

Firebrand 281

Chapter 281: Rolled Up

Rolled Up

His decisions and plans made, Martel walked back from the copper lanes. He took an unusual route for his return to the Lyceum, disguising where he had been. His stomach rumbled with the knowledge that he would miss supper, and he had no money to buy any; his wages, given to him this morning by Mistress Rana, had been delivered to Weasel as promised for his services last night.

The little rascal had demanded twice that for helping Martel out with his plan tonight, but thankfully, Marcus had decided that the Night Knives would cover it. A small price to pay for saving Flora's life, and as Marcus was the only conscious member of the mercenary band present in Morcaster, none could argue against it.

Back at the castle, Martel felt ready to drop. He had not slept for two days, crossing the city back and forth several times. His body yearned for rest, which was why he had to deny it. If he lay down, he would sleep clear through until morning.

Gnawing on an apple from his drawer, saved from breakfast and intended for Julia, Martel opened his window. The cold wind met his face much like a slap, reinvigorating him. Leaning over the windowsill, Martel prepared himself for a long wait.

When his Khivan clock struck ten, Martel blinked repeatedly and pulled himself upright. Once the shutter had been closed, he shuffled out of his room. Weasel should be here soon, so to speak. Martel had told the boy to arrive two hours after last bell had rung; how close he could hit that mark was another matter. Organising these affairs would be a lot easier if everyone had a Khivan clock.

Noticing himself straying towards unhappy thoughts, Martel quickly descended the boys' tower and went to the workshops, his appointed meeting place. He walked just past the threshold to the area and leaned up against the wall, out of sight from anyone walking down the hallway. Finally allowing himself some rest – Weasel knew where to look for him – Martel sank down to sit on the ground and nodded off.

"Wake up, wizard man, you can sleep after the job."

A small, thin finger, little more than bone, jabbed Martel's cheek. With utmost reluctance, the acolyte opened his eyes. "Alright, I'm awake. Let's go." He looked at his accomplice for the evening, covered in soot making him dark and difficult to spot.

"Before we go up. None of your little flames," Weasel warned him. "Besides attracting attention or waking people up, they'll ruin our night eyes. And then we won't find this little vial of yours."

"Got it." As weird as it felt to take orders from a boy half his size, maybe even half his age, Martel had to accept Weasel's experience on endeavours like this.

"Now, I should have asked this earlier, but you were out the door too fast. How sure are you that we'll find what we're looking for?"

"Well, he mentioned that he owned such an elixir. I can't imagine he's had reason to use it."

"Any chance he was just running his mouth? I ain't staying here all night looking for something that ain't real." Weasel crossed his arms.

"His father is the richest man in the Empire. Pretty sure they can afford a healing elixir."

"Alright. Lead the way. This once."

On quiet steps, at least in Weasel's case, the pair walked to the dormitory tower and ascended its floors. They continued until near the top. With no windows in the hallway, they walked in nearly complete darkness, Martel fumbling his way along the wall to reach the right door. Keeping silent, he poked Weasel to indicate their destination and stepped aside.

He could not see what the boy did and had to simply wait. Moment after moment passed, turning into minutes, as he heard Weasel cautiously tinker with some kind of tool. The tiniest sound reached Martel from the bolt that locked the room from the inside, being ever so slightly moved.

Martel's exhaustion battled against his nerves – if anybody discovered them, he was unsure whether he could talk his way out of it. Weasel's presence would be impossible to explain away.

Another sound, this time from the door slowly opening. Time for the next step. Weasel entered as the first, Martel second.

He realised the value of the boy's advice; tiny strips of moonlight made it through the shutter on the window, which felt like bountiful illumination compared to the pitch-black hallway.

Martel quickly glanced over the chamber. To one side, the bed with a sleeping Cheval. Next to it, an armour stand, a wardrobe, a drawer, a desk, some chairs – this room had to be three or four times bigger than his own.

Weasel had already begun looking through the desk. Following suit, Martel picked up everything on the drawer that looked vaguely in the shape of a vial or small bottle. Round object with a lid – jar of perfume. Another similar item, strange smell – oil for hair, Martel guessed. What a fop. An actual bottle – just ordinary wine.

As Martel placed it down, he misjudged it, putting the bottle down too close to the edge. It immediately fell back against him, making him desperately try to catch it with his hands. As it fell through his fingers, he finally reached out with his magic to grab hold of the bottle and arrest its movement.

Releasing a deep sigh of relief, Martel carefully put the bottle down. He did not bother looking at Weasel; he had no doubt the boy wore a scornful expression.

Continuing through the drawer, Martel found a lot of clothes, but nothing of interest. Weasel moved towards the armoire, which seemed an odd place to stash a vial worth twenty golden crowns.

Feeling like the obvious places had turned up empty, the acolyte began to despair. He got down on the ground, looking under the bed. Underneath was as empty as the mind of the loathsome mageknight sleeping on top.

He felt Weasel prod him with his foot. Getting back up, Martel saw the boy holding a sock. Wondering how to silently explain the vast differences between fabric and glass, Martel's objections quickly proved unnecessary. Sticking one hand into the sock, Weasel pulled out a small vial.

Nodding towards the door, the boy swiftly left, Martel behind him. Once outside, the door carefully closed, Weasel placed the vial in the acolyte's hand. "This it?" he whispered.

Even in complete darkness, Martel could see the faint glow of magic filling the liquid. Placing his hand around it, he felt the power through the glass. "Yes. Stars, who hides something like this in a sock?" It took him a moment to remember he had hidden his own stash of coins once in the same kind of place. Still, not something worth twenty crowns.

"Wasn't hiding it. You said he brought it on a journey. I figured, to keep it from breaking during travel, he rolled it up inside clothes."

Martel placed the vial back in Weasel's palm. "Get this to Flora."

Their hushed conversation was overruled by noise from the spiral staircase – boisterous singing, in fact, accompanied by the light from a lamp.

Panicking, Martel glanced in every direction. Should he hide back in Cheval's room? Or hope to talk his way out of it?

"Nordmark, what in Nether's name are you doing here?"

"Max! We –" Martel looked around. No trace of Weasel. "I couldn't sleep. Wanted to see if you were still up."

"Not for much longer! Look, I meant to ask you to join me tonight, but I could find no trace of you all day! I cannot be held responsible in that case."

"Understandable," Martel said graciously. "My own fault. I'll go out with you another night."

"Splendid! Now stand aside. I have a mighty need to relieve myself of tonight's ale, and after that, my bed beckons me."

"I wouldn't dream of standing in your way." Clapping the mageknight on the shoulder as he passed, Martel went down to his own floor and finally sought sleep.

Chapter 282: Late Lessons

Late Lessons

When first bell rang, Martel figured it was a mistake; he had only just closed his eyes. It felt like he had barely slept at all. Dreading the day ahead, he burrowed under his blanket again. Pelday with two lessons in fire magic when he already felt terrible. He tried to get some more sleep, but soon after, the sounds of other students in the hallway outside his room woke him back up. Resigned, Martel got out of bed and began his morning routine.

Arriving at the Circle of Fire, he felt a little better; some water in his face and food in his stomach had helped. Mutely waiting with the other students, he tried to look alert rather than expose his current weakness.

Moira strode in, looking wild as ever. She glanced over the students. "Duels, single opponent. Edward and Martel, Harriet and William. Anyone who yields gets detention."

An easy start, at least. They split up across the chamber, taking position.

"Begin!"

Fire bolts streaked through the air. Moira stood in the middle, constantly observing them without any concern that she might get hit.

A spell struck Martel on the leg as he tried to evade, making him flinch. He had not expected Edward to land any attacks. Quickly retaliating, his own spell flew wide, not even posing a threat.

Trying his best to focus, Martel corrected his footing to centre his balance. He could feel himself being slow, yet he could not push through the haze around his mind, which only frustrated him further. Another spell came flying at him, and Martel almost panicked in reaction. He threw himself to the side, avoiding it, but also making himself an easy target for the next one. As he scrambled to get back on his feet, Edward seized the opportunity to strike another fire bolt against Martel, hitting his hip. Limping for a few steps, Martel could not decide whether to shoot back or keep moving to avoid another attack; his indecision cost him, as Edward landed his next spell.

Off-balance and in pain, Martel could neither focus on evading nor casting spells. He got struck again and again; no doubt Edward enjoyed having the upper hand for once, and he held nothing back.

"I yield!" Martel yelled, seeing no other recourse.

Everything became quiet in the Circle of Fire. The other acolytes ceased fighting as well while Moira stared at him. "Take a break. Recollect yourself. You'll be back here tonight after last bell."

As Martel hobbled his way out of the chamber, he saw the other acolytes staring at him with clear joy. Either they delighted in his misery, or they were just happy to have avoided the punishment of detention themselves; probably both, if Martel were to guess.

He made his way down to the western courtyard, which had a water tap. Splashing some into his face and drinking greedily, he hoped it would help him recover. Otherwise, the remainder of the lesson would be brutal.

As the bell rang, after Martel had been hit by countless spells and his entire body ached, he could mercifully get some more sleep. He ended up missing lunch, and the second lesson of the day proved little better than the first. Whether impaired by lack of rest or food, Martel's performance suffered, and he was the object of ridicule from his fellow acolytes. As for Moira, her only remark was a reminder to return for his detention when last bell rang.

When supper time finally came and Martel had sated the worst of his hunger, he listened with half an ear to Maximilian's recounting of his night out, while thinking about Flora. It seemed best to avoid the copper lanes and the Night Knives for now, given the increased scrutiny they might all be under, but Martel wished he could have gone back with Weasel. Both to be sure they had found the right vial, hoping it had worked, and also out of professional curiosity to see the effects of a potent healing elixir. He wondered if it had been made by Mistress Rana or another alchemist, and if the former, whether she would someday teach Martel how to make it.

After the meal, Martel rested a bit more, though he avoided sleep. He could only imagine Moira's anger if he missed his detention. So, he waited patiently until his clock almost showed eight before he went back to the Circle of Fire.

Martel arrived more or less as the bell rang. At least she could not chide him on his punctuality. He waited only briefly before Moira appeared. "It's simple. You're going to fight me for as long as I consider it necessary. If you try to surrender or stop the fight, I'll keep going anyway, and you'll get detention tomorrow night as well."

Martel almost felt himself grow pale. He knew that he stood no chance against a battlemage as experienced as she was. His few brushes with her magic told him as much. At the same time, his knowledge of her teaching methods made it clear that she would not consider any appeal. This was not teaching, but punishment.

"Begin!"

Reacting mostly on instinct, Martel launched a fire bolt against her. She made no evasive move, simply accepting the strike without any sign of discomfort. At the same time, she raised her hand in an almost careless gesture and cast her own fire bolt against him. .com

Despite her casual stance, the spell flew with incredible speed. Before Martel could even consider dodging, it struck him in the stomach. He felt the same excruciating pain as when she had taught him a lesson a while back by grabbing his hand and channelling her magic through it. It left him unable to think or respond.

Moira waited as he stood bent over himself. "You have until the count of five to get ready before the next one. Five. Four. Three. Two. One."

Fear overruling pain, Martel straightened up and backed away, hoping some distance would improve his chances. This time, as soon as he saw her hand move, he fell to the floor. The spell flew through the air, narrowly missing him.

"Good evasion. Except you can't expect your enemies to always count to five before their next attack. You better move fast, boy."

This time, he did not even wait until he saw her move; he rolled away before leaping to his feet in another desperate bid to avoid her spells.

With an indifferent expression, Moira cast another fire bolt at him.

Chapter 283: Tactics of a Scarecrow

Tactics of a Scarecrow

Waking up on Malday, Martel felt mostly restored after a proper night's sleep; physically speaking, at least. Moira had not kept him for a full bell, but it had still been a long hour of agony and brutal exertion trying to avoid her spells. He stretched his limbs and neck, wondering if such magical attacks left any lasting damage, but his body felt fine. As for his mind, Martel was unsure. He had been in fights for his life, which obviously had been much more fearful situations than this. But they had also ended quickly. This type of fear, dreading pain rather than death, lasting moment after

moment after moment, not knowing how much longer it would go on, being powerless to do anything to stop it... This had to be what torture felt like.

He wanted to get revenge, pay the old woman back; at the same time, he knew such thoughts were useless. He could not do anything against a teacher at the Lyceum. He had no recourse other than making sure he never got detention again. It bothered him to think that instilling this fear, this motivation in him, was her very intention with the pain.

At least his first lesson went as usual, as Martel's superior skills in staff fighting exerted themselves. Not that Reynard cared or would ever bother to reward or punish any of them, but Martel was relieved to know that his skills did not suffer today as well.

He spent the lunch bell, before and after he had eaten, practising Mistress Rana's exercise for alchemy. She was a teacher he actually respected, and who taught him things he was eager to learn. If he failed to master this trick, she might change her mind about teaching him, which he had no intention of risking. So he sat for most of the bell, staring at a herb in his hand while trying to feel its magic. Whether he made any progress, he could not tell; but tonight his evening was his own, and he would keep at it until he saw results.

The second lesson of the day arrived, and Martel went to the gymnasium. It was as cold as it had been this morning, and he was glad for his leather armour providing a bit of warmth in addition to protection.

"Nordmark, have you heard?" Maximilian approached him.

"I won't know until you tell me what you mean."

"Guillaume, he claims that someone stole his elixir of healing," he explained with an amused tone of voice.

The fire acolyte frowned briefly. Right, Cheval. Using his given name felt like more respect than Martel wanted to give him. "Are those valuable?" It probably did not hurt to play dumb.

"I thought you were learning alchemy? Of course they are. Guillaume claims he paid twenty crowns for it."

"Well, he can afford it." Martel knew it was a drop in the ocean for a man of Duke Cheval's wealth; still, he derived a certain amount of glee from having inflicted this inconvenience on his enemy. Two of them, counting the son as well.

"It is not about the coin," Maximilian explained with an overbearing tone. "The ingredients are so rare, an alchemist makes only a few every year. And probably there are only a couple in the entire Empire with the skill to do so." He gave Martel a sceptical look. "Do you actually learn anything in that apothecary of yours?"

"Not really. Too busy treating wounds from all the idiot mageknights who don't know how to defend themselves."

"Hah, good retort! I shall make you regret that once we spar."

Martel followed Maximilian's gaze to see that Moira had entered the arena. Another round of fire acolytes against mageknights, it seemed. However, this time, their teacher did not simply sit on the stands, but approached her four students.

All of them turned to look at her, waiting with expressions that indicated they wanted to do anything but that. "Listen up," the Mistress of Fire said. "If you lose your fight against the mageknights today, all of you will have detention tonight. And if I'm particularly disappointed in your performance, expect it to be extended to every night this fiveday."

She strode away to find a seat, leaving her students aghast. "Great," Harriet mumbled, "you worthless pricks are going to cost me all my evenings."

"I bet you'll eat dirt before I do," William snapped.

Edward simply looked sick.

"We have to stop this," Martel interjected. Three acolytes looked at him with varying degrees of hostility. He thought about the Night Knives. If he could go into battle by their side after trying to kill each other in the first encounter, the same had to be possible here. "I don't care if you hate my guts and want to see me suffer." Their expressions told him he had formulated their desires correctly. "If we don't work together, we all suffer. Besides, aren't you tired of those arrogant mageknights lording over us? Imagine when we beat twice our numbers, leaving them in the dust. Won't that feel better than our petty feuds? Not to mention, avoiding detention."

"Scarecrow is right," William conceded. Nickname apart, his words pleased Martel.

"Get ready to train! Eight mageknights against the elemental bunch. Marche, Griffé, Cheval..." Reynard called out.

"But what can we do?" asked Edward. "We try our best, but we can't stop them all."

"We can if we work together." Martel thought about fighting with Marcus, how the warrior provided cover. "I know what we'll do."

"Right, so we listen to you because you fancy yourself our leader?" Harriet scoffed.

"Just give me one chance," Martel pleaded. "It can't go worse than we've done so far."

The other fire acolytes looked from each other to Martel. In the distance, eight mageknights took position.

"Fight!"

Eight warriors ran across the arena to close the short distance between them and the fire acolytes. Four fire bolts flew in response, all of them hitting their target. One mageknight went down, another blocked with her shield, taking no hurt; two stayed on their feet, but halted their advance to recover from the pain. That left five still charging forward to close the gap.

Moving from the flanks, Martel and William stepped in front of the other two acolytes, raising their weapons. Using staves and magical shields, they fought defensively. Behind them, Harriet and Edward continued as before, felling opponents left and right.

Sensing Alain trying to go around him, Martel stepped back and released a blast of air to push the mageknight away. Immediately, Maximilian swung his hammer against Martel's shoulder, but he raised his magical shield in defence to take the blow.

Two steps further back, Harriet landed a fire bolt straight into Maximilian's thigh, making his leg buckle. While tempting to seize the opportunity, Martel stuck to his plan, fighting only to protect his backline, keeping Alain at bay again. Reversely only focused on offence, Harriet hit another fire bolt, putting Maximilian down for the fight.

Some of the attackers hit by the first wave of spells had recovered, returning to the brawl, but their aid came too late. Using their best staff fighters in front to buy time allowed the other fire acolytes to concentrate on offensive spellwork, and the barrage of fire bolts did its work. A few minutes after the skirmish had begun, the elemental mages claimed victory.

Chapter 284: Spite

Spite

After several miserable days filled with fear, terror, dread, and plenty of pain, Martel felt vindicated by the victory on Malday. Getting a second full night's sleep in a row did not hurt either, and he faced Glunday in a reasonable mood. He just needed to get through two lessons of fire magic, avoiding detention in the process, and he had two easy days ahead.

Arriving at the apothecary in the morning, Martel quickly set to work making salves. Nora still only spoke when absolutely needed, and he felt too worn by recent events to care. So he simply laboured in silence.

Halfway through his shift, Mistress Rana appeared, coming down from her laboratory. "Martel, tomorrow I want you to be here at sixth bell instead of second. I trust that will not be an issue?"

"Not at all. May I ask why?"

"I need you available in the workshop upstairs for more than two hours at a time if you are to learn proper alchemy. But both yours and my mornings are too busy to accommodate that. So, tomorrow afternoon, we shall work into the supper bell as needed, and you may create your first potion. Understood?"

"Yes, mistress. Tomorrow at sixth bell." Martel knew it would be something simple, probably the same kind of elixir as he had worked on last – repetition was the road to mastering any skill – but he still felt excited at the prospect. He would learn every recipe available to him and practise as much as needed; one day, hopefully, he would have the knowledge and skill to make small vials with the power to defy death.

"Good. Remember to practice working on the herbs. See you then."

As the acolytes gathered in the Circle of Fire, Martel thought he sensed a slight change in the mood. Usually, they either avoided each other's gazes or simply scowled while waiting for Moira to appear. Today, while none of them looked happy as such, let alone ventured to speak, the normal hostility seemed muted.

Their teacher arrived, looking at each of them in turn until they felt uncomfortable under her gaze. "So, you finally managed to beat a rabble of empty-headed oafs, useless for anything other than waving swords around and blocking arrows with their faces. Was it the threat of detention that finally made you wise up?"

The acolytes exchanged glances; nobody seemed eager to draw Moira's attention. Finally, Harriet spoke up. "We're better than them. And we were tired of letting them win." She tried to sound confident, but Martel imagined that she felt the same unease around their teacher that he did.

The edge of Moira's lip curled upwards in a contemptuous expression. "Spite is an undervalued emotion when it comes to motivating people."

Martel realised her strategy in this; his first class in the Circle of Fire, she had belittled the other acolytes at his expense, making them all feel spiteful towards him. Just to motivate them to work harder. There was a method to her cruelty, it seemed, but it was still cruelty all the same.

"If you little fools had any sense, you wouldn't need any motivation – you'd understand the value of fighting together even with people you dislike," Moira continued. "Maybe once it's real and soldiers are dying around you, it'll sink in. But until then, I'll find ways. I expect you to repeat your performance from yesterday every Malday. You let those mindless thugs beat you, it's detention for all of you. Every time you fail."

None of the acolytes dared to voice any discontent loudly, but Martel saw his own emotions expressed on their faces.

"You lot seem displeased. I'll remind you that in war, you don't get to fail twice." She muttered something in addition, which Martel could not hear, but only reinforced the imagery of her as a crazed witch. "For today, let's see how well your newfound unity holds up. You'll fight in pairs and be measured on your performance as a team. Harriet and Edward, William and Martel. If one pair gets hit ten times in total, they get detention tonight."

Sighing, the acolytes spread out across the Circle of Fire.

A short and hastily scribbled note found its way to Martel as he checked for mail after lunch.

Martel,

Everyone is well.

We are back home.

Keep to yourself.

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A bit cryptic, but still possible to deduce. He assumed the sender was Flora, letting him know that the potion had worked. The last line he interpreted as a suggestion of avoiding contact for the time being. Probably wise, in case the inquisitors still prowled the streets looking for them. And if they were back in the bridge district, Martel could go see Weasel and pay him what he still owed without any chance of being seen together with the mercenaries.

He could also look in on Julia. He felt a flash of worry; it had been a while since he last saw her, and if she was in any trouble, he had no way of knowing. Part of him considered if he should go

check on her tonight. Yet he quickly dismissed such thoughts. No point assuming the worst; besides, Julia had survived on her own for a while. She was not helpless. Best to let things quiet down and see her on Soliday when he would go to see Weasel as well.

Setting his concerns aside, Martel took out the herb given to him by Mistress Rana for his exercise in alchemy. He had a spare bell to practise igniting its magic; he wanted to have some progress to show before his lesson tomorrow in the apothecary. He might have to give it another try tonight, after his second class in fire magic, assuming he could dodge detention again. Trying not to feel overwhelmed by everything he had to learn, everything he had to do, Martel pushed his thoughts from his mind and focused once more on the stubborn, little plant in the palm of his hand.

Chapter 285: Liquid Magic

Liquid Magic

Martel had rarely slept as well at night as he did these days, his body and magic being pushed to the limit. With that in mind, waking up on Manday felt almost relaxing; his first class, Archean language, only required him to sit still and listen. And compared to lessons with Moira, learning elemental spells from Master Alastair in the afternoon was a breeze.

And this particular morning was even more relaxing, as his alchemy work had moved from second to sixth bell. For once, Martel ate his breakfast slowly, feeling like he had all the time in the world. Once he was done, he used his spare hours to practice drawing magic from the herb given to him by Mistress Rana. He believed that he saw progress, a faint shimmer of magic, but it seemed to vanish the moment he stopped focusing his efforts.

He continued practising after his class with Master Fenrick and during the dinner bell until it was time to go to the Hall of Elements. His teacher stood waiting, wearing a smile as usual when he spotted his student. "There he is. I was thinking, you did so well with water last lesson, it seems unnecessary to push further with that. Better we spend our limited time together moving to the next element. In this case, earth."

Martel nodded a little, trusting Master Alastair to know best.

"Unlike water, we obviously can't pull earth from the air around us. We must work with the element as it is present. The most skilled of earthmages can shape stone or even metal, which probably will always be beyond our ability," the old battlemage admitted. "Fortunately, just loose dirt will do for our purpose. Remember, we only require it as a vessel for the magic, nothing more." He stretched his hand down towards the ground, clenched his fingers into a fist as if grabbing something, and yanked his hand up. A lump of earth flew up from the ground, hovering in front of him for barely a moment before shooting through the air to hit the far wall. "Like that. Your turn."

Martel did the same gesture to help guide his magic flow from him into the ground. By now, he had sufficient control that he could restrict his power to a limited area, rather than losing it as it spread through the earth. He pulled upwards to raise his targeted area into the air, just like Master Alastair had done. That was when the problem arose. He could pull it towards himself, raising it like a column; but separating it, pulling just a small piece apart to act as a projectile somehow resisted his efforts. It felt like his magic somehow became sticky, unwilling to cut in two.

"Sorry, master," he spoke quietly as it became clear the spell would not work for him.

"Save your apologies, lad, this is what you're here for. To learn. Now, although I said loose dirt would do, you may find this easier to learn with a small pebble or such. Something already clearly defined in shape. Come, let's go to the courtyard and find something for you to practise on. Hope you don't mind the cold!"

After predictably slow progress with the elemental spell, Martel walked the short trip to the apothecary, waiting for Mistress Rana to show up. It felt awkward, standing in the small room with Nora studiously ignoring him as she worked, but now was hardly the time to get into it with her. Soon after, the alchemist appeared and motioned for Martel to follow her upstairs.

This being his third visit, he noticed a few changes. Some of the jars on the shelves had been moved, one of them gone altogether. The coals on the fireplace were warm, evident of recent use. He wondered what potions she had brewed since last – perhaps another healing elixir? Martel doubted Mistress Rana would tell him, though. She was not the sort to speak freely about her affairs, and he had his own task ahead. Lying on a worktable, he saw all the ingredients for a potion of warmth.

"Let me see how well you can awaken the herbs." She pointed at the reagents.

A little hesitant, knowing his performance would not be adequate, Martel picked up the mustard seeds and closed his hand around them. He could feel them against his skin and reached out with his magic to take hold of them in that respect as well. He imagined the dormant power as a light that grew in strength to suffuse all of the seeds. As he opened his fingers, a frail shimmer appeared and faded again.

"Keep practising. Every single day," Mistress Rana told him. Sweeping up the other ingredients into her own hand and taking the seeds from Martel, she effortlessly drew their magic out to make them all shine. "You remember the procedure from last?" she asked as she walked towards the fireplace.

"Boil the water, put everything in, keep stirring."

She left the ingredients on the nearest table. "Get to work."

For two hours and more, Martel did nothing but move a ladle around a boiling pot. He could see why masters of a trade had apprentices; anyone could do this bit. Conversation would make the time pass more easily, but Mistress Rana did not speak to him while he stirred, occupied with her own work elsewhere in the laboratory. Whether she was focused on her labours or perhaps feared that talking would distract Martel, he could not know, but her stern demeanour kept him from starting any conversation himself. So he simply moved the ladle, round and round. In the distance, the bell rang, and still he continued.

When perhaps another half hour had passed, the water in the pot had a warm glow, almost like a liquid fire. Martel understood this was magic of a different kind than the Asterian, focused on spells with imminent effect, where the magic vanished as soon as the spell ended. With this, magic was almost an element to itself, fluid and malleable, bound to the water.

His teacher came over and cast a look at his efforts. "Good. Now comes the hard part. In Sindhian alchemy, magic can be diluted or distilled, so to say. It would not be feasible for anyone to drink the

entire contents of the pot just to gain the effects of the potion. Therefore, as we pour it into a bottle, we must guide all of the magic to follow, concentrating it into the vial. And it must be done swiftly. Once it stops boiling and stirring, the magic begins to evaporate."

Liquid magic that evaporated like steam in a bath house; so strange to think about.

Mistress Rana gave him two rags to keep him from getting scalded on the handles of the pot. Meanwhile, she fetched a small glass bottle held in place by something resembling a candle holder. "Grab the pot and pour a little of the liquid into the vial until it is nearly full. Meanwhile, I shall pull all the magic floating in the water along to fill the vial as well. Observe closely – next time, you will do it."

Martel grabbed the pot and carefully poured from it. Fascinated, he watched as a stream of orange-glowing water entered the vial until it was just about full, and he hurried to pull up. Nothing remained in the pot except hot water with some roots, leaves, seeds, and flowers floating.

Mistress Rana grabbed a stopper to seal the vial. The liquid within retained its colour, and as she placed it in his hand, he could feel both the heat and the magic within. "Keep this, in case you have any cold days ahead."

Chapter 286: Small Glow

Small Glow

Having seen how Sindhian alchemy worked up close, Martel finally understood how different it was. It should not have come as a surprise, given he knew about Tyrian runes, which likewise channelled magic completely different to the Asterian craft. Still, seeing what felt like almost raw or pure magic, floating in water with only a fragile bond keeping it in place, made him realise the limits of his own knowledge.

To Martel, magic had manifested itself as fire. As a child, the two had been the same. Coming to the Lyceum, he had learned how to make it manifest itself as the other elements, or even as part of his body. But he saw now what Master Alastair had tried to teach him, magic being an independent force, and the elements being vessels for it.

As he worked alongside Nora in the apothecary on Solday morning, Martel for once wished that they were on speaking terms. She might be the only person he could discuss this with. He could try to rectify matters between them, but since he had done nothing wrong, he was disinclined to take such a first step. So, like every other morning in the apothecary lately, they worked in silence.

Mistress Rana had paid him his wages for the fiveday yesterday, once Martel had finished in the laboratory; it was time to complete his promise to Weasel and pay him the last sum owed for guiding Martel through the sewers. Good thing that Marcus had covered payment for the second outing, stealing the healing potion from Cheval, as Weasel had demanded even more payment for that; otherwise, Martel would have been indebted to him for months to come. The little bastard would probably charge interest if that happened.

Grabbing some food at lunch to bring to Julia as well, he set out shortly after. The cold weather almost made him want to drink the potion from yesterday, though instead, he resorted to more natural means by increasing his pace. After walking a while, he began to feel warmer, the cold had

less bite, and he made his way through the city. He chose a direct route for the most part, only ducking into alleys a few times as a precaution; nobody seemed to be following him.

Reaching the home of Weasel's gang, Martel was glad to see they had a bundle of firewood. He had plain forgotten on his last visits about buying them fuel, thinking only of the wounded Flora. "I see you got my present," Martel pointed out as he handed over five silvers to Weasel. "Not that your gratitude kept you from demanding payment for helping me."

"I can't throw away opportunities to make coin." The boy shrugged and returned upstairs with his money.

The other children crowded around Martel as he sat by the table, begging to see some magic. Indulging them, he summoned a flame hot enough to provide them warmth, and once their initial amazement had dwindled, they stretched out their small hands towards the fire to make the most of it.

"Were any of you awake when Weasel came back the other night and brought my friend a small bottle to drink?"

Some of them nodded.

"Did you see what happened when she drank it?"

"Oh yes," Sparrow said.

Hearing her talk caught Martel by surprise; she always seemed muted on his visits, ever since her experience being taken by the maleficar. Happy to encourage further speech, and eager to hear about the healing elixir, he continued, "Can you tell me what you saw?"

"She looked like death, to be honest. But then Weasel gave the little bottle to the big man, and he pried her mouth open to pour it in. It looked strange! The drink had its own strong glow, it looked like, though it quickly disappeared down her throat. Moments later, her face got colour, and her breathing didn't sound so ragged," Sparrow related. "She could even sit back up and talk."

Martel regretted he had not witnessed it himself; now that he had begun to understand Sindhian alchemy, he wanted to learn as much as possible. To wield the power of life in a small vial, able to administer it even to those with one foot in the grave... He knew it would take him ages to learn such potions, and he might have to continue his studies on his own after the Lyceum, but nothing felt more worthwhile. The Empire might force him to use his natural talent for war, but they could not deny him studying alchemy as well.

Martel thought about the cures for consumption too, looking around at the children who had benefitted from it. So much good could be done with alchemy. Far more than his talent with fire would ever allow him to do, he suspected.

Bidding the children farewell, Martel left the copper lanes. Under his robe, he had some slices of bread for Julia. He felt a little guilty for visiting the urchins while carrying food and not sharing it, but he had just paid Weasel enough to buy lots of bread. Besides, the children in the copper lanes had each other; Julia was on her own.

Walking eastward a while, Martel reached the harbour on his route back to the Lyceum. Glad to step inside the insula and escape the wind, he moved up the floors towards Julia's chamber. He nodded curtly to the few people he met, who quickly got out of his way; the intricate red robes could be seen underneath his cloak, which gave the impression of a man with certain means.

At last he stood outside her door and could give it a heavy knock. No response; usually she was quick to open and let him in. Martel tried a few more times with the same result.

Somehow, Martel had imagined Julia would always stay inside, where it would be safe. But even she had to leave sometimes to buy food or other necessities; he had given her money for that purpose, after all. Accepting that, he left.

Chapter 287: Arsenal

Arsenal

As another fiveday started, Martel felt cautiously optimistic that he had escaped any consequences from his latest brush with the inquisitors. He still had to be careful, of course, avoiding the mage hunters' suspicions while watching out for any other ploys by Duke Cheval, but on the whole, he felt good. The vengeful nobleman's plot had been foiled, Flora's life saved, and Martel could focus on his spellwork and alchemy.

His good cheer lasted until a letter arrived for him in a sealed envelope; even before reading, Martel knew that he had challenged fate lately, and the response had come promptly. Nothing good came from sealed letters. He did not recognise the insignia stamped into the red wax, however, showing a long feather. Nothing to do but open and read.

Master Martel,

Lady Pearl cordially requests your presence within the next few days to make good on your promise to her. You may find her at the expected locale at most hours, though she asks you do not seek her company before fourth bell has rung, regardless of your chosen day. A written response is not expected. Your arrival either on this Pelday, Malday, or Glunday will be satisfactory.

With respect,

Lady Pearl

The acolyte narrowed his eyes. It took him a moment to recollect his meeting with the lady of the bridge district. Right, he had promised her a favour in exchange for suppressing the knowledge of his involvement with the Night Knives. That had proven to be in vain, given the trap sprung on him and the mercenaries the other night. Could she really collect payment when her aid had accomplished nothing?

It seemed like she believed so. Knowing these Nine Lords, Martel feared she might be right. Even if he disputed that she had any claim to his services, denying her would earn him another enemy. At the very least, he would hear her out. As long as she demanded nothing odious, nothing to endanger his situation further, it might be best to simply do it and close the matter.

But it would have to wait for another day. With some stolen food from the dining hall, Martel went into the city.

Going at noon put him in a rush; he would have to hurry back for his second lesson in fire magic. But tonight, the sparring club met in the Chamber of Earth, and for once, Martel intended to go. Some of the mageknights wanted a rematch without teachers deciding the rules and who fought who, and the fire acolyte intended to oblige them. He did not expect to gain much experience, though it never hurt to keep practising, but Martel did have an ulterior motive for proving his prowess in combat. Someday, he would have a mageknight as his protector when going to war, and he knew who he wanted; hopefully by showing himself to be the best battlemage, he might get his wish.

For now, he made his way to Julia's insula as he had yesterday. This time, as he knocked, the door opened. He entered, and she quickly closed and bolted the door behind him.

"I came by last night," he explained, handing over some bread and a carrot. "But you weren't here."

"I needed water. I don't like going out during the day." She squatted and began eating.

"Of course. Just be careful. The docks at night aren't the safest place for a girl to run around."

She shrugged, and together with her forward leaning position, it revealed two pieces of jewellery around her neck that he had never noticed before. The pendants looked simple; one was made of black stone, it seemed, and the other looked like glass, of all things. "Those are nice."

Julia grabbed both pendants and placed them under her dress. "My mum gave them to me. Said to keep them safe."

The alchemist, Martel recalled, though he assumed in the Asterian rather than Sindhian tradition. At least nothing about Julia suggested her mother had origins from outside the Empire, though looks could be deceiving, of course. He wondered if the necklaces contained any magic, even if they looked mundane; perhaps protective spells made by a mother to help her child. "May I see them?"

She shook her head. "Mama said to never take them off or let anyone see them. I promised her."

Well, it would not do to force the girl to hand them over. And if magical, surely it would be something benevolent if it came from her mother. Perhaps it even explained how Julia had survived on her own, evading inquisitors, city guards, and who knew what else. "How long ago did you last see your parents?"

The girl shrugged. "A long time ago. We've had cold days more than once."

Probably years. "Well, I must get back to my school. I'll see you again soon."

"Not too soon," she cautioned him.

Given his recent run-in with the inquisitors, Martel agreed.

His second lesson in fire magic was an exhausting exercise in casting spells, being hit, and running ragged. In other words, the usual. With their improved performance against the mageknights last fiveday, Moira seemed less inclined to punish them for the time being. Furthermore, they only practised the simple spells that they could maintain casting repeatedly over a long day of fighting. That meant, as Martel arrived at the Chamber of Earth in the evening, while physically tired, he brimmed with unspent spellpower.

Lots of mageknights from his Malday lessons were present. Martel did not know most of them other than superficially, as he had not shared any classes with them prior to becoming a fire acolyte. He got the feeling that they underestimated him; they had not taken part in the sparring club previously and thus had never seen Martel duel before. Apparently to them, the fire acolytes prevailing last fiveday was pure luck. Martel had come to prove them wrong.

He looked towards the group of mageknights in silent challenge; one of them, a short boy but muscular with corn-yellow hair, walked over while hefting his sword and shield. "You elemental lot only win because our fights start with us ten paces away. Ready to fight me up close?"

Martel stretched out a hand towards Maximilian, who handed him a staff with a grin. "Max, give us the signal."

"Fight!"

The mageknight launched into a series of blows. He fought well, striking with swiftness and precision. Martel defended with his staff, but could not parry them all. In a fight purely based on weaponry, he would lose very soon. Instead, Martel showed what an elemental mage could do.

First, he sent a powerful blast of air that pushed his opponent back several paces. As the mageknight advanced once again, Martel stomped his foot into the ground to crack it open. It caused a sudden depression to appear in the earth right where the warrior stepped next, throwing him off balance and leaving him wide open. A fire ray shot out to strike him in the chest, continuously burning him.

The mageknight threw his weapon aside. "Stop!"

Martel ended the spell. He took a step forward, looking at his opponent, who wore a pained expression. "It has nothing to do with distance. You have two weapons at your disposal. I win because I have four elements and six spells at mine." He looked towards the other mageknights. "Who's next?"

Chapter 288: Carrying Water

Carrying Water

For the second lesson on Malday, it seemed that they would resume training with fire acolytes and mageknights mixed together. Moira did not appear either, leaving their practice entirely in the hands of Reynard. Paired up with Alain, Martel nodded to him as they prepared to train. They stood against two mageknights, Eleanor and her friend Clarisse.

"Begin!"

Martel immediately retreated one step behind Alain, letting him act as a shield to hold the two attackers back. Fighting purely defensively, the mageknight did admirable work intercepting their attacks, giving Martel free reins to use his offensive spells. Despite the advantage this should yield, the fight proved difficult; by shielding him, Alain also blocked Martel from a straight line of sight to their opponents, making it tough to attack them without hitting his own protector.

The turning point came when Clarisse manoeuvred her way past Alain to attack Martel directly. While it seemed a good strategy, it proved in his favour, as he could finally unleash his spells without concern of a friendly strike. It took only two fire bolts for her to yield.

Two against one, Eleanor fought better than could be expected, but she had to surrender soon after as well.

The skirmish done, Martel untensed his body. The others still fought on in their duels, leaving him and the three others some time to slake their thirst and catch their breath.

"You are doing well," Eleanor told Martel as they stood by the barrel of water. "I am told you impressed a few last night, in the Chamber of Earth."

"Thanks." His face lit up in a smile – it meant more when it came from her. "You too. The way you kept moving, keeping Alain between me and you, so I couldn't get an attack on you."

She gave a shrug. "He was easy to manipulate."

"Hey!" came the offended outburst from Alain, standing nearby.

"Well, I am glad I am not a protector," Clarisse interjected. "Following some battlemage around like a watchdog. I much prefer to lead rather than be led."

Martel tried to imagine the snobbish girl leading soldiers in battle. She would have to handle a lot more than two fire bolts to do well, assuming anyone would even listen to anything she said.

"Get ready!" yelled Reynard. "We go another round!"

The acolytes drank their last sips of water and resumed positions to fight again.

Once the class had ended and the students began filing out of the gymnasium, Maximilian appeared by Martel's side, slapping him on the shoulder. "Nordmark, it is about time we set sail again! I have not shared a drink with you in ages. We never celebrated your ascension to acolyte, for instance."

For Maximilian, any excuse to go out drinking would serve, but it also suited Martel, given he intended to take the mageknight's measure on a matter. "Sounds good. I get paid on Solday, so we can go out then."

"Pointless to wait that long." Maximilian waved his hand about dismissively. "My purse got enough for us both. You can cover next time we saddle up."

That left Martel without reasons to refuse. "The Golden Goose?"

"You read my mind."

After baths and supper, the pair of acolytes went to their tavern of choice. The place bustled with activity as ever; winter only gave people more reason to seek indoors for warmth, drink, and company. Each mageling armed with a full tankard of ale, they sat down. "Cheers to my man from Nordmark, an acolyte at twice the speed of any other!"

Martel joined in the cheer, accepting the accolade. Once they had sampled the brew and the mood was on the rise, he decided to broach his intended subject. "I understand that there's ways you can decide where you get sent, after you graduate."

"I doubt that will matter much in your case," Maximilian considered. "All battlemages these days get sent to the siege of Nahavand, from what I hear."

"Right, sure, I wasn't thinking about myself." Martel did not need any reminders of what awaited him. "But you mageknights, you get some influence over the choice, don't you?"

"Well, formally it is the Imperial administration that makes the decision. But if you know the people in the administration making that decision..." The young nobleman gave a wink and took another sip.

"That's what I understand. Because some mageknights will be protectors, but who determines whether they'll join the praetorians or go to the legions alongside battlemages?" More importantly, could the choice of a battlemage's protector be influenced?

"I cannot say what they claim to base the distinction on." Maximilian shrugged. "Supposedly, the best are offered a place in the Praetorian Guard, considering they guard the emperor's life."

"Offered? So they could refuse and go to the legions instead?" Martel raised his cup in front of his face, trying to hide his interest.

"Possibly. But who wants to be sent to the field when you can live at the Imperial palace?" Maximilian laughed. "At least mageknights serving as officers get a command and a chance to rise through the ranks. Protector to a battlemage, you are stuck at the bottom of the ladder. Little chance for glory either."

"I hadn't thought about that." Martel cleared his throat. "So you're happy that your father wants you to be a praetorian?"

"My wishes have nothing to do with it. My father has spent money and political influence to get me in position that one day, I shall be captain of the Guard. I doubt he would accept all that being thrown away!" His laughter continued. "Besides, could you imagine me trailing some mage around on the battlefield? Me, the favoured son of the House of Marche?"

"A silly notion, I guess." Martel certainly felt silly having thought of it. At least Maximilian's obliviousness spared him further embarrassment.

"Ah, I am empty already. I will get us another round."

"Yeah, thanks." Martel drank the last of his mug and set it on the table between them.

Chapter 289: Dazzling Pearls

Dazzling Pearls

The next day during his apothecary shift, Mistress Rana appeared again. "We shall do the same tomorrow as last fiveday," she told Martel. "You'll join me upstairs during sixth bell instead of the second, and you may work to complete a potion from start to finish."

"Very well, mistress." Martel already felt excited. As soon as he had control of the basic method, he would have to look into recipes; maybe the library had a tome. Getting ingredients would be another obstacle, but the possibilities seemed endless.

"Don't forget to practise drawing the magic from the reagents. It requires hard work to learn, I know." The alchemist glanced at her apprentice, quietly chopping roots.

"I'll keep practising," he promised.

Mistress Rana left again, and Martel resumed his work. He glanced at Nora. "I was wondering..."

"Do you have a question about your work?" she asked with a light voice.

"Not as such. I was just thinking, as her apprentice, you must have learned how to do that thing. The magic to fill the ingredients for the elixir. Right?"

Despite the simplicity of the question, it still took a few moments for her to respond. "Yes."

"Any chance you could help me? Just any advice or explain how you learned it."

Her voice carried the same light tone as she spoke. "I think it's best we stick to our work and assignments here in the apothecary."

Martel put his tools aside to turn around and look at her, as she stood with her back turned to him.

"What did I do to deserve this treatment?"

The chopping sound from her knife ceased. "You lied to me about what you really are. I think it's best we just keep to ourselves."

"I kept a secret. Just like you did." How quickly she had forgotten how Jasper had extorted her, and how Martel had helped her with that.

She turned around. "That is not the same. I sold a remedy that helps people, that's all. You know how dangerous fire-touched mages can be, and you hid that."

"Given how you treated me, can you blame me? Besides, when have I ever done anything to suggest I am a danger to anyone?"

"I've heard about you, your nights in the Chamber of Earth. Violence seems to come naturally to you," Nora retorted.

"Because that's what they teach me! That's the only magic I'm allowed to learn now. But I'm trying to find a different path. I'm trying to learn alchemy so that I can do magic that heals people rather than hurts them." Martel stared at her, feeling frustrated at having to explain himself. "But I could use your help."

She made no immediate reply.

"If you think I'm dangerous, that I deserve punishment for keeping this secret, remember that I'm being sent to war. I think that's more than enough punishment. But until then, I would really like to learn how I can use magic that helps. And this is my only opportunity."

He kept his eyes on her until she finally relaxed her shoulders, slumping forward a little. "Alright. Come back tomorrow morning during second bell like you usually would. I'll help you practise. For now, we need to finish these salves. The infirmary is nearly out."

In the evening, Martel left the castle to walk east. The route was familiar, though he did not head towards the home of the Night Knives, once he reached the bridge district. Instead, he continued until he was at The River Pearl. The tavern looked inviting as ever with the sounds of merriment coming from inside, not to mention the scantily clad wait staff visible through the windows. Steeling himself for the upcoming conversation, unsure what Lady Pearl wanted, Martel went

inside. He kept his hood up, mostly for his own sake, as he had to announce his arrival anyway. "Tell Lady Pearl that the mage is here. She wanted to meet me."

The guard gave a brief nod and disappeared into the back, leaving Martel to awkwardly fend off offers of drink or companionship from the serving girls.

"She says you can come right in. She's in her study," the guard related as he returned.

Martel gave a curt nod and hurried onwards. He remembered the way from his last visit, and soon, he stood before the bald proprietress who shared the name of her establishment.

"Master Martel. Good of you to come."

He was unsure if it had been much of a choice, but regardless, he inclined his head in greeting. Best to stay polite. "Lady Pearl."

"As you might have guessed, I thought of a way you can repay that small favour I am owed." She gave a wide smile with her painted lips.

Martel still felt he had gotten a raw deal on that matter, but he would hear her out. "Tell me."

"Solday evening, I have a meeting at Smallport. A representative from the Island Trading Consortium. Now, I have never met this fellow before, but he offers a deal so enticing, it warrants my personal attention. At the same time, a woman in my position can never be too careful."

Martel had never heard about this island guild before, but he understood the rest. "You want protection."

"I have my own guards, of course, but a mage offers certain assurances that others cannot. We have all heard about the battlemages of the Empire, even if you are the first I myself have met." She leaned forward, her many layers of expensive clothing all shifting. "Come around on Solday at fifth bell, and we shall travel to Smallport together. A quick meeting, most likely to be concluded peacefully, and we are done."

Given his recent luck, Martel felt quite certain this would be an ambush, but he could hardly refuse on such grounds. It was a reasonable request. "I'll be there," he promised.

"Excellent, darling. Be sure to look all wizard-like. No harm in impressing these islanders." Lady Pearl gave him another dazzling smile.

Chapter 290: Slipping Through Fingers

Slipping Through Fingers

The next day, Martel went to the apothecary at second bell as usual, even though his work with Mistress Rana had been moved to the sixth bell. Instead, he hoped that Nora could give him some insight into the exercise of awakening the magic in alchemical ingredients. He expected that since she had first learned Asterian magic like him, she might better understand the difficulties he faced.

As he arrived, she greeted him properly for the first time in over a month. As she began to talk, her usual apprehension towards him seemed to fade away. "Alright, in my experience, it's easier to get the magic going with ingredients that are still in their natural state. So try with this herb rather than any powders or such." Nora handed him a coltsfoot. "Now, Mistress Rana probably doesn't quite understand why this is difficult for us. This is the only form of magic she knows. We're used to

always thinking of magic as coming in the shape of the elements. Metal or stone belongs to earth, anything liquid contains water, and so on. You have to forget about that."

Martel nodded a little. He had begun to understand that. Magic was a force unto itself. A raw material that could be expressed in different ways, not just as one of the elements.

"Everything living carries the seed of magic. Your task is to make that seed blossom. Connect with it and make it grow until it fills the plant."

Martel looked at the herb between his fingers. Perhaps his mistake had been that he tried to simply grab and pull on the magic inside. Instead, he had to coax it out rather than just yank it. "Alright. I'll give it a try."

"Don't get discouraged. It took me a long time. Why don't you practice a while now, and I can do some of my work. Then we see what progress you made," Nora suggested.

"Alright." Closing his hand around the plant, Martel reached out with his magic.

Martel continued to practice for the rest of the bell, though he had little to show Nora in the end. After his lesson in Archean, he kept at it for most of the lunch hours until his class in elemental magic with Master Alastair. Which led to sixth bell and his return to the apothecary, where Mistress Rana soon appeared to grant him entry to her sanctum.

As before, a worktable with all the ingredients for a potion of warmth waited for him along with a fireplace, a pot, and water. "Show me your progress."

Martel grabbed the coltsfoot and focused. He tried to reach out with his magic, but he could feel himself doing it wrong. His first instinct was always to feel for heat, which usually served him well. But it meant that the vaunted kernel of magic eluded him, and he could not properly connect to it. Something was there, perhaps, but it did not respond to his call. He was tempted to simply grab at it and pull on whatever his magic could catch, but instead, he tried to be patient, ignoring the pressure of Mistress Rana staring at him. Like trying to get a cat to approach, Martel held out a hand, magically speaking, hoping to connect with the dormant magic in the herb.

A shimmer appeared through his closed fingers, and he opened his hand to see a faint glow. It disappeared again. The cat had chosen to run away.

"Keep trying." Mistress Rana gathered up the ingredients and performed the magic herself, leaving them all bristling with power. "You remember the procedure?"

Martel nodded. "Boil the water. Keep stirring." That part, at least, was easy enough.

"Yes. As you do, try to connect with the magic as it appears in the cauldron. Get a sense for how it flows and moves in the water. When you are done, you will have to distil it into the bottle."

"Yes, mistress." Lighting a fire in the hearth with a casual spell, Martel prepared to prove his potion.

The third time around, the novelty had worn off. While it was still fascinating to watch the glow of magic in the pot, Martel knew to expect it, and he still had to spend more than two hours just staring. He could not spend the time practising his spellwork with the ingredients, as he had to try and connect with the magic floating in the water; not that he quite grasped what that meant. He

could certainly reach out and feel the heat from the boiling liquid, and he knew it contained power same as when he held a potion in his hand. But he was unsure how to do anything with it. Much like sticking his hand in a brook, he might feel the water flowing past his fingers, but he could not grip it or do anything with it.

At length, Mistress Rana appeared. "Good. We are ready." She brought over the metal holder with a bottle attached to it. "I shall pour. Your sole task is to connect with the magic bubbling in the cauldron and push it into the vial. Get as much as possible for the strongest concentration."

The command was simple, unlike the execution. Still, Martel prepared himself, extending talent towards the pot and its contents, trying to grab hold of it in magical terms like he might a puddle of water in the street or a pebble on the ground.

With some cloth to protect her hands, Mistress Rana grabbed the cauldron and began pouring.

The water flowed easily; the magic did not. Panicking, Martel tried to reinforce his connection with spellpower pouring into it. As the only consequence, the water began boiling again with steam rising.

His efforts in vain, the glow in the pot faded as the magic evaporated. Nothing but warm water ever reached the bottle.

Setting the cauldron aside, Mistress Rana looked at their failed work. "You are welcome to take that home if you wish. Not that it has much use. But first, clean up your workstation."

With a faint sigh of disappointment, Martel did so.