them. "We don't want more attention than needed."

"Same approach as last?" Marcus asked.

Flora nodded. "I'll go in once I hear you." She separated from the others, moving around the block towards the alley behind.

Marcus hefted his sword and shield, looking at Martel. "They'll see us as soon as we move out on the street." They stood by the edge of another alleyway, hiding behind the building on the corner. "We rush across the street, make our way in, and incapacitate those inside. Expect them coming down the stairs. You got range, so you deal with them. Understood?"

"I'm ready."

The warrior looked towards the building, took a deep breath, and broke into a sprint. Quickly, Martel followed, and they crossed the street in a few moments. A swift kick opened the door, revealing a band of thugs reaching for weapons. As Marcus engaged the closest, slamming his shield into the other man's face, Martel blasted another to the side, knocking him off his feet. As the veteran tried to get back up, Martel stepped forward and swung his staff to deliver a concussive blow.

Several came jumping down the stairs. One in the back had a bow. Before he could shoot an arrow, his bowstring caught fire and broke.

Flora burst in from the backdoor. She sent a ray of frost towards the nearest enemy, making him buckle over in pain. "Surrender if you wish to live, fools!"

Clearly outmatched if not outnumbered, several of the brigands retreated and lowered their weapons. One of them still raised his sword, and Martel blasted the blade from his hand with a well-aimed burst of wind.

Flora looked from one to the other. "We met last night. You clearly had some help planning that ambush, and I want to know from whom."

The bandits exchanged glances. Several of them still had their weapons in hand, even if lowered.

An icicle appeared in Flora's hand and extended itself towards the nearest brigand, who backed away. "If I don't get an answer now, the first among you will die. And then another. Until you tell me."

"He didn't share his name," one of them explained quickly. "A few of us met him, that's all."

The icicle in Flora's grasp extended itself further another inch. "A description?"

"Uhm, short, and bald. No beard. Tapered ears like a goblin."

The earthmage quickly stepped forward, pointing her icicle against the chest of the talking bandit. "If any of this is a lie, this is your only chance to correct it. If I have to come back, I won't bother talking."

"It's true, I swear by Sol and the Stars!"

The others quickly nodded.

Flora looked at her companions. "We are done." Demonstrably, she turned her back towards the thugs as she walked out, though Martel caught the glimmer of magic, showing that she had summoned her shield.

Outside, they quickly crossed the street while Martel kept glancing over his shoulder. The bandits did not follow them. "You sure they told you the truth?" Martel asked. They were hardly a trustworthy lot.

"Unfortunately, that description fits too well. Did you notice Lord Ironside's new lieutenant yesterday, who received the shipment?"

In the dark, with his mind on the ambush, Martel had not paid him any attention. But he suddenly saw what Flora meant. "Now what?"

Flora exhaled. "Now we find a place to get something to drink while we think."

They left the market quarter entirely, finding a tavern at the edge of the bridge district instead. Each with a tankard in front of them, Martel looked from one to the other. He wanted to ask what this meant, but he was unsure about disturbing their thoughts.

At length, Flora spoke. "I can think of two explanations. On the surface, it looks like Lord Ironside's lieutenant is making a play against his master."

"A poor one in that case. We dispatched those cutthroats with ease," Marcus pointed out.

The earthmage nodded. "Which makes me suspect something deeper is afoot. I think that bald bastard set this ambush up with his master's blessing."

That left Martel more confused than ever. "Why would he rob himself?"

"There are constantly independent gangs springing up across the city. All the Nine Lords have trouble with them. I imagine our good client used us to bloody their nose. Two tasks for the price of

one. And he got the chance to put our skills to the test, if that was something he wondered about," Flora considered.

Martel scratched the back of his head. Involvement with any of these Nine Lords always seemed to bode ill. "So, what are we going to do?"

The earthmage shrugged. "Nothing."

The novice looked at her shocked. He turned his eyes on Marcus, who seemed likewise indifferent. "So he gets away with it?"

"When Kerra used you as bait for an ambush, did you take vengeance on her afterwards?" Flora raised an eyebrow. As he did not reply, she continued, "If I am right, we gain nothing challenging one of the Nine Lords. If I am wrong, let him figure out for himself that his lieutenant is disloyal." She opened her purse and counted out eight pieces of silver. "Either way, you've gotten paid."

Chapter 238: A Light Step

A Light Step

After he had undressed, Martel hurried to step into the warm basin. Tonight was the solstice celebration at Maximilian's home, so Martel made use of the Lyceum's baths to get a good scrub in before he changed clothes.

But first he leaned back to enjoy the warm water. A few other boys made use of the pool as well, but they did not disturb him. It gave Martel the opportunity to consider tonight. During the summer celebrations, he had performed magic not once, but twice in a hall full of people. Given that Maximilian and Jasper had managed to guess his secret, he obviously had to be more careful. If Maximilian wanted him to participate again, he would just have to lie and claim he had exhausted himself practising spells. No matter what, he would avoid attention.

As the hot water helped him relax, this line of thought gave him an idea. If he was serious about trying to find the contract for Shadi and her father, or just anything that might help them avoid eviction, it would help him to prepare. However, he obviously could not practice sneaking around the duke of Cheval's palace.

But he could do so tonight at Maximilian's home. While not the same place, Martel assumed both had guards and areas restricted for guests. He could use tonight as an opportunity to practice getting about unseen. And should he be discovered, Maximilian could vouch for him, letting him avoid trouble. Closing his eyes, Martel allowed himself to sink underneath the water before he emerged again.

At fifth bell, the carriage arrived to take Maximilian and Martel to the feast. As they travelled, Martel had to resist the urge to constantly fiddle with the tight collar of his shirt or other parts of his outfit; he would never get used to this kind of clothing. "Max, you don't expect me to perform magic like I did last time, right? Because I'm really tired from practising." *freewebnovel.com*

"Of course not, a repeat would be plebeian. No, I will fight a duel with Eleanor. It allows us both to show our skill, and it seeds the ground for our union."

Another thing Martel still felt weird about. He stayed quiet as the drive continued, eventually reaching the stately home belonging to the count of Marche.

The first time Martel had seen this place, he had felt overwhelmed. Now that he had seen the Imperial palace, he knew that some lived in even greater wealth and luxury. Still, he admired the rich decorations, the artistry shown everywhere, and the amounts of food offered to guests. Martel made sure to taste the different kinds of fowl, fat and exquisite even in winter. And this was not the full meal, but simply treats to welcome the guests. Maximilian laughed at his eager eating, slapping him on the back.

An hour later, when everyone was presumed to have arrived, the count of Marche appeared on a balcony overlooking the great hall, where his guests had gathered. He gave a speech, which Martel did not pay attention to, already thinking about his own little activity. He slowly moved backwards until he stood against the wall. A few more furtive steps before he slipped out of the hall into a corridor.

As he began walking, servants appeared from the opposite direction, carrying trays with more food. Martel prepared himself to be asked about the reason for his presence when they simply passed him by, eyes downwards. Of course; he was dressed as a noble, and regardless of ancestry, he was still a guest of the count. Only the guards could be expected to question him.

Martel knew the route to Duke Cheval's study in his mansion, so to give himself the same challenge here, he decided to reach the room with the artefacts from the Western Isles, where he had once been offered that bitter coffee by the count.

It lay in the inner part of the complex, where no guests were supposed to be, and where sentinels could be expected. Walking with confidence until the stream of servants had passed him by, Martel finally slipped into a smaller corridor.

Catching his breath, feeling nervously excited at the thought of sneaking around, Martel tried to calm himself. He would have to stay sharp and especially keep his ears open so that he might hear others in time to hide.

With cautious steps, focusing on avoiding noise as he walked, Martel continued down the small corridor. It lay between the larger hallways, acting as a quick passage for servants to move swiftly around the mansion. Now it served the same purpose for Martel.

He reached a crossroad where it intersected with one of these bigger hallways, and he heard the lazy gait of heavy boots coming from the side. An old lamp cast a frail light inside the passageway, and Martel quickly reached out with his magic to quell the flame even as he retreated into the appearing darkness. Shortly after, a guard walked by at a leisurely pace.

Waiting until it was quiet, Martel crossed over to continue down the servants' corridor on the other side of the hallway. This was not the same route he had taken when going to the chamber with Maximilian, obviously, but Martel believed he now approached his destination. freeweb(n)ovel

Leaving the servants' passage, Martel almost walked straight into a guard who stood posted down the hallway. Pulling back, he wondered what to do. A distraction ought to work; the question remained how to best accomplish this.

Carefully sneaking another glance, after he had extinguished the nearest lamp, Martel noticed a large painting on the wall. With a strong gust of wind, he pulled it down to land on the floor with a heavy sound. Flinching, the guard leaned his spear against the wall and hurried over to inspect the fallen object. Meanwhile, Martel quickly snuck forward.

As he approached the next large hallway, he recognised it. Being more careful than last, he extended his magic to search for any large sources of heat, such as human bodies. Nothing came back to him; the hallway was empty. Moving forward, he swiftly approached the door into the chamber decorated from the Western Isles. It was locked. A quick touch and a spell on the keyhole, same as he had done in the house of Oswald, gave Martel entrance. His little training run had been a success.

"It is I."

Hearing Juliana's voice on the other side of his chamber door, Alastair crossed the room to open up. "Come inside."

The overseer did so, joining the Master of Elements in his private quarters. "The headmaster moved faster than I did." She held up a letter in her hand.

Alastair took it and glanced over the list of names. "The tribunal?"

She nodded. "At least half are guaranteed to be swayed by him. I might have stood a chance to convince the rest to support me, but the meeting is held in a few days. If I could not influence who sits upon the tribunal, I doubt that I can persuade any of them before we meet, or during, for that matter."

He gave her a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry. For all your work for this school, you deserve better treatment."

"I will not argue that."

"Martel deserves to know. This leaves him in a most precarious situation."

Juliana exhaled slowly. "I know. He must expect to be expelled. I will tell him on Pelday when the solstice celebrations are over. Let him enjoy those until then."

Chapter 239: Covetous

Covetous

Solday was the last day of celebration. Unlike summer solstice, the winter counterpart was a more subdued affair. Commoners mostly celebrated at home, restricting it to a single day. Only the nobles dedicated several evenings, as they all invited each other to these feasts, using attendance to measure loyalties.

Unaware of this, Martel had his own considerations as he once more lay in the warm pool in the basement of his dormitory tower. While bathing twice in two days seemed excessive, Eleanor had once explained to him in no uncertain terms the necessity of a full wash before any such event as the one tonight.

Given the ease with which he could bathe, not to mention the comfort of warm water in winter, Martel no longer resisted the thought. On the contrary, he could grow accustomed to this. Getting

out of the hot pool, Martel collected his things and moved to the cold basin to wash and finish his bath.

Feeling his mind roused from the cool sensation of the water, Martel made his decision about tonight. While he knew he took a risk angering the powerful duke, he could not stand aside and watch the nobleman evict family after family from the Khivan quarter, Shadi's included. If any evidence could be found in the man's study of illegal rent-raising, Martel would find it. He owed it to Shadi to at least try.

With the same procedure as yesterday, Martel arrived alongside Maximilian to the home of Duke Cheval. Just seeing the building gave Martel a knot in his stomach, but for once, it only strengthened his resolve. He was not doing this for himself, but for others.

They entered the main hall, decorated with green boughs of pine tree. It gave the stone surroundings a gentle touch, reminding Martel of spring to come after winter's end. He almost forgot that he stood in the house of a man he deeply disliked. He should have known about the duke, given how his son behaved.

Across the hall, Martel's greater height allowed him to catch a glimpse of said son. Guillaume of Cheval stared back with an angry demeanour, but he made no move towards Martel, demonstrably turning his back. Following Maximilian deeper into the hall as other guests pressed from behind to enter as well, Martel glanced around to see whom else he might recognise.

Very few, as it turned out. While he did know some of the house insignias, thanks to five evenings at the Imperial palace, he had little recollection of the people who wore them. He did recognise Alain as the latter appeared with his parents and siblings, and presumably a few other students of the Lyceum would be present, at least those with noble blood.

After a while, their host appeared on a balcony overlooking the hall, his family by his side. He raised one hand to gain silence and addressed the crowd. "Welcome, dear guests! As the year reaches its end, we look towards the new. Change is never easy, but it is also the only way to find opportunity. Embracing the new while preserving the old, all the traditions that have made our Empire great, remains the challenge, year after year." He made a brief pause. "But you did not come to hear me talk. I suspect you came for wine and music." Polite laughter could be heard. "I am happy to oblige."

He clapped his hands, and servants appeared bearing trays of empty cups while others followed with pitchers, allowing the guests to take the former and have it filled by the latter. Meanwhile, a troupe of musicians entered and began playing their instruments.

"Finally. I am parched." Maximilian pushed forward to immediately grab a cup from a tray before doing the same to a pitcher, taking it out of the servant's hands. "Nordmark, what is keeping you?"

With a shrug, Martel joined him after securing his own cup, extending it for Maximilian to fill.

Once the wine had done its work, the musicians changed melody and began playing tunes for dancing. Maximilian soon disappeared from Martel's side, joining the fray on the floor. With all the commotion and people moving about, the novice considered to make his retreat and seek out the

duke's study. Nobody would miss him, and few if any would take notice of someone who wore no house insignia.

He glanced around just to make sure nobody was watching him, especially Maximilian, who conceivably might be the one person to cause a ruckus if he saw Martel leave. Fortunately, the tall mageknight was easy to spot on the dancefloor. He seemed engrossed in the act, perhaps because his partner was Eleanor.

As always, seeing her in a beautiful dress with elaborate hair and discreet cosmetics to accentuate her eyes, such a contrast to the mageknight's tunic she usually wore, made Martel forget to breathe for a moment. He felt strange having this reaction; he ought to be accustomed to seeing her like this. It reminded him of when he attended the summer solstice in her family's home, or rather the preparations beforehand, when she rubbed oil into his hair. He imagined that if he had been the one dancing with her, the scent of lilies would surround him.

"You are not dancing." Alain joined him.

"Neither are you."

"I sprained my ankle yesterday. What is your excuse?"

"I don't know the steps." This was true; Martel had only learned the one dance of the many favoured by these nobles, and they were currently in the midst of another.

"A pity. The way you look at the dancefloor, you seem envious."

"We all want things we can't have," Martel replied, quoting something his father always told him whenever he had complained about being denied something. "But I can get more wine," he added with an attempt of a smile, raising his empty cup to signal his attentions to Alain.

The mageknight laughed at him and nodded in farewell as Martel pulled away. Once he had moved deeper into the crowd of onlookers, he made his way towards a corridor and left the hall.

Chapter 240: Clocks and Locks

Clocks and Locks

Thanks to his foray yesterday in the house of Marche, Martel knew how to make his approach to the duke's study. Before venturing too far from the main hall, making himself suspicious to any guards, he found one of the passageways for servants to move about the mansion unseen. He quickly ducked inside, preparing himself mentally to act and look arrogant should he encounter any actual servants; it was not their place to question a guest of the duke.

Guards were another matter; but he had his magic to use tricks on them, and if they caught him before reaching the study, he would claim to be lost. As long as nobody saw him rifling through the duke's papers.

He did as he had last night. Extinguishing the lamps whenever he needed darkness, using his magic to sense people nearby rather than risk sticking his head out, and causing a distraction when he wanted someone to turn around. The only hindrance was that it had been half a year since he had gone to the duke's study, and he was not even taking the same path, using the servant corridors this time. This delayed him, as he sometimes had to spend time walking up and down the main hallways to look for doors that he might recognise, exposing himself to being seen. free(w)ebnovel

After several such outings, he began to grow worried. What if he failed to remember how the door looked? Perhaps he had already gone past it. He did not know how much time he had spent already, but he needed to complete this and return to the great hall before the other guests left.

Time. That was the clue he needed.

He pressed his ear to a door that looked promising, but heard nothing from the other side. He tried another, also without result. Turning back, he retraced his steps to the previous hallway to investigate a door he had been unsure of. With his ear against the wood, he heard the faint sounds of a mechanical clock ticking. The Khivan watch he had noticed when the duke had invited him to the study. Hand against the keyhole, Martel quickly used his magic to unlock the door and hurried inside.

Closing the door behind him left the room in darkness, but a glow of magelight alleviated that. He vaguely remembered the study with its Khivan clock, bookshelves, and a bronze statue. The most likely place for any legal documents would be in the desk, in particular any locked drawer. Martel crossed the room and began pulling on all of them until he reached one that would not budge. A small burst of magic persuaded the lock to open. Martel dove in and withdrew a heavy stack of parchment. Placing it against the desk, he quickly skimmed through them.

These all seemed to be deeds. Not what Martel came for, though it surprised him to learn how many properties the duke owned. This looked to be a large part of the Khivan quarter.

One piece of parchment in the pile was folded up. Opening it, Martel recognised it to be a map of Morcaster. It seems strange why this would be with the documents, and increasing the light floating above his head, Martel inspected it further.

He found only one thing that gainsaid his knowledge of the city. Rather than the ramshackle houses of the Khivan enclave, the lower left corner of the map showed large buildings. Insulae big enough to house hundreds, probably.

The pieces fell into place for Martel. The duke had bought all these properties to develop them. But he needed the current tenants out, hence the constant rent-raising.

This made it all the more urgent that he found the rental contract to prove the duke was breaking the law. He was not simply trying to extort the Khivans like Shadi and her father; he would not stop until they had been forced from their homes.

Noise outside the door. Panicking, Martel grabbed the documents and threw them back in the drawer. As he heard keys jangle in the lock, he dove underneath the desk to hide and extinguished his light.

A moment later, footsteps from at least two people could be heard entering the study, accompanied by a ring of light. "Hold this." The voice belonged to the duke, and as he spoke, Martel noticed the light moving, as presumably a lamp changed hands. "Where did I put it..."

"What is that strange noise?" The speaker was unknown to Martel.

"My Khivan clock. A marvel of machinery. Have you never seen one before?" As he talked, the duke rummaged through what sounded like a shelf or maybe another drawer. Martel prayed he did not need anything from his desk.

"Never. It uses noise to count time?"

"With great precision. I would advise you to buy one as well, but after tonight, I doubt that will be possible." They both laughed. "Ah, here it is."

The men left, closing the door behind them and returning darkness to the room. Martel emerged from his hiding place, stretching his legs. The duke's words had sounded ominous, and he wondered at their meaning. They suggested something imminent, an immediate threat to the Khivans. Perhaps Duke Cheval had grown tired of evicting families one by one. But what did he intend instead?

Martel thought about his experiences in the enclave. The worst of these had to be the day of the riots, incited by reports of casualties from the war. The attack on the small temple, blood and bodies strewn across the square. With tonight's celebration as an excuse to drink heavily, igniting tempers would not be difficult. To a man with the duke's resources, inciting another riot would be possible.

Martel had to warn the Khivans. He would wait just a little longer to be sure the hallway was clear and afterwards rush to the enclave.

The noise outside returned. Martel dove underneath the desk again. Perhaps the duke had forgotten something. Martel prayed that the nobleman left quickly; he did not know how much time he had before the attack happened.

The door croaked open, revealing light. Several pairs of boots could be heard. "I know you are in here," came the voice of the duke. "Show yourself."