

Firebrand 261

Chapter 261: A Sindhian Beginning

A Sindhian Beginning

Pelday morning, Mistress Rana did as promised. When Martel arrived in the workshop, she simply gestured for him to follow her through the back. For the first time, he ascended the stairs to enter her laboratory.

In some ways, it looked like he might have expected from the apothecary downstairs, though the size still impressed him. The walls were filled with shelves containing ingredients of every possible kind. Powders and liquids stood next to all sorts of jars holding the oddest items. A lot of it seemed harvested from different animals – at least Martel hoped it came from animals – including different organs. One glass bottle held three feathers. To Martel's chagrin, any labels were written in what he guessed to be Sindhian.

Besides the impressive array of ingredients, the large chamber also held a fireplace and several worktables, complete with a number of tools. The last thing of note had to be a great book placed open on a small writing desk; a number of other volumes stood on a shelf above.

"Come here."

Martel joined Mistress Rana by the worktables. He glanced over the items present. In many ways, both tools and reagents looked similar to those used on the floor below.

"What is the difference between alchemy and apothecary work?"

"The former involves magic?" Martel guessed.

"Simply put, yes. Any fool can grind powders and stir ingredients to make a salve. But with the gift of magic, so much more can be done," Mistress Rana explained. "Here in Aster, alchemy has usually been done by adding spellwork to the process. You wish to make a healing potion, you pour healing power into a liquid able to bind magic. A crude manner."

Martel listened intently.

"Sindhian alchemy is more refined. Spellwork is used to draw magic from the ingredients, thereby allowing them far more uses and effects." She picked up some leaves that Martel recognised as foxglove. "In the hands of an apothecary, these can make a tonic to strengthen the heart. To a Sindhian alchemist, along with other reagents, these simple leaves have the power to cure someone at death's door."

Martel's eyes widened. This was exactly the knowledge he wanted, the kind that seemed worth pursuing.

"But to do so, you must approach this simple plant as a Sindhian. Few people have the ability to actively use magic, but everything in this world possesses magic passively." She placed the leaves in his hand. "The first thing you must learn is how to draw this magic out. It sleeps like a seed. You must make it blossom."

Martel reached out with his magical sense. It told him that the leaves were dry. It would require barely a thought for him to set them aflame. When it came to the element of fire, his magic

responded. But he doubted that would help him with this; on the contrary, it seemed like his sense of magic worked against him. "I don't know how."

"Of course not. It will take you a long time to shed your Asterian training. First, we shall open your mind towards the magical possibilities something as simple as a leaf might possess. Next, we open your heart to the same." She took the foxglove from his hand. "I will assign you further work. For this bell, your only task is to observe everything I do, without asking any questions. I trust you can do as much?"

"Yes, mistress." For the next two hours, Martel watched in silence.

Martel barely heard the bell ring, and he felt reluctant to leave the laboratory. Even if he had only observed, his imagination was aflame with considering the possibilities and promises vested in this alchemy. Martel could never be a healer; unlike someone such as Maximilian, who had received this gift and done nothing with it, Martel would never know how it felt to heal someone grievously injured or even dying and restore life to them. He still remembered how it felt when Master Kelsos had cured him of consumption. The complete reversal of his physical state, the immediate disappearance of pain and discomfort. Martel would never have the power; but through alchemy, he might nonetheless be able to do the same.

Distracted by these thoughts, Martel momentarily forgot what lesson came next. As he suddenly remembered, he scrambled to get there in time. The other acolytes laughed derisively as they saw him enter the Circle of Fire.

He still gasped for breath as Moira arrived, and she likewise gave him a look of disdain. "Be mindful of the time, boy. Stop panting like a dog, we've not even begun."

"Sorry," Martel mumbled. He felt the urge to explain himself, against his better judgement. "Mistress Rana began teaching me alchemy today. It took me a while to get here from her workshop."

"Alchemy," his teacher sneered. "What use will that be?"

"It can provide powers our own magic can't," he said in defence. "Having a healing elixir seems very useful on the battlefield."

Moira gave a shrill laughter. "You think the legions will provide a laboratory for you in the army camp? You were born with a talent for destruction, boy. That is the only power that matters where you are concerned."

Martel clenched his fists, trying to think of the best retort.

Without sparing him a second glance, Moira turned away. "Enough chatter. Harriet and William, you spar against each other. Edward, you're up against the alchemist here."

In between classes, Martel left the school for an errand. Thankfully, not as far as the copper lanes; he would have no trouble making it back for his second lesson in fire magic, this time without running or gasping for breath. He only ventured to the merchants' district, walking until he found a peddler of firewood. Entering the small courtyard in front of the trader's house, he saw great logs

stacked to one side and workers piling some of them onto a cart. A clerk appeared, giving the young visitor an inquisitive glance.

"I am Master Martel of the Lyceum," he said. Wizards impressed people, he had learned.

The clerk inclined his head. "How can I be of service, master mage?"

"I wish to buy firewood, as you can imagine. Five silvers' worth."

"Very well, good master. Delivered to your school?"

"No." Martel gave as good a description as he could of the derelict house in the copper lanes and the route thereto, including its inhabitants. "Now, simply because they are children, do not expect you can get away with anything. If the firewood is not delivered, or the amount is light, I will know." He straightened his back, trying to look intimidating while hoping that a layman's imagination concerning magic would do the rest.

"Never, master mage. We pride ourselves on our good practices. Good firewood at good prices, my master always says."

"Very well." Martel handed over five eagles.

"It shall be delivered today, good master."

"See that it is."

Chapter 262: Fast Talk

Fast Talk

The next day saw Martel busy with the addition of another task. Two lessons of combat magic and his work in the apothecary only left one bell open before supper, which Martel had to spend this Malday to complete an assignment as dictated by Mistress Rana. When sixth bell rang, the acolyte went to the library.

It gave him great pleasure to approach the librarian and request permission to enter the upper floors. He looked forward to learning about Tyrian runes so that he might one day do it himself, but he took satisfaction in seeing the grumbling caretaker rise from his seat and open the way.

Once upstairs, Martel carefully went through the shelves until he found the object of his search, more or less where Mistress Rana had said it would be. A large and heavy tome, Martel used a bit of magic to steady his arms as he took it down and dragged it to the nearest desk.

The book was a compendium of herbal lore, but not made by anyone from the northern continent. Instead, as the introduction revealed, it was a Sindhian work in origin, translated into Asterian. Besides long descriptions, the pages were also beautifully illustrated in vivid colours to make it easy to recognise each plant and its parts.

Martel took out a list of herbs given to him by Mistress Rana. His instructions were simple to understand, if perhaps challenging to carry out; he was to read the entry for every item on the list and memorise all its uses, whether for leaves, stems, or roots. Opening the page to the first one, Martel began.

Eating his supper quickly in the dining hall – his lessons both in combat and in fire magic gave him a voracious appetite – Martel paid little attention to his surroundings. Ever since donning the red robes, other students avoided him at every mealtime, Maximilian and Eleanor excluded. But the latter two had other friends who might crowd their table, and Martel knew his presence would only complicate matters; for that reason, he always sat down at an empty table, leaving it up to his only two friends whether they could join him for that particular meal or not.

Finishing up, Martel rose to put his plate away when his eyes by chance found Jasper. The earthmage glanced in his direction and quickly scurried away; he had reacted thus ever since Martel had put him in his place during that sparring session, which now seemed like a different lifetime.

Normally, Martel would think nothing of it, but suddenly, his conversation with Kerra came to mind. People were talking about him, giving him trouble. If there was anyone who might relish revealing his knowledge about Martel, it would be Jasper.

Quickly leaving the dining hall, Martel hurried down the corridor until he had caught up with his quarry. "Jasper!"

A start went through the earthmage, who turned around. "Sol's eye! What do you want?"

"To talk, of course. I know you like talking." The fire acolyte approached his prey, and anyone else in the hallway either hastened past them or turned around.

"I got nothing to say to you," Jasper replied, perhaps hoping to sound defiant.

Martel knew better than to believe this display of courage. The acolyte had not a trace of a backbone when confronted. "Really? Because I'm told people are busy talking about me. And I know you always had an itch for running your mouth." Martel walked up until he was practically in the other student's face.

"I don't know what you mean," Jasper argued, losing the boldness from his expression. "Everyone knows you're fire-touched, so there's nothing left for me to tell people."

Martel placed his hand against the wall, right next to his fellow acolyte's face. "That's not all you know, is it? You proved remarkably well-informed about my time with the Night Knives, during your ill-fated attempts to extort me."

"Listen, I haven't talked to anybody about that! What would be the point? You're going to be a battlemage," Jasper pointed out. "If anything, they would just commend you for getting experience in fights."

"If you haven't dropped my pennies," Martel said, trying to borrow a phrase, "who else? Because people know, and I can't think of anyone who might have told them but you."

"They could have found out same place as me, couldn't they?"

Martel did not reply to this, considering the answer instead. He could not deny this possibility. A brothel seemed like the place that would freely trade secrets for coin, especially with all the pillows talking. Only question would be if Duke Cheval's people would know to look for information in the bridge district, and if they did, could it be used against Martel?

Seeing him distracted, Jasper slinked off. Martel let him get away. He needed to figure out the best way to plug any leak of information from the bridge district.

Back in his room, Martel considered what he might do. But before he could think of a solution, he needed to understand the extent of his problem. While Martel had done tasks with the Night Knives in different places around the city, even outside, his identity and participation would not be widely known around Morcaster. He would just have appeared as another Night Knife. The only place where he had stuck around would be The River Pearl. Certainly that girl, Dawn, had known enough to tell Jasper about him.

It seemed safe to assume that Martel only had to worry about the brothel. He needed to convince them to keep quiet, lest the duke was given another opportunity for causing trouble for Martel.

To his luck, Martel knew whom to approach. Kerra already provided the same service for him in the copper lanes. With that in mind, it seemed obvious that he should speak to Lady Pearl. Not only did she own the establishment in question; her influence over the bridge district would come in useful as well. Tomorrow, he would pay her a visit and gain her help.

Chapter 263: Idle Explanations

Idle Explanations

Busy with his lessons most of the day, Martel intended to pay Lady Pearl a visit in the evening. A note reaching him around noon forced him to reconsider.

Martel,

I have discovered someone
talkative near my home.

I intend to ask a few questions
and see what might be learned.

If you wish to be present,

I suggest you join me today.

Kerra

He would not have time to visit both the copper lanes and the bridge district in one evening if he also wanted any semblance of a decent night's sleep. Considering that Kerra made this sound rather urgent, it seemed necessary to prioritise meeting with her. Lady Pearl would have to wait.

With swift steps, Martel walked to the copper lanes. He made haste, as it would take him most of the evening just walking there and back, and who knew how long the whole affair would take at The Copper Drum. Avoiding the piles of snow and keeping his cloak tightly around him, he looked forward to spring. It would probably be another month before that, however; the days still felt short and the nights long and dark.

Arriving at the tavern, the warmth and lights from inside beckoned to him as always. Every time, the sight cheered him up for a moment until he remembered who owned it. Just some months ago,

he would never have imagined going back here; then again, ever since coming to Morcaster, he had done countless things he never could have imagined before.

Making his way to Kerra's study, the watchmen simply nodded and allowed him to pass. The final sentinel outside her door was the only one to make the visitor halt as he himself stepped inside. Rather than motion for Martel to enter, the guard gestured for him to wait; moments later, Kerra appeared in the hallway.

"I see that my letter aroused your curiosity." Her ever-present half-smile greeted him.

"I figured it was worth the journey," Martel admitted.

"Come with me." Kerra began walking, leading him deeper into her compound. They moved around winding corridors, twisting and turning to make Martel lose his orientation. The only thing he knew for certain was that their path led them downwards until they had to be underground. A lack of windows suggested this as well.

They passed rooms holding barrels and crates, suggesting this to be cellars for storage or similar. Martel was also reminded of their journey to the Undercroft; he presumed they would not have to descend quite that far.

Eventually, Kerra stopped outside a door with a guard. He nodded towards his mistress and stepped away. She pushed the door open – Martel noticed that while guarded, it had not been locked – and stepped inside. Martel followed.

The light of a few lamps from the hallway barely made it inside, though Martel both heard movement and sensed the body heat of someone curling up in a corner. The man in question mentioned by Kerra's note, Martel presumed.

"Would you mind a little light?" she asked.

Obliging, Martel summoned a flame to illuminate the space. He saw that he had been wrong on one count; the inhabitant of this improvised cell proved not to be a man, but a woman. She looked haggard from lack of sleep or the like; her clothes were dirty, but not ragged. He imagined she had been here a day or two.

Kerra squatted to be eye level with the woman. "You know who I am?"

"The Copper Lady."

She pointed with her thumb over her shoulder at Martel. "And him?"

"The Copper Mage."

"I bet you also know what I told everyone in the district. Don't talk to outsiders, especially not about our mage friend here."

"I beg your pardon, milady! I just seen him bring gifts to the street rats in that old, abandoned house! I didn't think any harm would come telling that to anyone." The woman shook, either from the cold or from fear. She placed her arms around her shoulders to hug herself.

"You thought you would make a few easy pennies and that I would never find out," Kerra corrected her. "Now you got one chance to be honest, or the wizard here will solve your problems with the cold by setting you on fire."

"Please, no! I'll tell you everything!"

Martel assumed that Kerra was bluffing, which also seemed to work; he had no intention of burning someone alive.

"The man who bought your information – have you seen him since?"

"No, I swear! Just the one time!"

"Has anyone expressed an interest in buying your home?"

In the light of his summoned flame, Martel could see confusion flicker across the woman's expression before she replied. "No, milady, none."

"Master Martel, set her on fire."

Looking down at the frightened, defenceless prisoner, the acolyte hesitated. He could not tell if Kerra bluffed or actually expected him to follow through. Trying to make the threats seem real, he floated his conjured flame closer towards the woman.

"I swear by Sol and Luna, it's the truth!" she cried out with terror written all over her face.

It made Martel feel terrible for instilling such emotions in her, and he raised the flame a few inches upwards. "I believe her," he said quietly.

Kerra stood up, giving him an annoyed glance. "Fine." She stepped outside, as did Martel. Once the door had been closed, she looked at the mage again. "I would have thought you had a stronger stomach. I forget you're just a boy." Whether she meant the last statement as conciliatory or derisively seemed impossible to tell.

"Using magic for torture demeans it."

Kerra began walking back the way they had come. "If you think so. It's your area of expertise, after all."

"What will you do to that woman?"

"What do you care?"

"It seems harsh to punish her simply for talking about something innocuous."

"The topic of the conversation doesn't matter. These are the copper lanes, Master Martel. This is my area. Not only in terms of expertise, but in terms of everything."

Martel noticed an unusually hardened edge in her voice, and he sensed there was nothing to be gained from pushing further. He could still do something, of course; his magic made him more powerful than anyone in the compound, he reckoned.

But at the end of the day, he did not know the woman nor what Kerra actually would do to her. It was not his responsibility to help everyone in need, Martel told himself. He had no obligation towards someone whose careless words had gotten him into trouble. She would not have done the same for him if their positions had been reversed. Martel told himself these excuses – explanations – and more as he walked home to the Lyceum.

Chapter 264: Chasing Pearls

Chasing Pearls

After a good night's sleep, Martel shook any thoughts of the woman at the Drum from his mind. He had his own troubles. Inquisitors stalking him and dukes investigating his past. Tonight, he would see Lady Pearl about this, but first, he had another long day of schoolwork ahead of him.

At least it was Manday, which always felt like a holiday after the gruelling lessons of the three prior days. No classes in combat or fire, just Archeon and elemental magic. While Martel found the former a challenge, especially starting behind schedule, Eleanor's aid had remedied the worst of it; as for the latter, taking instructions from Master Alastair felt like a breeze compared to Moira or Reynard. Being back in the Hall of Elements reminded Martel of his early time at the Lyceum, back when magic had been new and exciting, promising him a bright future. Now, Martel felt less optimistic about what lay ahead, but he enjoyed those moments with the Master of Elements, making him forget his future life in the Empire.

"Martel? You seem distracted," Master Alastair chided him.

"Sorry, master." The acolyte smiled. "Just enjoying being here, in the Hall of Elements."

"Well, I won't chastise you for that, I suppose. Show me your progress."

Martel drew water from the air until his hand overflowed, drops falling to the ground. "I'm better, but I still don't see how to turn this into an attack. Compared with fire, where I barely have to think."

Master Alastair gave a knowing smile. "That is perhaps the trouble. You never had to learn how to draw upon fire, so you've yet to understand this lesson. It's not really about the water, or any element." The wizard gathered water into his own hand, freezing it cold before hurling it across the room. "The element is just a vessel, a way for you to steer your magic into an attack. Once you understand this – once you see magic as the primary force and the element as mere clothing, rather than reverse – it opens up for more advanced spells."

Such as lightning, Martel considered. "You never taught me this last year, even when I tried to master advanced elemental magic."

"I didn't want you to understand magic this way," Master Alastair admitted. "Once you frame magic as a weapon, regardless of the shape it takes, it becomes difficult to think of it as anything else." He cleared his throat. "There's a reason mageknights end up being useless for any other kinds of magic. When you only ever use weapons, any tool begins to look like a weapon as well."

For his evening errand, Martel for once missed his brown robes. The dull colour made him unworthy of note, resembling one of the countless clerks working across the city. The bold red of his current clothes, including the embroidered flames, drew attention and made him stand out.

He could borrow a surcoat from the Night Knives, but since the aim of his outing was to distance himself from them, that seemed contrary to purpose. At least his cloak looked ordinary and would help to make his robes less noticeable. A good scarf around his head also hid his face.

Lastly, he put on his gloves. Not that he felt any need to disguise his hands, but the weather promised to be wicked. Once outside on the street, Martel had confirmation. Howling winds threw snow into his face, making him bend his neck. As the sun had already set, the streetlamps struggled to illuminate against the snowfall; between that and his posture, Martel walked into other people

and even a dog at one point. The River Pearl lay about an hour away, but the journey felt many times longer this evening.

Martel breathed with relief as he heard rather than saw the tavern. Rowdy singing, loud enough to be heard through walls and doors, issued from within. Despite the cold weather, the shutters had not been closed, allowing the brightness from within to shine through the glass windows.

For once, no guards stood outside, and Martel pushed the doors open to enter directly. Someone immediately closed them behind him. Untensing his shoulders, Martel took a deep breath, happy to be out of the gale.

A young woman approached, extending her hands to take his outerwear. Looking at her own garb, or lack thereof, Martel judged her to be among the staff of the Pearl, and he felt sorry that she had to work with arms, legs, and more uncovered; even indoors, it was still a cold night. "No thanks," Martel told her as his cloak dripped melting snow onto the floor. "I'm just here to speak with Lady Pearl." He removed his cap but kept the scarf around the lower half of his face.

"Who's here to see her?"

"Tell her it's a friend of Flora's. She knows me," Martel declared. Best to avoid saying his own name or invoke the Night Knives outright.

The servant girl gave him a quizzical look but turned around and left, leaving Martel to stand around.

The boisterous music and song continued, along with the constant slinging of ale and spirits, from what he could tell. A few sent him idle glances, their interest quickly wandering on; the common room was full of people, many of them stranger than him. Probably only the harbour saw a greater gathering of different travellers from across the continents compared to the bridge district.

"She'll see you," the waitress informed Martel as she returned.

With a nod, he left the young woman and made his way through the crowded chamber, full of drunks. His cloak weathered a few more storms as tankards were spilt in every direction until he could reach the back rooms.

Outside Lady Pearl's study, a guard gave a pointed look at his dagger. Relinquishing the weapon, Martel stepped inside.

The bald woman greeted him, sitting not behind, but on her desk. "It really is the littlest of the Night Knives, without either big sister or big brother. I'm surprised."

"This is a personal matter," Martel explained. "Though it does relate to the Night Knives. There are some people digging through my past, looking for connections they might use against me. If they were to ask around at the Pearl, I don't want them to learn about my affiliation with the Knives."

"I'm the sort who is happy to sell everything, including information. If you want me to remove that from my shelves, I'll need compensation." She gave him a bright smile.

"How much do you want?"

"More than a student at the Lyceum can afford, even with your nightly activities," Lady Pearl declared. "But I'll make you a deal."

Martel suspected the mentioning of his school was a veiled threat of sorts; proof that she knew about him and could use it against him. "What kind of deal?"

"I'll let everyone in the bridge district know to keep quiet about you. My girls, my boys, anyone I work with – none of them have heard of you."

"And in return?"

"A wizard who owes me a favour is always welcome. I can be a good friend, my little mageling, if you want me to be."

That sounded uncomfortably vague. Martel could not be sure how valuable Lady Pearl's help actually would be, and he could not imagine that she would ever ask for his help with anything benign. "I can do you a favour, within limits. I'm not a murderer or torturer or anything of the sort."

She gave the laugh that always reminded Martel of her name. "Goodness, what an imagination in one so young. Don't fret, that would be a dreadful waste. I would never use something so rare as magic on something so mundane."

It unnerved Martel a little that she apparently considered murder to be mundane. "I can do the same kind of help that you received from the Night Knives, or if you need my knowledge when it comes to spells or alchemy. I'm happy to provide those."

Lady Pearl gave him a long look. "Agreed. I won't ask you to do anything distasteful. We have a deal?"

He hesitated briefly before he spoke. "Agreed."

Chapter 265: Downstairs Reunion

Downstairs Reunion

For most of his Soldays since becoming an acolyte, Martel had spent his shifts in the workshops making ink and doing similar labour, using his skills honed in the apothecary. Yet he sensed today would be different as Master Jerome held up a hand to keep him from going to his usual spot in the laboratory.

"I'm afraid I'll need your help elsewhere," the artificer said. He sounded almost apologetic, which made Martel a little worried.

"With what?"

"Trouble in the pipes again. There's a block somewhere, and I fear it must be underground."

The sewers. Martel's nose wrinkled just at the memory.

"Nobody's favourite task, but if you'll go down and check, I won't ask more of you today. You did well last time, and I fear that's the reward. You get to do it again." Master Jerome held up a key.

With a sigh, Martel reached out and grabbed it.

As soon as he opened the hatch, Martel missed his cloth mask with its disguising scent. He could use his scarf, but he feared that the stench would only settle, and for the rest of the winter, he would

smell the sewers when going outside wearing it. Taking a deep breath through his mouth, Martel descended.

He reached the grate door and unlocked it. The tunnel beyond looked foreboding as ever; perhaps more than it had the first time, now that Martel knew what dangers lurked inside the darkness. Of course, he also knew none would reach him. He would only go as far as where the pipes from the Lyceum lay; nowhere near the old catacombs, whose restless inhabitants were held back by the Archean symbols anyway.

Summoning a flame for light, Martel moved down the dark corridor. He told himself to stay calm; a month's training as a battlemage had already paid off. Any skeleton with the bad sense to walk around would get an improved fire bolt straight in the skull.

He reached the beginning of the sewers, which unfortunately also meant the stench became even stronger. Taking small breaths through his mouth, Martel continued alongside the stream of water, careful to stay on the ledge.

Finally, he reached the crossroads where the different pipes from the castle met, their contents spewing into the stream below. Moving from one to the other, Martel continued until he found one without any flowing water. Not looking forward to what he might find, he brought his light closer and bent down to look. It seemed like a mass of tangled rags lay across the opening, which felt similar to last time. It made Martel wonder who exactly was throwing out these dirty pieces of cloth, and more importantly, why they sent them down the pipes. If Martel ever found out who, he would drag them down here and throw them in the stream.

Taking a step back, Martel launched a fire bolt into the mass, letting it burn. He quickly regretted it as it only made the stench worse, not to mention the smoke that erupted.

Turning around, eager to take his leave, Martel froze as he heard movement down one of the tunnels that met at this intersection.

He sent out his magical senses to catch any trace of heat. Part of him worried about not discovering any, especially if the movement continued.

There. The warmth of a living thing, much too big to be any animal that might be found down here. Large enough to be a child, at least – it hit him. "Julia?"

The girl stepped forward, entering the edge of his light. He noticed that she wore the dress he had bought for her, and proper footwear. But she still looked dirty and malnourished. Martel felt tempted to sweep her into a hug, but knowing how shy she was, he restrained himself.

"I have been worried about you. You disappeared, and I couldn't find you."

"The inquisitors came. They looked for me. I had to disappear."

Martel was pretty certain they had been chasing a maleficar, not a young girl, but that did not matter right now. "Do you have someplace safe to stay?"

She nodded. "Plenty of hiding places down here."

He had hoped for somewhere better. More dry, less smelly. "What about food? I bet you could use some of that."

"Always."

"If you go down that way, which I came, there's a door made of bars," Martel explained. "I can hand the food to you through there."

"No," she declared. "I'm not going closer to the big castle. I've seen the inquisitors swarm it."

"They're all gone," Martel told her. "It's safe."

"I won't."

That left only one other option. "Very well. Remember when we met last? Nighttime, at the square in the market."

"Sure."

"Meet me there again tonight? I'll bring all the food I can." Martel wanted to extract a promise from Julia that she would not disappear again, but he feared pressing her too hard would drive her away. Hopefully, the lure of something decent to eat would prove stronger than any promise.

"Alright." She spoke in such a flat tone of voice, Martel could not tell how earnest she meant it. But he would have to trust that she wanted his help, else she would simply disappear again.

"Very well. Long after last bell, when no one else is around, I'll be there." He looked at her expectantly.

"Me too."

Martel tried not to be distracted during his session with Eleanor, listening carefully to her explanations and doing the work as instructed. Yet all the while, he wondered if Julia would show.

If someone had asked him, Martel could not explain exactly why he cared so much. Morcaster had plenty of homeless people and outcasts. He could spend all day trying to help them, and it would barely amount to anything.

Yet something felt particularly pitiful about the young girl. Maybe because Martel knew the dread of being stalked by inquisitors regardless of one's innocence. Perhaps her fate seemed especially cruel, losing everything and resigned to living in the sewers of all places. Or it could be, though he always disliked thinking about it, Julia reminded him of someone he had failed to help years ago.

No matter the specific reason, Martel gathered any food he could during the meals. Eating alone turned out to be useful for this purpose; he ate only the stew, impossible to get to Julia anyway, and saved all the bread and vegetables for her.

Once his Khivan clock told him it was an hour after last bell, Martel left the Lyceum. The weather was scarcely better than yesterday, and he regretted asking Julia to come up to the streets. He could only hope she was not already there, waiting for him.

Martel reached the alley and settled down where it met the square, trying to shield himself from the wind. At least the lack of snowfall allowed for better visibility, though the dark alleyway did not help in that regard.

"Hullo."

He flinched hearing the voice. "Hey, Julia." The relief at seeing her overtook his initial fright. He extended the bundle of food in his hands, which she quickly accepted. "Listen, if I could find a safe place for you to stay, would you want to?"

"I don't want to stay with anybody," she quickly replied.

"I understand. What if I found somewhere you'd be all on your own? Nobody else. I'd be the only one who knew you were even there. It would be dry and warm."

She looked at him sceptically. "Where?"

"I'd have to look into it, but by the docks. A room just for you."

Julia wrinkled her forehead in thought. "Alright. If you swear never to tell anyone I'm there."

He placed his hand over his heart. "I promise."

Chapter 266: Eye of the Homeowner

Eye of the Homeowner

The following Pelday gave Martel some trouble; unlike yesterday, today was a packed schedule, and he had an errand to run. Between the morning and the afternoon, he only had one spare bell before his second lesson in fire magic, where arriving late would not do. But if he ate quickly during lunch, he could add the saved time to his free hours, giving him three in total. Once he finished stuffing food into his mouth, Martel left the dining hall, going directly to the harbour.

He did not exactly run, but if he had been a horse, Martel's gait would have been described as a swift trot. At least it helped him stay warm against the cold.

His destination was a familiar building, though he had lost his reasons for visiting it of late. Rising up several stories tall, Martel looked at the insula that once had hosted the Night Knives.

Thanks to his frequent visits, Martel knew the great structure had different kinds of rooms for rent. Some large enough for families, like those where Flora and Marcus had stayed; others small, a single chamber meant for one or a few inhabitants.

Entering, Martel searched through the hallways until he found the right door. A sign upon it proclaimed it to be the office of the reeve responsible for the building. He gave it a heavy knock.

A short man opened, looking up and down at the visitor. "Yes?"

"I wish to rent a single room. I've been told that's fifteen silvers a month."

"Aye, that's right. Step inside, good master." The reeve walked back into his office, which proved to be simply a small chamber with a desk. A jar of wine or ale stood upon it along with a cup. The man quickly dug out a ledger. "Fourth floor, third door to the right is available."

"That's fine." Martel took out nearly all the coins he had. "For the rest of this month and the next. And a few more for you to find some furniture. A mattress, a water jar, anything else it'll pay for."

"I guess I can do that." The reeve scratched the back of his head. "I'll need your name for the book."

"Master Martel of the Lyceum."

The short man swallowed. "Of course. I'll get it ready for you."

"Good. I'll be back tonight, after last bell, to collect the key. Be in your office when I arrive."

"Yes, master mage. As you wish."

Hurrying back to the Lyceum, Martel made it in time for his lesson in fire magic. With his mind worried about whether Julia would trust him, he did not perform to his usual standards; the distraction cost him, as William landed several attacks. Besides the stinging pain, Moira wasted no time heaping scorn onto Martel, which only made him angry and more distracted. When the bell rang, he was happier than usual to leave the Circle of Fire.

At supper, he squirreled away some carrots and artichokes, bringing them back to his room. Now he just had to wait.

Trying to make the most of it, Martel practised the spell that Master Alastair was teaching him. Disregarding the cold, he opened his window. The weather made it easy to draw water; snow lay everywhere, covering the castle. He tried to remember his teacher's lesson, seeing the puddle of water in his hand as nothing more than a vessel. The droplets shimmered as he infused them with magic before he willed them to fly through the air across the courtyard.

Looking at his Khivan clock, it was time. Martel got his winter clothes on, grabbed his scrounged food, and left. He tried not to think about last time he had gone to meet Julia in the hopes of finding her a home; while she said the inquisitors had kept her away, he feared that she simply did not trust him.

Reaching the square, he hurried to the corner of the alley serving as their meeting point. Pulling his cloak around him, Martel crouched to make himself small and waited. The weather changed back and forth between snowfall and rain, making for a wet and uncomfortable experience. Every surface was drenched, leaving him nowhere to sit; staying on his feet, he continued to wait.

"Hullo."

The little shape appeared next to him, and he almost called out in surprise. Julia stood next to him, and besides her usual clothes, she had a large rag around her shoulders serving as a poor shield against the elements, which she held in place with one hand; the other carried a small bundle, presumably all her worldly possessions.

"Good to see you." Martel smiled as he rose, and he extended his cloak to cover her. "Let's go."

"Is it far?"

"A bit." She seemed taller, suddenly, walking next to him under his cloak. He had judged her to be maybe twelve, and that she would only reach to his chest; now her head came close to his shoulder. Perhaps she was older than he presumed; given her diet, she probably did not get all the food a growing child needed.

They walked along the alleys towards the harbour. Julia refused to move along the main streets, making their journey longer than needed, but at length they reached the insula. "There it is. I just have to collect the key, and you'll be safe inside."

She stopped walking abruptly. "I'll wait out here while you get it."

"Alright. I'll hurry." Untying his cloak to drape it around her thin shoulders, Martel glanced around; nobody in sight except an old drunkard stumbling home. With a smile towards Julia, Martel crossed the street to enter the insula.

Shaking the worst of the rain and snow off, Martel continued to the reeve's office. He gave a quick knock.

The short man opened and inclined his head. "I was waiting for you, master mage." He held up a key. "A mattress and a full water jar have been placed in the room." He licked his lips. "As you requested."

Martel took the proffered item. "Good. I require nothing further from you."

"Yes, good master." The reeve bowed his head again.

Martel gave a brief nod and walked away, returning to Julia – or at least where he had left her. Confused, he glanced around in the darkness. He considered lighting a flame, though something in his instincts spoke against this; perhaps Julia's fear of being followed or seen had infected him.

"I'm here." The girl materialised from behind a barrel of rainwater.

Martel exhaled and held up the key. "Come along." He reached out a hand to take hold of hers, and together they crossed the street to enter the insula.

Walking up the stairs to the designated floor, Martel noticed her skittish steps, like a deer ready to burst into flight. He wondered at the exact events that had made her so fearful; he knew the broad strokes of her story, but he felt the details had to be sinister to instil such permanent fear into the girl.

They reached the room, and Martel unlocked it. Quickly, Julia slipped inside. As promised, the small chamber held a mattress, probably stuffed with straw, and a jar filled with water. A window provided a bit of light from the streetlamps outside. Compared to his room back at the Lyceum, Martel thought it looked more like a prison cell, and his reaction made him suddenly smile; back when he lived in Engby, having a private room like this would have felt like the height of luxury.

He placed the key in her hand. "Will you be all right on your own?"

She nodded.

"Good. I don't have more money on me, but I get paid on Solday. And I can come by tomorrow with more food."

"Don't come two days in a row," she suddenly said. "People will take notice."

He could not help but smile, thinking her excessively cautious. Yet it struck him that inquisitors did follow him around – at least, they had done so recently. They had shown an interest in all his activities; if they found out that he visited Julia, they would no doubt interrogate her and probably take her away. She was right, he realised, but at the same time, she needed to eat. "You need food."

She raised the meagre meal Martel had brought her. "I'll be fine for a few days."

It seemed only marginally better than starvation, but being afraid of pushing her away, Martel conceded to her demands. "Alright. I'll bring food the day after tomorrow, after dark. And on Solday I can give you some money for necessities. That leaves a day in between my visits. Is that acceptable?"

Her little face looked serious as she nodded.

"You should sleep. Keep my cloak as a blanket."

This time, her head shook as she untied it and placed it in his hands. "I'm not cold. You're going outside, you need it more. I got this." She draped herself in the rags that she had used as a cloak.

"Very well. I'll be back in two days."

"Be careful." Her dark eyes, too big for her head, watched him as he walked out. Immediately, she closed the door, and he heard the bolt lock from the inside.

Chapter 267: Distractions

Distractions

The first lesson of Malday proceeded as usual. Thanks to his experience in staff fighting, going up against much better opponents such as Lothar from *The Broken Crown*, Martel always proved superior to the other fire acolytes. In some ways, the lesson felt like a waste of time; none of them could provide any challenge to help him improve. He already knew how to add strength to his blows or raise his magical shield when the situation called for it. If Reynard, ostensibly observing them spar, had any advice for how Martel could become better, he did not bother sharing it.

As for the other acolytes, they seemed indifferent, almost as if they considered fighting with weapons to be barbaric. More than once, when Martel landed a particularly good blow, he noticed his opponent preparing a fire bolt or other such offensive spell, though they always restrained themselves in the end. This lesson was solely to practise weaponry, which the other acolytes seemed to regard as beneath them. No doubt their attitude was another reason why Martel handily defeated them every time he faced them with a staff in hand.

The second lesson of the day, where they trained with a number of mageknights, did not always go the same way. Even if Martel considered himself among the stronger of the acolytes, the chaos coming from numerous people fighting in a skirmish made everything unpredictable. Martel could usually hold his own when they practiced in small numbers, but every once in a while, Reynard changed the circumstances to expose them to different situations. For this bell, he decided that the four fire acolytes would face up against six mageknights. Inferior in numbers, but the four battlemages would have their full array of spells.

The fire acolytes stood in one end of the arena, side by side. The mageknights stood in the other end, spread out. To his surprise, Martel saw his other teacher, Moira, appear and take a seat in the stands. Forgetting about her, he turned his attention to his opponents, waiting for a last signal.

"Attack!"

The mageknights burst into sprints while the fire acolytes unleashed their spells. All of them used fire bolts except for Martel, who unleashed a ray of flames. As it hit his first target in the chest, making the mageknight buckle over in pain, he swept the ray right to strike another mageknight, who likewise stopped dead in his tracks.

Looking to his left, Martel saw his allies had not all fared as well. While Harriet had felled another attacker, pelting him with spells, both Edward and William struggled. The latter had resorted to fighting with his staff, with the predictable lack of success as indicated by this morning's lesson. As

for Edward, he had already been disarmed and received a thrust to his stomach; had the sword been sharp, it might very well have killed him.

Martel prepared a spell to aid his fellow acolyte when he locked eyes with Eleanor, pulling her sword back from her attack against Edward as she turned towards him.

He hesitated; he knew how much it hurt to be hit by a fire bolt. With empowered speed, Eleanor closed the distance between them and slashed her sword against his knee, making him struggle to keep his balance. With a kick, she sent him tumbling to the ground. His staff fell from his hand; sent to the ground, he had to yield according to the rules of the exercise.

It took only a few moments for the remainder of the skirmish to end. Harriet scowled at her fellow acolytes, being the last one to fall, and she added a few berating comments aimed at the others for making them lose the fight. Given that he had taken out two opponents, Martel considered any reproach towards himself to be unjust, but he lacked the energy to start an argument and chose to simply ignore Harriet instead.

The mageknights, meanwhile, grinned and congratulated each other, though the pair struck by Martel's spell seemed only able to grimace. While more of a drain on his spellpower than a simple fire bolt, the fire ray spell had proven its value in a fight like this against superior numbers.

"Back to positions," Reynard barked. "We go again!"

Although not his best performance, Martel quickly forgot about the day's combat lessons. As Reynard never bothered to instruct or actually teach the fire acolytes, Martel thought little of it as well. The important work happened on Peldays and Glundays, learning fire spells that he might actually use in a fight, even if he would never give Moira the satisfaction of admitting such. She seemed to derive more than enough pleasure from tormenting her students.

Checking for messages after class, Martel received one. He hoped it was not from Kerra; whenever he thought about the imprisoned woman at The Copper Drum, he felt uncomfortable, and he always tried to push the thought aside.

Martel,

An opportunity has presented itself.

Your two friends in the bridge district

would ask that you come around

so that we may discuss in detail.

Flora

Martel stuffed the note into a pocket and left the entrance hall, going to his room. He wondered at the exact nature of the opportunity, but he assumed it was a task of some sort like his previous dealings with the Night Knives. While payment had always been good for each of those outings, Martel had no particular need for money, thanks to Mistress Rana. He could afford the room for Julia and still have coin to spare for himself. Given his attempts lately to avoid any scrutiny into his link with the mercenaries, meeting with them would only undermine that, not to mention actually donning their colours and working with them again.

Martel opened his window with one hand and held the note outside with the other. Flames spread from his fingertips to lick up the parchment, consuming it. Summoning a gentle breeze, he scattered the ashes into the courtyard below and closed his window again.

Chapter 268: Reward or Punishment

Reward or Punishment

Glunday, the third day in a row with heavy sparring and training. Martel disliked the day for that reason, though on the other hand, once sixth bell ended, he could look forward to the rest of the fiveday being a breeze in comparison. Arriving at the Circle of Fire, Martel took position some distance away from the other fire acolytes and waited for their teacher to arrive.

When she did, she seemed to be in a foul mood based on her expression, though it was hard to tell; she seemed to wear a permanent scowl regardless of the situation. "Yesterday, Master Reynard arranged the exercise for my benefit."

That explained why she had been present to observe them.

"Your performance was pitiful," she spat.

Definitely in a foul mood.

"Both of you folded like wet rags," she exclaimed at William and Edward. "You barely accomplished anything before you lay on the ground like the worms you are."

Keeping quiet, the two acolytes stared at the floor with downcast eyes.

"As for you," she continued, raising her head towards Martel, "I saw you hesitate!"

"I stopped two of them with one spell," Martel protested. By his estimate, he had done better than any of the acolytes present.

"Spare me," Moira sneered. "You get no rewards for doing one thing right! In battle, you do everything right every time, and your reward is survival. One mistake, one false move, one moment's hesitation because a pretty face distracts you, and your punishment is death."

Martel heard Harriet giggle, which she managed to make into a condescending sound.

Unfortunately, this also drew Moira's attention. She turned around to stare at the female acolyte. "Don't think you have anything to be proud of! I saw the way you crumbled at the end."

"They were two against one," Harriet objected.

Martel admitted a certain satisfaction at seeing her raked over the coals as well.

"Well, it's a good thing that wars are always just and fair," their teacher remarked with scorn. She let her eyes sweep over all of them. "Pathetic lot. All of you, practise your basic spells. Next time, I expect to see every single attack land without hesitation."

The acolytes grumbled, but did so quietly, and set to work.

At the meals, Martel collected as much food as he felt he could get away with and stashed it in his room. Most of it was bread, though he had also some strips of meat that he figured would be good for Julia. Along with an apple, he hoped that would sustain her for a few days. He could continue to

scrounge food from the Lyceum, of course, but that would necessitate him visiting her constantly to deliver it, and the conversation yesterday had made him realise the danger if he led the inquisitors to her.

For that reason, he waited until it was dark before he left the castle; even if he had not agreed any specific hour with Julia, it seemed wise to only go outside after sunset, allowing him to lose any pursuers. Moving along dark alleys rather than the illuminated main streets for the same reason, Martel felt assured that nobody could follow him. Even so, he kept glancing over his shoulder the whole way, especially as he reached the insula.

Outside Julia's room, he gave a quiet knock. "It's me, Martel."

He heard the bolt move before the door opened. She took a step back to let him slip inside.

"I brought you this." For a moment, he looked around for a table to place the food upon until he remembered the lack of furnishings. Instead, he simply placed it in her arms.

She sat down on her mattress and began to eat.

Watching her slow, deliberate movements as she picked up pieces of the food to put in her mouth, Martel leaned against the wall and slowly sank down to sit on the floor. He was reminded of many years ago when he had found a wounded bird in the forest by his town and tried to care for it, nurturing it back to health. His father had eventually discovered it, and the bird had ended up as stew. Martel hoped Julia would fare better.

But in order to protect her, he needed to know more. "Julia, just so I can better look out for you, can you tell me what happened to you? Your family?"

She turned her big eyes towards him, still carefully placing bits of food into her mouth. "Do you really need to know?"

"It will help me protect you."

She took a deep breath. "My mama was an alchemist. My papa did apothecary work. The inquisitors came one day, destroyed everything. Smashed all my mama's bottles. Threw everything on a pile and burned it. Papa lowered me out the window on the upper floor. I waited for him to jump, but they took him. He told me to run, so I did." She finally exhaled, having spoken with barely a pause in between her sentences.

Martel felt his heart tear, and he wished that he could wrap the girl up in a tight hug, but he was unsure if she would let him. "How long ago was this?"

"I don't know. I found the sewers and stayed there mostly. You don't count the days underground."

Martel had not heard of anything like this happening recently; although the inquisitors did punish an alchemist a while back, he had been a man. It might have escaped Martel's notice, of course, but he considered it more likely that this had happened before he even came to Morcaster. He wondered if he might discern the identity of Julia's parents, assuming any such investigation would not bring the attention of the inquisitors upon him.

In any case, he could not imagine that they actively searched for Julia herself. She was still a child, she had shown no sign of magic from what Martel could tell, and there was no reason to suspect her of any wrongdoing. Hopefully this meant she was safe; the difficult part would be to convince her

of that as well. But Martel had time. He had nearly a year left in Morcaster, and for now, she had food and a dry place to sleep.

"I'll be back on Solday with some coin, so you can buy other things you might need." Martel stood up.

Julia carefully placed her food on the mattress and got up as well before walking over to unbolt the door. "Thank you." She gave a cautious smile, the first he had ever seen from her, and he interpreted it as expressing her gratitude for everything he had done, not just this latest promise.

It made him feel warm despite the cold weather. "You're welcome."

Chapter 269: Homework

Homework

When Martel arrived at the apothecary for this morning's work, Mistress Rana awaited him. "Come along. It is time for your next lesson in alchemy." He squeezed past Nora, mutely at work, to go through the backdoor.

Following his teacher, Martel returned to the laboratory that he had only visited once before. In his mind, he urgently went through everything he had read as proscribed by her, hoping he remembered it all. It had been some days since he went to the library, and with everything going on with Julia, alchemy had been pushed out of his thoughts.

As they approached a worktable, Martel saw a row of herbs lying on it, and he recognised them as being on the list Mistress Rana had given him to memorise.

She grabbed the nearest. "Which one is this?"

Martel looked at the plant. It resembled a dandelion, but since that had not been on the list, he knew which it was instead. "Coltsfoot."

"Which parts do we use?"

"Leaves, flowers, root," Martel recited.

"And what is each of those parts useful for?"

"Leaves and roots can ease coughing, flowers help with wheezing breath. Flowers are also used for warming tea."

She placed the plant back on the table and picked up another, repeating the questions for each of them. To Martel's relief, he remembered the answers to every one of them.

"Have you figured out what connects them all?"

He had noticed something. "All of them have a part that is used for warmth."

She nodded. "An apothecary can make a simple tea, better than nothing, for someone caught in the cold, protecting against hypothermia."

An unfamiliar word, but Martel thought it best not to interrupt.

"However, if you awaken the dormant magic in these simple plants, you can create an elixir to keep someone warm for hours even in a blistering blizzard," she explained.

Martel felt his interest piqued. He could think of many times in Nordmark when that would have been useful.

"This is a good potion to learn as a beginner. It requires only these herbs. Easy ingredients to gather. But first you must learn to draw their magic out." She placed the leaves from one of the plants in his hand.

He looked down as they lay in his palm. "How do I do that?"

"It helps to visualise something at first, but nothing related to the basic elements. That will only confuse you Asterians," Mistress Rana said pointedly. "Try to think of the magic as a spark of light, hidden inside the leaves. Call upon it. Draw it out until the light suffuses the plant material."

Frowning, Martel tried to obey the instructions. He looked at the dry leaves and imagined it as best he could, like a mote of light trapped within.

One of the leaves burst into flames. A little panicked, and a touch embarrassed, Martel quickly quelled the fire with his magic. "Sorry."

"I see why they gave you red robes. Keep trying."

For the next two hours, Martel did just that. At the end of the bell, Mistress Rana gave him all the ingredients to bring back to his room; he would have to continue on his own time.

For his lesson with Master Alastair, Martel also had to do magic that felt counterintuitive; drawing on water as a fire-touched did not come naturally, but at least it was still within the frame of the elements. Some aspects of Asterian magic might be hard, but Martel understood what it involved.

He pulled water into his hand while drawing all heat from it, leaving a frozen pebble. That was only the first step; now he had a small ball of ice. He could throw that at someone, and it might annoy them, but probably nothing more.

No, he had to imbue the dripping pebble with his magic; in some ways, the reverse of what he had tried to do in Mistress Rana's laboratory. He watched the shimmer as his gift filled the small chunk of ice. Now controlled by his will, it flew through the air to strike Master Alastair on the shoulder.

His teacher laughed. "There we are!"

"I did it?" Martel smiled a little from relief. Given all his difficulties when he first tried to learn the elements one year ago, he had been worried a spell like this would take him ages.

"You did. Granted, it took you twenty breaths. We'll have to work on reducing that to one."

"Right." Martel nodded a little. Every step of the process had been conscious and slow. It had to be instant, taking no longer than the duration of the thought that willed the spell into being. Water, ice, magic, attack. Four steps that had to become a single action.

"You can practise for the rest of this bell. Once it looks like you might have it, you'll get to do it under duress."

Martel looked at his teacher. "How do you mean, master?"

"First you learn the spell. Then you learn to do it swiftly. Finally, you learn to do it while someone's trying to kill you." Master Alastair let a flame appear around his hand in a motion that Martel had grown to recognise as a fire bolt waiting to be launched.

He tried to imagine what it would be like fighting an experienced battlemage instead of acolytes. Martel doubted that would go well for him. "That doesn't have to be today, does it? The third step."

His teacher dismissed the flame rather than releasing the spell. "I suppose not. But I don't want you motivated to be slow, trying to avoid what comes next. So here's what we'll do. You got the rest of the bell to practise, and all your spare time until our lesson next fiveday. But come that next lesson, you better be ready." Master Alastair wore a faint smile that blunted his threat, but Martel assumed he was serious all the same. It looked like he had a lot of after-class work to do.

Clearing his throat, Martel practised the spell once more, counting his breaths all the while. His next attempt took eighteen; when the bell rang, he had reduced it to sixteen.

Chapter 270: Staying Underneath

Staying Underneath

Eleanor gathered the different parchments into a neat pile. "That does it. We have covered everything you missed."

Martel looked at the notes, detailing the intricacies of the Archean language. He would miss these sessions with Eleanor in the library, the shared solitude, but given how hectic his schedule looked, having an extra spare bell might be for the best. "Thanks for your help. I appreciate you took the time." He could only imagine that she was likewise busy, being in her last year. He knew from Maximilian that the mageknights sparred every single day, usually for two or three bells.

"You are welcome." She gave him a quick smile. "I believe the examination is at the end of next month. If you require any help revisiting the material, let me know."

"That's really nice of you to offer. I'll probably have need of that," Martel admitted. He had no idea how difficult it would be to pass the course, but help from someone who had taken lessons for years already would undoubtedly be useful.

Eleanor rose from her seat, picking up her notes. "Well, we better get going. I have a quick errand to run before my next lesson. I imagine you have plenty to do also."

She probably referred to his schoolwork, but Martel also had an errand of his own. Five silver pieces rested inside his pocket, for now. "I certainly do."

After last bell had rung, Martel went into the city. Although tempting to follow the main streets that went directly to the harbour, Martel exercised caution and used the winding alleyways instead. If anyone followed him, they would be hard-pressed to keep up.

With no sign of pursuers, Martel continued the final stretch to reach Julia's insula. He hurried up the stairs to knock at her door, which she opened within moments. As soon as he stepped inside, she closed and bolted it.

"I brought this for you." He dropped a blanket onto her mattress. That left him with only one for his own chamber, but he could handle the cold. If the weather turned worse, he could spend his next

payment from Mistress Rana to buy himself a new one. As for his latest salary received just this morning, he fished out the coins and placed them in Julia's hand. "That should keep you fed for a while. But you can also buy other things you need or want. I'll bring more."

"Thank you." She spoke calmly, as she always did, giving Martel the impression of a much older person. She had none of the exuberance he associated with children, even those living a harsh life like Weasel's band. Julia was more like the little chief himself, always serious. A consequence of responsibility, Martel guessed, being forced to grow up much faster than any child should.

He watched as she sat down on her mattress and opened the small bundle on the floor. She pulled out a small doll, little more than pieces of cloth sewn into the proper shape and stuffed with straw, the latter sticking out of a few holes by the neck.

Stretching the opening, Julia pushed the coins down one by one. "George will keep them safe for me." She placed the doll on the mattress next to her, leaning against the wall.

Martel crouched in front of her. "Is that his name?"

She nodded. "Mama gave him to me, so I wouldn't be alone. He protects me from the bad man in the blue cloak."

"The inquisitors?"

She repeated her motion. "One of them chases me. He can't talk, and his eyes look hazy, like my Papa after too much drink. And his forehead's really big."

"I'll keep watch for him," Martel promised, though the sparse description did not leave much to go by. It did not matter either, as such; he was already suspicious of all inquisitors and would do what was needed to keep them from discovering Julia. "You don't have to worry. Besides George, you have me as well to protect you."

She smiled with her thin mouth and picked up the doll, seating it in her lap. "He likes you. You are nice."

Martel accepted the accolade gracefully with a nod. "The feeling is mutual."

His visit at an end, the acolyte hurried back, using the main roads. Since nobody had followed him to the insula, he saw no need to disguise his movements back to the Lyceum. Given the late hour, and the long day of arduous lessons that awaited him tomorrow, every moment of sleep mattered.

Reaching his room, he relaxed and removed his cloak while glancing at his clock. Almost midnight. That offered him about six and a half hours of rest if he managed to fall asleep straightaway.

He ignited a flame to let him see where he placed his cloak and also quickly wash a little before bed. As the light illuminated the room, Martel noticed a scrap of parchment on the floor. A note, pushed under his door. Curious.

Martel,

Perhaps you did not receive my last message.

An important opportunity waits for us both,

if you would join us for a visit to discuss it

in detail. Time is less abundant, as the matter takes place next five day. Please stop by within the next few days.

Flora

She was getting impatient. Then again, Martel had never ignored a message from her before. Her urgency was not his problem, though. He had no imminent need for coin, and he saw no reason to get involved with the Night Knives again, undoubtedly ending up in another skirmish. If the mercenaries needed more hands, they would have to wait for their brethren from Aquila to reinforce them. Martel was an exemplary student of the Lyceum. He let this note follow its predecessor, igniting the parchment and dissolving the smoke.

After finishing his preparations for bed, Martel crawled under his single blanket. He woke up several times that night, needled by the cold.