

Firebrand 251

Chapter 251: Idle Machinations

Idle Machinations

Martel stepped into the Circle of Fire the next day, just as the bell rang. Thanks to his Khivan clock, he knew exactly when it would. He found the other acolytes already present; assuming they lacked the same precise instruments for time-measuring, they probably had to arrive early just to be on the safe side. Martel sent a kind thought to Shadi for her gift, immediately followed by a wave of sadness as he remembered he would never see her again.

The other acolytes still looked at him with disdain; presumably nothing could mend those relationships. Mistress Moira had seen to that on his first day in the Circle of Fire.

At the same time, Martel noticed they did not seem to like each other either. All of them stood apart. They had not been talking as he entered, apparently waiting in silence. So his teacher's strategy of sowing enmity between students did not appear confined to him alone, but extended to all of them.

Not that Martel could understand why; he would have thought that promoting cooperation would make them more effective fighters, given his own experiences fighting with Maximilian or the Night Knives.

Their teacher arrived. She did not greet her students, except perhaps for a quick gesture that could be interpreted as a curt nod. "Pair up. Edward, you're against Martel. Harriet, you're against William."

At least Martel knew their names now, assuming he remembered. It did not seem he would have much reason to use them.

Unsure what was expected besides joining into pairs, Martel turned towards his new partner and watched him carefully.

Mistress Moira cleared her throat, and they all turned their heads towards her. "First one to yield will be kept an hour after class. Begin."

It took Martel a moment to understand; Edward, perhaps from previous experience, did not require as long. A bolt of fire streaked through the air to hit Martel on the shoulder.

It stung, making him grit his teeth. In the other half of the room, he sensed that Harriet and William had likewise begun their duel; even without looking, Martel's magic told him that bursts of heat soared between them.

Ignoring it, Martel turned his attention towards his own opponent. Already, more bolts of fire flew through the air towards him. This time, he managed to evade, crouching down. He flung his own attack forward, sending flames from his fingertips against Edward.

They struck the acolyte on the leg, which buckled under him, and Martel smiled at the taste of victory. Seeing his opponent off-balance, Martel sent a ray of fire this time to press the advantage. The flame struck Edward in the stomach, and he fell to the ground in an attempt to escape; maintaining the spell, Martel kept the ray going as he moved forward, scorching his opponent.

"Enough!" Mistress Moira called out. Martel ended his spell and looked towards the other combatants, wondering if one of them had yielded. It did not appear so; both of them stood on their feet, and they likewise glanced around, looking confused.

Their teacher approached Martel. "Why did you use that spell? The ray of fire?"

Caught off-guard by the question, Martel struggled to think of an answer. "I thought it would end the fight quicker," he tried to explain.

Mistress Moira turned towards Edward. "Did it hurt worse being struck by the ray than the initial bolt?"

"No." Judging by the acolyte's grimace, both had still caused him some pain.

The teacher looked at Martel again. "Your enemy was already out of balance, easy to hit. You did not need to keep the flame going. All you accomplished was draining your spellpower, when a simple fire bolt would have served just as well." She rapped her knuckles against Martel's forehead, and while it did not hurt as such, he felt a flare of anger. Ignoring any sign of emotion on his part, Mistress Moira spoke again. "The next time I see you waste your spellpower, it'll be another bell of practising the simplest of spells for you. Do you understand me, boy?" She stared up at him with her wild eyes.

"Yes, mistress," Martel mumbled. Around him, his fellow acolytes seemed only delighted as they watched him be chastised.

"Again! Fight!"

After classes, Martel felt spent. Even so, he decided to leave the castle. Shadi had told him to stay away, to avoid saying farewell a second time. But every time he looked at his Khivan watch, every time he became mindful of its ticking noise, it hurt. In some ways, he appreciated how busy his schedule had become, as it left him little time to miss her. But each evening, back in his chamber, listening to the ticking sound, he relived their final conversation over and over in his mind. Unable to resist any longer, he left the Lyceum.

His journey to the Khivan enclave was quiet and uneventful. With the solstice celebration over, little took place in Morcaster in these last months of winter. Not until spring would arrive.

Arriving at the foreigners' district, Martel received a few looks. Some were unfriendly, but others seemed to recognise him, bowing their heads as he passed them by. In either case, few people could be found on the streets. Besides the dark evening giving little reason to be outside, the district had lost many of its residents, Martel noticed. Houses looked abandoned with no light or warmth inside of them. And as he approached the small temple square, he saw the remains of the devastation wrought upon the quarter.

Some work had been done; much of the burnt wreckage had been dismantled and hauled away. Some of the dilapidated houses still remained, waiting for their turn to be removed as well. It sickened Martel to know that in the end, Duke Cheval would get his wish. One way or another, the Khivans would be gone, and he could begin construction of his large complexes meant to house Asterians.

Hurrying past, Martel approached the watchmaker's workshop. Once he reached it, he saw that it had suffered the same fate as some of those he had seen earlier. It lay dark and empty. No one responded as he knocked. He was too late; they had left.

Martel had feared this, yet it still hurt to have it confirmed. On the other hand, he could now cease his speculations, his imagined conversations where he convinced Shadi to stay. It was done. Martel had no further business in the enclave. He turned around and began walking home.

Chapter 252: Public Enemy

Public Enemy

Eating his breakfast alone, Martel paid little attention to those around him, but even he noticed as everyone suddenly became silent. Looking around, he saw the reason why; a pair of inquisitors had appeared in the dining hall, surveying the students. They looked familiar; probably they had been among those interrogating most of the school, back when they still hunted the maleficar.

Martel briefly wondered how that had gone; he had heard nothing further about this dark sorcerer, and the city had been quiet. No doubt if he had been caught, the inquisitors would have paraded him around town, which suggested that he had managed to evade them and stay underground, perhaps literally. No wonder this pair of blue-clad zealots looked angry, though Martel had rarely seen them with any other expression.

They spotted Martel and went in his direction. Of course. Who else could they be here to harass?

The shorter of them sat down opposite Martel; the taller remained standing, hovering over the acolyte while his fingers fiddled with the golden chain in his belt.

"You're a firemage now," remarked the inquisitor sitting down.

Martel recognised them, now that they were up close; they had been the pair who interrogated him in his room, forcing their way inside and practically keeping him detained to prevent him from getting help. Gold or not, he would not be so easily intimidated this time. "Congratulations. You can tell colours."

The taller one barked a coughing laughter. "A real wit. Why don't you put that mouth to use and answer our questions?"

The acolyte looked up at him. "You haven't asked any."

"Then pay attention to this one," the shorter inquisitor growled. "What happened the night of the fire in the Khivan quarter?"

Martel had wondered at when he might be questioned about the affair. Yet as the days had passed, he began to consider whether either the Lyceum had downplayed his role or perhaps Duke Cheval had kept a lid on any official investigation. But it appeared that the wheels of justice simply moved slowly. "I noticed a fire spreading. I extinguished it. It's the sort of thing I can do with magic." He pulled demonstrably on the red sleeve of his robe. "Being a firemage, as you astutely noticed."

"Quite a coincidence," sneered the seated interrogator. "A fire breaks out, and you, still a novice who happens to be fire-touched, happens to walk by?"

"What about the scuffle on the streets?" interjected his partner. "You were seen fighting with the locals. Did they try to prevent you from setting the fire?"

Martel almost laughed at the inept attempt of baiting him. He had no idea how the inquisitors fought in combat, but he certainly hoped they did better than how they questioned someone they considered a suspect. "Do you have any evidence or just random hearsay?"

"Witnesses who saw you fight," came the rebuttal. "Who say you used fire magic."

"To defend myself. I was beset by rogues, no doubt seeking to mug me and my companion, the viscount of Marche."

"So, you're claiming that you started the fire on accident?"

"Any fire magic wielded by me lacked the power to set a twig ablaze," Martel retorted dryly. "You can ask Mistress Moira, the Mistress of Fire here at the Lyceum. She'll agree."

"What is the meaning of this?" The overseer had appeared, her stern expression cracking a little to show fury underlying. "You are not to question students without a member of faculty present! And doing so in public view is scandalous! This discussion is over, and I will have words with your superior!"

The shorter inquisitor got up with a shrug. "We were done anyway."

The pair left, and Martel looked around to find everyone staring at him. Ignoring them, he finished his breakfast.

Later, Martel found a message waiting for him in the entrance hall, delivered by a mute Henry. Ignoring the air acolyte, Martel gave the note a quick read.

Master Martel,

I write to you for your own sake.

I strongly suggest you pay us

a visit when time permits.

Kerra

She persisted. Martel trusted her as much as he would a rotten toothpick, but he could not deny a certain curiosity as to her reasons. He did not think it a trap as such; more likely, she had some scheme where she wanted him to play an unwitting part.

But there was the slightest chance it was something else. She claimed that she wanted to meet for his sake; while Martel found it unlikely that Kerra would do anything other than for her own benefit, his situation had changed a lot recently. Certainly, given the scrutiny he currently faced, he had no desire to become entangled in her schemes; but given the enemy he had created in Duke Cheval, perhaps he should not be quick to dismiss someone as powerful as a Ninth Lord.

Sighing a little, Martel prepared to leave for the copper lanes.

It had been a long time since he last walked this path. It was strange to consider that for a while, such frequent trips to the copper lanes had almost been a daily occurrence. Now, it had been months

since the last time; probably not since the ill-fated trip into the Undercroft, as far as Martel remembered.

Yet the district seemed itself, as did The Copper Drum.

Once he had entered, Martel located the nearest member of the staff. "Tell Kerra that I am waiting for her in the common room if she wants to talk." He had come this far; the least she could do was meet him down here. Fetching himself something to drink, Martel found a seat in a quiet spot and waited.

He saw no sign of his friends, but the sounds from the adjoining hall told him a fight was in progress, which explained their absence. Martel felt a little guilty that he had not been to visit Lothar and the others, though on the other hand, none of them had made attempts to contact him either.

After a while, Kerra sat down at his table. "You could have come to my study."

"Ale is better down here."

"You make a boy into a fire acolyte, and suddenly he has an attitude." Kerra smiled, but her expression had an edge to it.

Martel was tempted to argue, to point out how she had treated him, but he felt too tired after his demanding lessons. "Your message gave the impression you had something to share."

"I do. Lately, the copper lanes have been visited by people inquiring after you. Not looking for you, but information about you, that is. We all heard about the fire in the Khivan quarter, and now you sit here in a red robe. I assume there is a connection between all this."

So she had asked him here to gain knowledge rather than share it, Martel surmised. Still, he might learn something. Just the fact that people asked around about him in the copper lanes was worth knowing. The question remained what to share. If he revealed the truth of the events, would Kerra use it against him? Perhaps try to make a profit by selling him out to Duke Cheval?

Unless Martel could frame the nobleman as a common enemy. "I suspect those people are the servants of Duke Cheval."

For once, Kerra looked surprised. "What is his interest in you?"

"His men tried to burn down the Khivan quarter. I stopped them. I imagine now, he seeks retribution."

She scratched her chin. "An unbelievable story, except I cannot see any reason you would make this up. You have made a most dangerous enemy."

"An enemy to us all. He's been buying land in the enclave, and now with buildings burnt and people leaving, he can build new properties to make more money. Once he is finished with the Khivans, I wonder where his eye might turn next."

She leaned back in her seat. "You are implying that might be the copper lanes."

Martel raised his shoulders. "Cheap land, old buildings easy to replace, made from wood that might burn..."

Kerra looked not only contemplative; she almost seemed concerned, which Martel could not recall ever happening before. "I'll be on the lookout. His men will find no traction here."

"Good to hear."

Chapter 253: Frank Exchange

Frank Exchange

Martel's mornings in the apothecary were quiet; Nora still did not seem comfortable with his presence. He wondered if she ever would be. But he had nothing to explain or apologise for, and if she wanted it this way, he would oblige her.

The only interruption to their silent work came halfway through when Mistress Rana appeared. She held out her hand towards Martel, who mirrored the gesture. "Your payment for this fiveday," she said as she let five silver coins drop into his palm.

"Thank you," Martel told her.

"You earned it. Nora, I shall need your assistance upstairs shortly."

"Yes, mistress," she replied.

Martel placed the money inside a pocket. He had earned a lot more than five birds before, but always by somewhat dubious means such as illegal prize fighting or running with the Night Knives. It felt reassuring to know that every coin in his pocket belonged to him unquestioningly.

"Finish these, please. I have to go upstairs." Nora pushed a mortar and pestle towards him without eye contact.

Martel took the tools and continued her work, enjoying the solitude of the apothecary once the apprentice had followed in the footsteps of her mistress.

He found a message waiting for him at the entrance hall just like yesterday; Martel was starting to feel popular. This time, it was not from Kerra.

Martel,

I have heard rumblings.

We should talk.

Flora

Compared to the Copper Lady, Martel had more faith in the earthmage. If she wanted to talk, it was probably important. He could visit her tonight, but he still felt weary from this whole fiveday with long hours of schoolwork and going all the way to the copper lanes and back yesterday. And the note did not sound urgent, after all.

He would allow himself this Solday to rest and go tomorrow evening. That did coincide with the sparring group that met on Pelday, but given how hard Mistress Moira trained him, Martel did not feel underdeveloped in that regard.

He did secretly look forward to returning to the Chamber of Earth, though; he no longer had to hide his fire magic, restraining himself while using his lesser spells to fight. When the time came, Martel would show them what a fire acolyte could do.

His decision made, Martel went to his last engagement for the day. He had always enjoyed Soldays, naturally, being his day without classes; other than his work in the apothecary and for Master Jerome in the mornings, Solday felt like it belonged to him, or rather, his time did.

Now that he had tutoring lessons with Eleanor, this was less the case with two more hours accounted for, but he had only come to appreciate Solday even more. Compared to the rest of his hectic schedule, it still remained his easiest day. And the quietude of the library, spent solely in Eleanor's company, had its own charm.

It also helped that unlike arithmetic, Martel actually had some skill when it came to learning languages. He had never done this before; nobody in Engby spoke anything other than Asterian, at least until Master Ogion came. They knew a few Tyrian words, living in Nordmark, but not the language as such, and nobody had ever seen any need for anything other than the emperor's tongue.

Contemplating the last, Martel looked over at Eleanor, seated by the desk next to him. "Why is it we are learning Archeon?"

"It is the language of Archen," she replied, as if this made it self-evident.

"Yes, I'm not a complete idiot, I understood as much," Martel defended himself. "But how does this help us when it comes to magic? I can't think of a single time during all my lessons at the Lyceum where I needed to know Archeon."

"Perhaps not yet, but the time may come. It is the language of knowledge," Eleanor replied. "Many tomes and books are only available in Archeon, and when someone like, say, Master Fenrick corresponds with other scholars, he most likely writes in Archeon."

Martel frowned hearing this. That made no sense. Why choose deliberately to write something other than your own tongue? "Why?"

"Because he might correspond with people of Sindhu or the Western Isles or even further," Eleanor patiently told him. "Rather than everyone learning each other's language, it pays to have one in common."

"That explains why it's useful for Master Fenrick. But I don't think you and I are meant to debate the Khivans to death."

Surprised laughter came from Eleanor before she quickly stifled it. "I am not sure that is appropriate to jest about. Though you would be right. Regardless, you never know when it might come in useful to understand Archeon."

Martel thought about when he had accidentally strayed into the catacombs underneath the castle. Archeon writing had been on the walls, which he had not been able to understand. If learning the language could keep him from stumbling onto the living dead another time, perhaps it had its uses.

"I was wondering... Do you have any plans next Solday? After our session together, of course," Eleanor specified.

Martel gave her a look of curiosity. "I don't. How come?"

"I am going home that afternoon to visit my family. I should like you to come."

"Really? Won't I just intrude?"

She smiled to herself. "Trust me, that will not be the case."

Martel thought briefly about when Maximilian had extended the same kind of invitation. It was part of some political ploy, Martel had eventually understood. But Eleanor did not strike him as someone playing that kind of game. And even if she did, considering she spent her spare time tutoring him, he was in her debt. "Alright, I'm happy to go."

"Excellent. We shall leave once our session is done. But that is for next Solday," she impressed on him. "For now, back to these verbs, Master Martel."

Accepting that he could not keep her distracted any further, Martel dove back into conjugating.

Chapter 254: Angry Fire

Angry Fire

As the bell rang, Martel and the other students stood ready in the Circle of Fire. As usual, they stood apart, none of them speaking to the others. Mistress Moira arrived soon after, and like last time, she divided them into pairs to fight each other. This time, Martel faced Harriet, who seemed the stronger acolyte of the three, by his measure. Not that it gave him any pause. He had beaten her once without even using fire magic, all the way back during the summer solstice when his magic had been far less developed than now. In fact, he relished the opportunity to see what he could do without any restraints upon him; if it taught her some respect, all the better.

The duel began. Martel restricted himself to using only fire bolts, a spell so simple it placed no strain on his spellpower at all. He could hurl these motes of flame all day if need be, and he saw the point that Mistress Moira had made during the other class. If engaged in a lengthy battle, it would not do to expend all his magical strength straightaway on complex spells.

Several of his attacks landed as they should, striking Harriet on her arms or legs. Their fireproof robes prevented any chance of the garments being set ablaze, which often had been Martel's tactic for frightening his enemies in his scraps alongside Maximilian or the Night Knives, but he doubted another fire acolyte would be so easily scared anyway, even if her clothes caught fire. He remembered his first and only fight against Flora; she had not panicked when his fire had struck her, but simply used her knowledge of water magic to quickly extinguish the flames. No, to win this duel against Harriet he needed to strike her with such strength and frequency, the pain made her surrender.

The same applied to her, of course. Martel caught one of her attacks straight against his chest, making him wince. It felt like touching his father's anvil with his hand, heated from red-hot metal placed upon it. He imagined his skin charred even if he knew it remained whole underneath his clothes.

Retaliating, he watched with a triumphant smile as he struck Harriet on the knee, making her stagger for a moment before she regained her balance.

"Stop!" exclaimed Mistress Moira, stepping in between Martel and Harriet. "Not you two, continue," she barked at the other students, who resumed their duel. She looked at Martel. "Why are you holding back?"

"I'm not," he replied, confused and also distracted watching the other students still fighting, in case any of them had poor aim.

"Even worse. That means you are weak," his teacher growled. "Your last bolt should have hobbled her, but it barely did anything." She stood in front of him, hands on her hips. "Hit me with all the fire you've got."

She asked for it. Martel summoned a flame and threw it at Mistress Moira.

She did not react in the slightest. "Pathetic. Again!"

A sneer running across his face, Martel repeated his attack, this time feeding spellpower into the flame.

"Disgraceful! Again!"

Fire filled Martel's hand before it hurled through the air.

"Pitiful!"

Martel heard the laughter of the other students. He did not have to look at their faces to know the scorn filling their eyes. It angered him almost as much as the utter contempt he saw on his teacher's face. Holding up his hands, fire filled the air between them. The flaming ball finally flew across the distance to strike Mistress Moira in the face.

"Better. But far from satisfactory. I want to see that power in all your attacks, boy." She managed to make the final word sound like an insult. "All of you, back to the fight!"

Two lessons with the Mistress of Fire left Martel feeling worn out, and he was tempted to abandon his thought of visiting Flora. But he had already delayed once, instead of going yesterday, when he had the time. He felt foolish now, as obviously he would be more weary tonight. Regardless, it was best to find out what Flora wanted. Besides, given the hostile environment he faced in the Circle of Fire, Martel did not mind getting away from the Lyceum to see friendlier faces. As much as Marcus could ever be described as friendly, at any rate.

He reached the house in the bridge district and noticed it did not seem to have any more inhabitants than before. As he entered, his impression was confirmed by only Flora and Marcus being present. "I thought more of your people would come from Aquila," Martel said.

"At some point. Not much traffic during the winter months. Most of our company are away on longer journeys, only able to return once spring arrives," Flora explained.

"I see. What did you want to talk about?" He sat down by the table once Flora did while Marcus placed a cup of ale in front of him. "Thanks."

"Just a word of warning. Someone's been asking around for you, and not like how the Fire Eater did. These people aren't looking for you, they're looking for information about you," Flora elaborated.

Martel nodded slowly. "I heard the same from the copper lanes. They're casting a wide net."

The earthmage gave him an inquisitive look, and even Marcus sat down to follow the conversation. "Who?" she asked.

Martel took a deep breath. No reason to keep them in the dark. "You remember the fire in the Khivan quarter?"

"Of course."

"It was set by the duke of Cheval. His men, anyway. He is angry with me for interfering, and I think he's looking for ways to hurt me."

The two Night Knives looked at each other. "A powerful enemy," Flora remarked.

"So everyone keeps telling me."

"Well, the duke's no friend of ours. He won't learn anything from us," the earthmage assured Martel. "And if we hear anyone talking, we will set them straight."

Marcus nodded in agreement.

"I appreciate it." The acolyte looked at the mercenaries; he trusted their word on this. It still left the question of what the duke might have learned – and how he could use it against Martel.

Chapter 255: Ambitions of a Father

Ambitions of a Father

Martel was unsure which lessons he looked forward to the least, combat or fire magic. Four lessons a fiveday under Mistress Moira would drive anyone mad with her incessant criticisms and belittlements, not to mention her exacting demands that left Martel exhausted after every class.

But at least he learnt something, even if the path was unpleasant and sometimes left him almost seething with anger. With Reynard, it was the same stream of negative remarks, but in a more indifferent manner; as if he did not really care whether they listened or improved, and he only spoke this way because he could not be bothered to do otherwise. Combat lessons allowed more leeway to slack, and it was easier to ignore the spiteful comments from his teacher, but Martel also knew that he made no improvements.

At least not during the first lesson on Maldays, training empowered fighting; Martel's time in the ring at The Broken Crown and elsewhere had already provided him with the foundation for using his magical shield or fighting with a staff. The only possible avenue for getting better at this lay in the second lesson, when the fire acolytes trained together with the future mageknights. Presumably because he cared about them, Reynard actually provided proper instructions during their sparring together.

Their training usually took place in the same manner. Those mageknights destined to be protectors, whether for the emperor as praetorians or on the battlefield for mages, played a defensive role alongside the fire acolytes. The rest, those mageknights seeking a career in the legions as officers, provided the attacking force. Martel still did not know all the names of the students in black tunics; partly because he did not care, but also because he had only been in previous classes with some of them. He did notice that both Eleanor and Alain usually fought as attackers, while students like Maximilian and Cheval played the role of defenders.

If left up to Martel, he would pair up with Maximilian for every exercise; besides preferring to fight next to his friend, they had already established a rapport in their actual brawls out in the city. Whether for some deeper reason or simply out of spite, however, Reynard always decided the pairings and never allowed them together.

Sometimes, perhaps to keep things from getting repetitive, Reynard did change their sparring exercises. Mageknights usually playing attackers became defenders and reverse, or he commanded the fire acolytes to fight on their own without protectors. Martel could see the sense in that; in a battle, it could not be guaranteed that the mageknight would always be right by the battlemage or even still alive. Yet he noticed that after every such fight, Reynard only offered instructions to the mageknight on how to improve, never the fire acolyte.

Regardless, Martel enjoyed such bouts. Thanks to his experiences sparring after hours in the Chamber of Earth, he knew what to expect from fighting a mageknight and what spells to employ in return. He rarely landed on his back, typically finding a way to disarm or disable his opponent first. He usually only had trouble with Eleanor, generally showing herself to be the strongest at spellwork among the mageknights, or Maximilian, who by now knew all of Martel's little ploys in a fight.

The fire acolyte especially enjoyed these sparring matches when up against Cheval. It seemed clear that the young nobleman did not have any particular talents to be a mageknight. Had his father been a peasant, perhaps he would have been allowed to pursue elemental magic as befitted his natural talent – assuming he had one. At least Martel could think of no other explanation why anyone would insist to train Cheval as a warrior.

Not that Martel particularly cared other than it afforded him the opportunity to humiliate the young nobleman every time they matched up. The father was beyond Martel's reach, but he could retaliate against the son.

Of course, he did not inflict serious injuries on Cheval; Martel was not interested in acts of cruelty. He simply did as told by his teacher and sparred against the mageknight to the best of his ability. If people quietly laughed at Cheval's performance, how easily he was bested, Martel felt no guilt related to that.

After another such round, Cheval got on his feet and glared at Martel menacingly. "Enjoy it while it lasts," the mageknight declared with a threatening voice. "The legions have no use for an honourless knave like you!"

"If that's the case, they are wasting an awful lot of time and money to train me," the fire acolyte retorted.

"I know the truth," Cheval sneered. "How you're always sneaking around the city, fighting with rogues, sell-swords, and all manner of criminals!"

"That sounds serious," Martel replied as nonchalantly as he could. "If you have evidence, you should really let somebody know." He turned and walked away. While he did not relish the thought of anybody digging through his past exploits, he wondered what anyone could do with the information. After all, they could hardly send him to war twice.

Once the lesson had ended, Martel fell into place next to Eleanor as all the students left the arena. "I was wondering about something," he asked.

"Which is?"

"Well, I know that Maximilian intends to join the praetorians. What about you?"

"My father is a legate, one of the few to reach that rank without possessing magic," she replied. "I cannot say if he was disappointed to never have sons to follow in his footsteps, but he was certainly pleased to discover my own talent in that regard." She gave him a wry smile. "Somewhere out there, a legion has a cohort in need of a prefect. No doubt, my father expects me to eventually rival him in rank."

Fathers and their ambitions.

"See you later." Eleanor and the other girls turned right, aiming for the northern corridor that led to their dormitory tower; Martel followed the other boys left towards their own, his mind already on the warm bath awaiting him in the basement pools.

Chapter 256: Heated Lessons

Heated Lessons

The latest fiveday of intense training with fire magic had begun to pay off for Martel. The spells invoking that element came more easily and swiftly to him now than before, even if he mainly used and practised the simple attack of a fire bolt. While hardly strong enough to kill a man – fortunately, since Martel would not wish that upon his classmates, however acrimonious their relationship – it now did far more than simply set someone's clothes on fire. He could see the hurt on the others' faces when hit by Martel's spell, or the flinch from fear of being struck, or even how they braced themselves when evasion was impossible.

Naturally, the reverse also held true. It stung bitterly whenever he got hit, which Martel used as additional motivation to become better at dodging. A pity that his magical shield did not protect against other magical effects.

"Stop," Mistress Moira commanded, interceding in the fight between Martel and William. "You flinched, boy," she barked at William. Martel stepped back, simply glad not to be the object of her ire. "Being afraid of pain will, at best, cost you valuable time in a battle. At worst, it will paralyse you. You know the remedy."

With the look of a beaten dog, the reproached acolyte hung his head and extended one hand. To Martel's surprise and subsequent alarm, he watched as his teacher filled her hand with fire and took a tight hold of William's. The boy cried out in pain before immediately clamping his mouth shut.

"Enough!" Martel called out, unable to stop himself. He did not particularly like William, but this seemed more like torment than training.

Moira released her grip and turned towards Martel. "You think the Khivans will stop if you ask them nicely? The Tyrians?" Her eyes narrowed. "You might as well learn. The others had to. Hold out your hand."

Martel hesitated. She did not have the authority to do this – did she? If he refused, how else could she punish him? It could not be worse than what she already planned to do.

"Every moment you delay, I'll keep going that much longer," she threatened.

Martel looked at the short woman with her wild, white hair. Nothing in her expression gave him reason to doubt her resolve. Finally, he held out his hand.

She grabbed it, and pain flowed through his arm. He remembered when Flora had hit him in the stomach with a ray of frost; this felt similar, like a knife tearing into his flesh, except the sensation did not quickly abate as it had back then. It continued for however long his teacher desired; Martel could not tell, his sense of time lost in the agony.

At some point, Moira released him, and he pulled his hand towards himself, cradling it. He had expected the skin to be charred black, but it looked as it always did. It felt absurd to have experienced such pain, only for it to leave no trace. He realised this also meant he had no evidence of what she had done to him, other than the testimony of others.

Martel looked around, finding no sympathy. In fact, the other students seemed to have almost enjoyed the spectacle, perhaps because they had all experienced it themselves. Or perhaps they were just all Nether-born bastards.

As for Moira, she appeared indifferent, as if she had done nothing more than swat a fly. "Back to training."

Even after the lesson had ended, Martel still felt shocked. He had at times been reprimanded physically, of course. Even mild-mannered Father Julius had once given him a light slap on the cheek when he had behaved impiously inside the temple back home at Engby. This felt different. Moira had not done this because Martel deserved punishment, or to make sure he paid attention or anything like that. She had inflicted pain on him, dragging it out.

He could not believe such was acceptable, but from what he had gathered, she had done this before. Probably on a regular basis towards all her students. The Lyceum not only accepted this behaviour; it might even be condoned.

Martel wanted to discuss the matter with Mistress Juliana; even if stern, she was not harsh or cruel. If Moira had crossed the line, the overseer would listen and take action. But what if she had not done anything beyond the limits of the school?

Tomorrow was Manday, which meant his one lesson with Master Alastair. He would ask him for counsel. If something could be done, no doubt his teacher would advise him to consult with the overseer. And if not, perhaps he had some advice on how to deal with a teacher who enjoyed hurting her students.

Still unnerved by what had happened, Martel almost forgot that he had been allowed to finish his work in the apothecary early in exchange for going to the market. Not wishing to upset Mistress Rana, especially considering she now paid him wages, Martel quickly grabbed his cloak and left for the old herbalist.

The vendor greeted him quietly. Unlike many others, this was not because of Martel's new wardrobe, he knew; the old herbalist had been apprehensive ever since Martel got attacked right down the street just for buying some herbs. It was telling that Martel had already forgotten about

that encounter among all the other events he had suffered. He wondered if the peddler would even still be selling him anything if he did not come in the name of Mistress Rana.

His purchases done, Martel began the walk back to the Lyceum. It was bitterly cold; winter had truly dug its claws into Morcaster. Snow covered the rooftops and lay in dirty piles along the edges of the street. The lack of people and the partly white colour muting other hues made it easy for Martel to notice two blue-clad men following him at a distance. Inquisitors, he guessed. At least they did not interrogate or ambush him – yet. It made Martel wonder what might come next.

Chapter 257: Mortar and Pestle

Mortar and Pestle

Martel's encounter with Moira still troubled him the next day, as could be expected. As much as Reynard had shown disdain and complete disregard for him, the Master of War had never gone out of his way to cause such pain to a student like Martel. This had been something else. Sitting in his class for the Archean language, he looked at Master Fenrick and wondered if the bespectacled teacher condoned such behaviour from another member of faculty, or if he even knew about it. Not that Martel intended to ask him; while he respected Master Fenrick, he would take his concerns elsewhere. All the same, those concerns swirled around in his mind, keeping him distracted. It was fortunate that he had his tutoring sessions with Eleanor, or else he would probably never learn this language.

In the afternoon, he went to the Hall of Elements. The familiar surroundings with the quiet water circling the central island of earth made Martel feel a little better. Still, he needed to ask, and it felt better to do this at once, rather than let the matter continue to distract him while Master Alastair tried to teach him.

"Master, something happened yesterday during Mistress Moira's lesson." He disliked using the title for her, but it was probably best to appear polite while arguing his case.

"What is it?"

"She punished one of the other students, William, by inflicting pain on him. When I told her to stop, she did it to me instead. I don't mean like a slap across the face or anything," Martel impressed upon the man. "I rarely felt anything like it. And it continued on and on. It felt like torture."

Master Alastair watched him with an expression that was difficult to read. "What in William's behaviour made her do this?"

Martel did not understand why that mattered; surely her behaviour was unacceptable regardless of the circumstances. "I don't know, he – he flinched or something. A completely trivial reason."

His teacher took a deep breath. "I will not deny that Mistress Moira is harsh to the point where it seems like cruelty." He took hold of one hand with the other, rubbing it as if to soothe soreness. "Certainly I thought the same when she taught me."

The revelation took Martel by surprise, though in hindsight, it should not have. After all, Master Alastair had also been trained as a battlemage; it makes sense he had been trained by the same, given how old the Mistress of Fire seemed to be. "You too?"

Master Alastair separated his hands, placing them behind his back. "Aye. From the sound of it, her teaching methods have not changed much, though she might have become – stricter in old age."

Martel still found it hard to believe that the kind-hearted Master of Elements had no issue with this. "So it's fine? She's just allowed to treat us this way?"

"If she has compelling reason, yes. Martel, you must understand that you are being trained for war. I understand right now, the prospect might seem distant, but once you are on the field, bullets and arrows in the air, you cannot flinch. You must be ready."

Martel would still dispute the necessity of Moira's methods – if anything, it seemed a convenient excuse for someone with a penchant for hurting others – but it was clear that Master Alastair would not agree with him. "Very well, master."

"Good. Let us turn to our own lesson. Have you made any progress when it comes to drawing water?"

Martel extended his hand, the same one that had suffered from Moira's spell, and demonstrated his ability to summon water from the very air into his palm.

Distracted by his schoolwork and what had happened yesterday, Martel did not check for letters as usual. To his surprise, as he returned to his room to relax before supper, he discovered that an envelope had been pushed under his door. That suggested something either urgent or important, but it could not be from any of his teachers; they would just have written a note and not bothered with an envelope.

Picking it up, Martel looked at the seal before he broke it. It showed a pestle resting in a mortar; same emblem that he had seen on signs in the city hanging above apothecaries.

To Master Martel of the Lyceum,

The Apothecary Guild has received reliable word that you have infringed upon the guild's charter and rights to solely provide remedies for the health of its citizens, including cures towards all ailments. As is our privilege, you are hereby summoned to face a tribunal of the guild's leaders and answer these charges.

You may bring witnesses and any other evidence in your favour, though the tribunal is not obliged to accept these as valid should there be strong reason against. If convicted, the penalty for infringing upon the guild charter will be a fine of up to ten gold crowns for each instance thereof.

If during the proceedings you are discovered to have grossly endangered the health and well-being of others, this matter may be referred to an Imperial magistrate with further punishment possible, such as imprisonment and forced labour in the mines or upon the galleys.

You have been given two fivedays, at the most, to make your preparations. Please respond to this notice which date exactly within that timespan would please you to appear before the tribunal in the guild hall. If you do not reply, the tribunal will assemble at sixth bell on Manday of the fourth fiveday of this, the first month of the fourteenth year of His Imperial Majesty's reign, Emperor Corvinus the Third. Failure to appear before the tribunal will be considered an admission of guilt.

With all respect due,

Charles, alderman of the Apothecary Guild

The same emblem of a mortar and pestle had been sealed underneath the name at the bottom. Sinking down on his bed, Martel stared at the letter, reading the words over and over.

Chapter 258: Dreaming of Potions

Dreaming of Potions

Martel had limited experiences with the law. He knew not to steal or murder, but this was something else entirely. He was not even sure if this actually pertained to the law of the land. He did not understand what exactly he was accused of doing. He had never had dealings with guilds before and knew nothing of how they operated, nor how their charter, rights, or privileges worked. He needed advice.

As luck would have it, the next day was Soliday when he would to receive payment from Mistress Rana. Considering she ran the apothecary at the Lyceum, Martel assumed she would have some idea of what this all meant.

So, as he entered the apothecary in the morning, Martel held up the folded letter and looked at Mistress Rana. "Can we speak in private?" Given how matters stood between him and Nora, he preferred that she did not hear.

The Mistress of Elixirs frowned before turning around and walking through the backdoor of the apothecary. Martel followed, having never been allowed past that threshold before. Not that anything of interest met his eye; they stood in a small room containing nothing but stairs that led to Mistress Rana's laboratory on the upper floor.

"What is it?"

Martel handed over the letter. "I have been summoned, but I don't understand why."

She quickly read the contents. "Strange. Why would they – right. You have been illegally competing with the licensed apothecaries of the city."

"How? I don't have a store. I haven't sold anything to anyone."

"You forget your young friends in the copper lanes. You remember when you contracted consumption from them."

Oh, that. "But what does that have to do with the Apothecary Guild?"

"You distributed remedies without permission from a guild member. I'm not sure how they found out, but they are within their rights to prosecute you."

Martel thought about the punishments mentioned in the letter. Ten crowns in fine for every time he had helped Weasel and his gang. Martel could never scrape together such a sum. He did not wish to think about the other options mentioned, working in the mines or becoming a galley slave. Surely the Empire would not do that to a prospective battlemage. "What do I do?"

Mistress Rana frowned. "Leave this with me. I'm busy for a few days, but I shall write to the guild and have them assemble the tribunal on Manday. Tell your teachers you will be absent that afternoon."

"Manday? Is that enough time?" That was in four days.

"I could handle this matter now if I had the time," she declared dryly. "But I don't. So we will have to wait."

"What should I do in the meantime?"

She gave him a stern look. "You have done more than enough. Have you gotten involved in anything like this ever since that whole affair with the consumption? Given out any other remedies?"

He quickly shook his head. "Not at all, mistress."

"In that case, do nothing and let me handle this. You have work waiting for you in the apothecary."

Despite Mistress Rana's assurances, Martel found it difficult to focus.

"You seem distracted. Does something trouble you?" Across the table, Eleanor looked at him.

Martel considered telling her, but there was nothing she could do. "Just a lot on my mind. Becoming an acolyte has changed so much."

She gathered together her notes as their tutoring session came to an end. "Perhaps this afternoon will provide a welcome distraction."

He felt confused for a moment until he remembered. The visit to her family. "Do I need to change clothes?" He looked down at his red robes. While suitable for most occasions, that did not include anything formal in the home of a legate.

Eleanor laughed a little. "My parents will not be home, so you should not worry about that."

"If they are not home, who exactly are we visiting?" From Martel's few encounters with Eleanor's family, he could not remember any prominent members besides her parents and herself, of course.

"You will see."

Late in the afternoon, they reached the stately home of Legate Fontaine. They entered through one of the smaller entrances, Martel simply following Eleanor's lead. Some servants and guards greeted them respectfully, always standing aside to let them pass. Eleanor nodded in return, sometimes giving a kind word, as they made their way through the servants' quarters to reach the upper floors of the family's chambers. Still wondering about Eleanor's intentions, Martel trudged along.

Eventually, they left the corridors and entered what had to be the private room belonging to a member of the Fontaine family. Inside a richly furnished chamber, Martel noticed two people. One, a servant woman seated on a chair. Next to her, a bed supporting a girl of maybe twelve to fourteen years of age. Martel immediately felt embarrassed, intruding on someone sleeping in their own room, and he assumed this was a mistake.

Yet Eleanor continued, nodding at the servant who quickly got up and left them alone. "Martel, this is my sister Genevieve."

He finally understood, as the sleeping girl did not stir despite their entrance. She would not wake regardless of what they did. "How long has she been like this?"

"Two years now. She fell from her horse and struck her head. The injury has since healed, but – nothing can wake her mind."

Martel remembered the potion that Eleanor had tried to make in secrecy. At last, he understood the purpose behind it. "I'm so sorry."

Eleanor took the seat by the bed. "As am I. My father spends a fortune in elixirs to keep her from wasting away, but he has given up on finding a cure for her condition."

"But you haven't," Martel said softly.

"No. Genevieve, I want you to meet my friend Martel. He is a wizard like me, and a hero." Eleanor looked at him as she spoke the last words, a sorrowful smile on her face. "He saved people from a dreadful fire. He is just like in those stories you love."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Genevieve."

Chapter 259: Getting Your Guild in a Twist

Getting Your Guild in a Twist

Martel spent the next days trying not to be anxious about the summons from the Apothecary Guild. He told himself to trust Mistress Rana and his position as a fire acolyte; he was too valuable that the Empire would allow some guild to harm him. Even if they demanded he paid some ridiculously big fine, what could they do if he refused? If it came down to an Imperial magistrate determining his fate, Martel expected that the Empire preferred him on the frontlines rather than imprisoned for debt.

Still, the whole affair made him uncomfortable. It had been months since Martel had helped the orphans in the copper lanes; he had barely seen them since, nor had he lent them any aid – something that made him feel guilty, thinking about it, but for other reasons. Regarding this business with the Apothecary Guild, Martel had to wonder how this alderman had found out, and why the knowledge had surfaced now.

Remembering Kerra's warning about people searching for information about him in the copper lanes, Martel could hazard a guess that somehow, Duke Cheval had orchestrated this. An unpleasant thought, though perhaps Martel should consider himself lucky; if this was how the duke's revenge took shape, it could have been a lot worse.

Which in itself felt suspicious and did not help Martel feel any calmer.

When Manday came, Martel walked westward to the merchant quarter, alongside Mistress Rana. Besides hosting men of trade, it was also home to many guild halls. Martel knew little of this whole system, and it surprised him to discover that Morcaster probably had hundreds of these associations. Every single craft or trade had their own guild, though they clearly differed in size and prosperity. Some were too poor to have their own guild hall; others, like the cloth traders, had a building that almost looked like a small palace in its own right.

The Apothecary Guild lay somewhere in between. The structure was certainly much bigger than any ordinary house, though it lacked the rich ornamentation Martel had noticed on some of the other guild halls on the way here.

Resolutely, Mistress Rana strode through the front doors, and Martel followed. They stood in a completely bare entrance hall. To the side, a flight of stairs led to an upper floor; in the back, a set of doors led into the offices of the guild. Mistress Rana flagged the nearest clerk. "Tell the alderman that Mistress Rana and Master Martel have arrived for the tribunal."

The clerk hurried away through the doors in the back, leaving them to wait. Martel glanced around at the hall meanwhile. He saw some sparse decorations on the walls, typically depicting the tools of the apothecary trade. A plaque had all the names of the aldermen engraved, going back some four hundred years.

In the distance, the bells of the nearest temple rang. The clerk returned. "The tribunal is ready for you."

While a tribunal sounded imposing, Martel found it less so. It turned out to be three men sitting behind a desk in one of the smaller chambers inside the guild hall. A secretary sat by a small writing desk to take notes; otherwise, the only people present were Martel and Mistress Rana, whose presence immediately caused some confusion.

"I was surprised to hear of your arrival," said the man seated in the middle, who Martel assumed was the alderman. "Your name did not appear in any of our investigations."

"It should have, Master Charles," Mistress Rana retorted. "After all, Martel works for me."

The older man cleared his throat and glanced at his companion, who shuffled through papers. "But you already have an apprentice by the name of –"

"Nora," said the other man.

"– Nora, which I do not presume to be another name for Master Martel here."

"Martel is hired to my workshop as a helper, not an apprentice."

"That is not in line with the rules of the guild," Charles pointed out, sounding smug.

"I have hired him in my capacity as a member of the Alchemist Guild. As a teacher of the Lyceum, I have free reins to teach alchemy to all the students." The expression on Mistress Rana's face did not change, unlike the alderman, who seemed rattled. "Thus, the reasons for your summons are irrelevant. The guild's charter cannot have been breached as Martel acted on my authority."

"Ah, so you do not deny that he distributed apothecary remedies in the copper lanes as accused?" Charles said, regaining his composure.

"We do not."

"But your apothecary is placed at the Lyceum. You do not have the rights to peddle your wares in another district."

"Nor did we. We accepted not a single coin as payment, considering it our charitable duty towards the least fortunate of Morcaster, the children on its streets. Is that not the case?" Mistress Rana turned her stern gaze towards Martel.

"Quite right," Martel hurried to say, deciding to otherwise keep shut. He could not imagine doing better than his teacher.

The three guild members looked at each other and exchanged whispers, while the secretary furiously scribbled to catch up with everything that had been said.

The alderman cleared his throat again. "Charity towards your own district is all well and good, but other apothecaries could argue that you have undermined their business by giving away remedies to their prospective customers."

"Very well. If any member of the guild can reasonably argue which sales they have lost, which otherwise would have been made to a group of penniless orphans, I am happy to compensate them," Mistress Rana declared.

The alderman sighed. "That will not be necessary. You may leave. This tribunal is adjourned."

With a nod, the Sindhian woman turned around and strode away, Martel quickly following. "That was impressive," he admitted.

She snorted. "A waste of time. But these guilds take any opportunity to guard their privileges, however frivolous. In any case, this does warrant a change."

"Which is?"

"I better begin teaching you alchemy, as I told them I would."

Martel had no objections to that.

Chapter 260: Cracks in the Walls

Cracks in the Walls

With the dispute regarding the Apothecary Guild resolved, Martel felt ambivalent. His concerns had been for naught, considering how handily Mistress Rana had solved the situation. It had not even required anything of him. That part was a relief.

But he could not imagine that Duke Cheval would be satisfied with this, assuming the vengeful nobleman was behind the dispute – though Martel could not think of anybody else, given the timing of it all. And if he had been able to unearth something as innocuous as Martel giving herbal remedies to orphans, and somehow use this against Martel, it made the acolyte worry about what else might turn up. Fighting in the pit at The Broken Crown, attending a meeting of the Nine Lords in the Undercroft, working tasks with the Night Knives... Martel might not be able to prevent the duke from discovering these events, but he could try. If nothing else, looking into the matter might give Martel some advance warning of what else to expect.

The next day being Solday suited him as he had no late class. Once his tutoring session with Eleanor had ended, Martel left the castle.

The acolyte went to the copper lanes once more, though he had a dual purpose in mind. First, his path took him to the old house that served as home to Weasel and his gang. The full might of winter could be felt; none of the children were outside after dark, and they huddled together inside the main room, shielding themselves and each other from the wind blowing through the cracks in the walls.

"What do you want now?" asked Weasel, for once to be found on the lower floor. He sat with his back against Sparrow's.

"I just needed to talk to you," Martel replied. "Someone's been asking questions about me, down here in the copper lanes."

"So?"

"Whoever it is, they found out about me giving herbs and such to you. I wondered if you had spoken to anyone, or if someone came asking you about me." Martel looked around the sorry lot of children, all of them bundled up in whatever rags they could find.

"We ain't rats," Weasel replied indignantly.

"Not even if someone offered you coin?" Martel raised an eyebrow.

"Alright, maybe," the little chief admitted. "But I've not heard anything."

The acolyte cast another look around the room. None of the children gave him a reason to suspect they had informed on him. They seemed indifferent to the conversation. Martel felt another pang of guilt that he had brought nothing. Obviously, he could not offer them any remedies like in the past; he had promised Mistress Rana as much, and it would be foolish to reignite his troubles with the Apothecary Guild, however swiftly they had been concluded. But maybe he could have brought them fuel; nights had to be bitterly cold in a house like this. Martel thought about how much money he had earned so far from working at the Lyceum's apothecary and resolved that he would put some of it to use this way. "Alright. Thanks for letting me know."

His first errand done, Martel continued deeper into the district until he reached The Copper Drum. This time, he continued all the way to Kerra's study rather than demand she meet him in the common room, considering this meeting was at his initiative.

Once the guard outside had granted him passage, Martel entered the chamber to find the Copper Lady in her seat. "The Copper Mage in my study, unbidden. To what do I owe this pleasant surprise?"

He could not tell how genuine her words were meant; she always seemed a little insincere, though never outright disrespectful. It left him feeling a little on his backfoot, trying to guess her mood or opinions, which he realised was probably the intended effect. "I just thought I'd keep you informed. About Duke Cheval's latest endeavours."

"Information is always appreciated. What's the old rascal up to?"

"I don't know if I ever told you, but I once supplied medicine to some of the children in the copper lanes. The duke must have found out, sniffing around the district. He tried to have the Apothecary Guild put me on trial, though it failed."

The Copper Lady smirked. "Complicated angle of attack and with little threat. I expected more from someone so powerful."

"I guess it wasn't too difficult to contend with." At least not for Mistress Rana. "I'll keep looking over my shoulder, in case he tries something else. But I figured you should know what his people were up to in the copper lanes."

"As said, it's appreciated. Though I won't let my guard down either. He could easily have the same in mind for my district as he did for the Khivan quarter," Kerra contemplated. "And if anybody spilled the pennies on you, despite my express command, I want to know."

"Me too. I asked the orphans, and they claim that they didn't reveal anything to anybody."

"And you trust them?"

Again, Martel found it difficult to interpret her smile and tone, whether she meant the question genuinely or not. "They're usually quite blunt. I don't think they've got a reason to hide this from me."

"I'll make my own inquiries. Also, something for you to think about," she continued.

"How do you mean?"

"I heard you're running with the Night Knives, for instance. But that story didn't originate from the copper lanes. And if I can find out about that, others can as well."

He frowned. "Why would you ask around about me?"

"I didn't. The Night Knives seek to be a force in this city – even if not directly my competitor, it pays to be watchful. You should be as well if you're going to play games with the likes of Duke Cheval."

Martel had no desire for that; part of him almost looked forward to receiving his posting, joining a legion somewhere far from Morcaster. "I'll keep that in mind."