

## Firebrand 291

### Chapter 291: Gemstone

#### Gemstone

Learning Sindhian alchemy felt like when he first arrived at the Lyceum, struggling to acquire even the simplest control over his magic. He could create a few effects, use his powers a little, but none of it actually helped him accomplish what he was meant to do.

Nora did her best to encourage him, explaining it had taken her almost a month before she had cracked it. Martel had not been trying that long yet, so it was too early to despair. He would have to devote his spare hours to more practice. He wished that he could afford the few tools and items needed to try making potions on his own, but given that half his wages went to paying for Julia's room, Martel would have to make do without. And as for this Soliday, rather than practise, he had an engagement to meet.

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With a staff borrowed from the school's armoury, Martel went once more to The River Pearl. This time, he did not have to announce his arrival; as soon as he stepped through the doors, a guard waved at him and gestured for the mage to follow.

Instead of going deeper into the complex, Martel was taken through a nearby door to reach a courtyard on the other side of the building. A carriage stood, painted in colours though notably lacking an insignia, showing it did not belong to any nobility. A handful of guards milled about as did the driver, smoking a pipe in the cold.

They greeted Martel with small nods at most, keeping their distance. Either because he was not of their number or because he was a wizard; perhaps both. Not that Martel cared much. He had no intentions of befriending them.

A woman joined them, though not the Lady Pearl herself. She was younger and most notably had hair, auburn in colour. As for her clothes, she wore an expensive, fur-lined cloak with a dress underneath that sat tight around her form, unlike the more flowing garments favoured by her mistress.

The woman's appearance reminded Martel that during the meeting in the Undercroft, Lady Pearl had been attended only by other women. Yet here, her guards seemed like ordinary men; the typical brawlers that filled Morcaster.

While Martel tried not to stare at the newcomer, she had no such reservations, scrutinising him unabashedly. He was almost grateful when Lady Pearl arrived. "You are all here," she remarked with her usual wide smile. "Let us not tarry." She stepped into the carriage, followed by the young woman.

Meanwhile, the driver climbed up, and the guards formed a square around the wagon. As for Martel, he walked over to stand alongside the horses, content to walk by himself.

"Oh no, master wizard, it would not do to have you trudge around like a commoner. Please, come and be seated."

Not sure how he felt about the invitation, Martel deposited his staff underneath the driver's seat and climbed into the carriage, sitting down on the empty side opposite Lady Pearl and her attendant.

"Ruby, you've yet to meet Master Martel."

The redhaired woman smiled like a peddler sizing up a naïve customer. "The vaunted battlemage. So young."

"They train them early at the castle," Lady Pearl said.

Eager to steer the conversation away from himself, Martel decided to learn what he could about what lay ahead. "Can you tell me the details of this meeting, milady?"

"He is so polite. One reason I like him," Lady Pearl told her attendant. "Naturally, darling. You are familiar with the Island Trading Consortium, I take it."

He was not, but revealing ignorance could be a weakness, so Martel simply nodded.

"You can imagine the amount of silk I buy, keeping my gems in suitable clothing." She pinched Ruby's cheek. "Not to mention many other purposes. Now the dreadful Consortium has a stranglehold on the trade, but this enterprising fellow has promised to sell me bolts and bolts of silk at half price."

"How can he do that?"

"By cheating both the Consortium and the Asterian toll collectors, I can only assume. Any details of what happens beyond our shores, I leave to him," Lady Pearl continued. "My interest is only once the goods reach land, specifically Smallport. So the good fellow will give us a little tour of his warehouse, we'll talk business a while, and so on. Really, the meeting is for us both to get a feel of the other person."

A warehouse as the meeting location, agreed upon in advance. That gave this trader plenty of time to set up an ambush. Martel tried to consider what to do if it came to a fight. In such confined spaces, archers would not be of much use, except maybe one or two inside to start the ambush, and a few outside to prevent any from fleeing.

If arrows came against Lady Pearl, Martel would not be able to do much; his magical shield could protect himself, but not anybody else. He could stand in front of her, maybe. But really, the best would be to leave the fighting to her guards and get the woman out, as long as he went first in case of archers outside.

Of course, if she happened to die despite Martel's efforts, she could not very well complain about his failure, being dead and all. Perhaps he should think mostly about keeping himself safe.

"What is our wizard thinking, would you say?" Lady Pearl asked of Ruby. "He seems awfully pensive, and quiet."

"No doubt great and important matters," the redhaired woman replied with a teasing voice. "Though he has the look of someone planning his next move. Calculating."

Realising they spoke about him, and caught off-guard, Martel stared from one woman to the other. Well, sometimes the best defensive spell was an offensive spell. "What of you, Ruby? What purpose do you serve for your mistress?"

"My dear gem is a good distraction." Pearl patted her attendant's arm. "Men find it harder to focus on business when distracted by thoughts of what comes after."

Ruby's only response was to wink. Looking through the opening of the carriage door, Martel saw the gate as they rumbled by, leaving Morcaster to travel on the narrow road to Smallport.

## Chapter 292: Silken Negotiations

### Silken Negotiations

Arriving at the small port that lay just outside the capital, where the river met the sea, Martel remembered his last trip to the place with the Night Knives. That journey had ended with them being ambushed on the return, so he kept his eyes open this time.

Not that he expected anything to happen while still on the streets; the city guards maintained a good presence in Smallport, and given its size, a patrol would never be far away. Added to that, the amount of people and traffic moving around made it difficult to accomplish a coordinated attack. Still, he kept watch for signs that might give him early warning of anything about to happen.

The carriage continued past the walls into the small harbour itself and what was basically a small town of its own, coming to a halt at one of the squares. The door to their transport opened, and the guard helped Lady Pearl descend to the street. Ruby followed with a mischievous look at Martel, who exited last.

"The ineffable Lady Pearl! Consider me charmed."

They all turned towards the speaker, a short man dressed dashingly in a doublet and black leather trousers. His hat, which he removed with an elegant bow, carried a large feather. While his clothes looked Asterian, he spoke the language with an accent unknown to Martel, and whereas most people here had brown eyes, his were entirely black.

"Master Domitian, I take it." Lady Pearl smiled as she extended a hand, which the man kissed. "An Asterian name for an islander. Curious."

"Whatever helps facilitate trade. Such is the Consortium's philosophy. In that spirit, may I offer the lady a drop of wine as refreshment? And perhaps cups of ale for her retinue."

"Most kind. You have a place for us to retire to?"

The islander nodded with a smile and made a sweeping gesture towards the tavern behind him. As he walked inside, Martel noticed another following, dressed as a clerk and looking rather self-effacing. Probably not an assassin, unless he played the role exceedingly well.

Inside, this Domitian sat at the table, as did Lady Pearl. Her guards walked up to the bar, drinking their ale, while cups of wine were brought to the table. Four in total, including one for him and Ruby. It seemed they were counted as part of the refined company, unlike the guards. Martel left his untouched; he noticed Ruby did not drink hers either.

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Conversation between Domitian and Lady Pearl continued for a while, consisting mostly of pleasantries and a few allusions to business that went over Martel's head. He saw no weapons on the man; he wore plenty of jewellery, all of it golden in colour. Nothing to indicate an intent to harm, though, unless perhaps he hid something magical on his person. Martel wanted to extend his own

sixth sense and get a feel, but inside the tavern packed with people, he would not be able to sort out the impressions. He would have to wait for an opportunity.

That came after a while. "If you feel ready, might I suggest a brief tour of my facilities? You can also inspect a sample of the merchandise," Domitian suggested.

Lady Pearl inclined her head in acknowledgement, and the two rose from the table. They all left, following the islander's lead out of the building. Martel did his best to stay close to Lady Pearl while keeping sharp watch of their surroundings as they progressed.

After a while, they entered a small warehouse; or rather, a part of it. The building itself was far larger than what they had access to, acting as a storage facility for any number of merchants that each had their own separate space. "The goods will remain here until your people are ready to pick them up. The building is under guard day and night. While the space is small, it will be more than adequate for our purposes, given the size of the goods."

"I have no doubt any warehouse in Smallport will suffice," Lady Pearl said, her voice affable yet conveying a desire to move on. "I care less about the location of the goods and more about the quality."

The islander bowed his head. "Of course." He moved towards a small chest in the back of the room; the only item present, in fact.

Martel glanced around meanwhile. The space was too small to hide any assailants. And it opened up to a wide street outside, which likewise made for a poor ambush site. Unless the islander pulled out a knife or something from the chest, it seemed Martel's suspicions were for naught.

Turning around, Domitian revealed his hands holding a thin bolt of fabric. He handed it over to Lady Pearl, who rubbed it between her fingers. Passing the cloth on to Ruby, she looked at their host. "And the details?"

"Five bolts next month, and ten every month after that."

"And the price? As offered, and only upon delivery?"

Domitian inclined his head. "Exactly."

Martel let his magic extend forward in case he had missed something. Nothing in the warehouse itself reached him. As for the islander, Martel sensed his body heat as expected, from top to toe, and nothing else. Same with the silk in Ruby's hands; ordinary fabric in terms of magic.

"As promised, the very finest all the way from Cathai. Are we satisfied?" Domitian asked.

"For now. You shall have my answer by letter soon," Lady Pearl told him.

With a round of pleasantries and farewells exchanged, they parted ways.

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As the carriage rumbled through Smallport, taking them back to Morcaster, Martel was a little surprised; all his suspicions had been for naught. At least his obligations toward Lady Pearl had been met. He would have time tonight to practice some of his spellwork.

He became aware that the two women in the carriage stared at him. They had been discussing the meeting, which he had not paid any attention to, and now they looked expectantly at him. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"Wizards really do have their heads in the clouds," Ruby teased.

"The silk. Or the man himself, for that matter. Did you notice any sign of magic on him? Anything to suggest he may have fooled our senses," Lady Pearl asked.

"None at all. You saw both the fabric and him. Not the tiniest shine or glow of magic on any of them." Martel looked out the window again, his mind distracted.

The women glanced at each other and chuckled. "Darling, did you think us mere mortals can see the signs of magic? No more than we can see the air," Lady Pearl informed him.

Martel frowned for a moment, digesting this. Obviously, magical effects were visible to everyone, such as when he summoned a flame. But magic itself, raw rather than bound into an element – the thought had just never crossed Martel's mind, as he had never really considered the nature of magic. That it existed by itself, invisible except to those touched by it.

"I don't suppose any magical artefacts on his person would work with all his golden jewellery," Ruby considered.

"Oh no, none of it is real. I guess it must be brass," Martel speculated. "I can say with certainty he wore neither magic nor gold."

Lady Pearl gave him a sharp look. "You are certain?"

"Believe me, as a mage, I would have known. You can't hide gold from a wizard," he insisted, eager to regain some of his standing.

"Now that is curious. A man claiming to deal in silk from Cathai, yet unable to afford real jewellery? Darling, I think you answered a valuable question for me."

Martel was unsure what she meant, his thoughts already elsewhere, and he did not feel like asking; he spent the remainder of the journey in silence, trying to ignore Ruby's scrutinising gaze.

## Chapter 293: Gracious as a Scarecrow

### Gracious as a Scarecrow

With his obligations towards Lady Pearl fulfilled, Martel could focus on his schoolwork again, in particular alchemy. Eager for any advantage he might gain unlocking the Sindhian craft, Martel's thoughts turned towards the library, which might contain tomes on alchemy that could help him; he had not investigated the books on the upper floors, where the real knowledge was shelved. Unfortunately, by the time he returned to the Lyceum, the librarian had left his post, and Martel still needed him to get past the inner doors. Hopefully soon, he would begin learning Tyrian runes.

Thus, Martel's visit to the library took place the next day, in between his lessons in fire magic. With a little assistance on where to look, Martel found the shelf containing all the volumes of alchemy. Choosing the largest one, he sat down and began to read.

It did not take him long to realise his error. The book dealt with Asterian alchemy, which focused on the elements and how they related to various ingredients, combining them to obtain the desired outcome. All very interesting, but useless for someone learning Sindhian alchemy. This

accomplished nothing besides confusing him further, and he closed the pages. Not feeling particularly hopeful, Martel looked through all the other tomes on the topic. Same result. They only dealt with how Asterian alchemists worked. Sighing, Martel replaced the books on the shelves and left the library.

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His second lesson in fire magic came and went. They still practised basic spells, which seemed unnecessary to Martel. He could not imagine himself improving much anymore when it came to casting a fire bolt. The magic came to him swiftly and reliably; if his attack missed, it was more to do with his aim. Maybe that was what they were supposed to train, but Martel would much rather learn more spells or at least practice his existing ones. But he suffered no illusions that he could in any way persuade Moira to change her teachings. The mere suggestion might earn him detention.

At supper, he ate with a voracious appetite thanks to all the training, paying little attention as Maximilian pontificated on various matters.

"You coming to the Chamber of Earth tonight?" The mageknight stopped talking, keeping his eyes on the fire acolyte.

Chewing on asparagus, Martel slowly swallowed to buy some time until Maximilian's question sank in. "Oh, I hadn't given it much thought. I practice combat six bells a fiveday, which feels like enough. Besides, the sparring done in the chamber is too casual to learn anything."

"Well, some of the mageknights are still sore about the other day. One of them, Julian of Sangmer, claims he can beat you if only given the opportunity."

Martel frowned in thought. From what he remembered, Julian was a protector, so the fire acolyte had never fought against him. He had fought alongside him, and the mageknight had failed to impress. Not necessarily a bad warrior, but hardly impressive compared to others or a threat to someone of Martel's skills, the way Eleanor would be. "Pretty sure I could take him down in three spells or less."

"Now you have to prove it," Maximilian claimed with a smirk on his face. "Or will you let this pompous bastard continue to claim he could beat the infamous Scarecrow without breaking a sweat?"

Martel glanced across the dining hall to where Julian sat, stuffing food into his mouth. He sounded like another noble who thought that his blood somehow made him a better mage, despite all evidence to the contrary. "I guess I got time to cast three spells."

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In the evening, Martel went to the Chamber of Earth as promised. He found the usual assortment of acolytes, numbering a score in total. About half of them were mageknights. Of the elemental mages, Martel was the only one in red. The other battlemages seemed to share his sentiment that there was little gained practising down here, compared to the gruelling hours that Moira put them through.

Many of the acolytes present glanced at him as he arrived, with a variety of expressions. Some looked excited or expectant, while others seemed disdainful or arrogant in their demeanour towards him. Martel ignored them.

Maximilian appeared by his side, handing him a staff. "Ready to show them the error of their judgement?" The mageknight already wore a grin.

Martel hefted the weapon in his hands. "Where is he?" The sooner this was done, the sooner he could go back to his chamber and do his Sindhian exercises.

Julian pushed his way through some of the acolytes to stand in front of the battlemage. He was of average height, but with a broad build, carrying an axe. Strong, but inelegant in his movements. Fighting more like a bull than a cat, which worked for a berserker, but not a protector. "Ready to fight me, Scarecrow?"

Martel sighed. He thought he had escaped that nickname, but he realised its absence was only because most of his classes as a novice had been solitary. Now as an acolyte, he was unfortunately subjugated to the regular company of his peers. "Just attack and let's get this over with."

Julian acted or reacted as expected. He quickly stepped forward, almost running to close the distance between them as he raised his axe for a heavy blow. Even blunted, it would leave a painful mark if it connected as intended.

Martel raised his shield to take the blow and pushed his staff forward and down to entangle itself between the mageknight's legs. The axe was held back by the magic, and with his clumsy momentum, Julian could not stop in time to regain his footing. The only thing left for Martel to do was to take a step to the side, avoiding the mageknight crashing into him. Instead, the stocky warrior fell flat on the ground, his own weapons preventing him from breaking the fall.

"Only took one spell."

As the acolytes laughed, Martel handed the staff back to Maximilian.

## Chapter 294: The Glow of an Idea

### The Glow of an Idea

Malday meant another encounter with the mageknights, though not until his second combat lesson. Before noon, Martel practised staff fighting as usual with the other battlemages. He had long since abandoned the notion that this would be anything other than a waste of time. Despite how staff fighting had helped them win their brawl against the mageknights last time, the other acolytes seemed to still consider training with weapons to be beneath them. As probably the only one with experience in actual combat, Martel knew better, just as he had shown during the fight with the mageknights; but his attempts to explain this fell on deaf ears.

So he showed them instead. Their half-hearted approach to practising empowerment also left them slow at raising their shields, which more than once left them at Martel's mercy whenever he outmanoeuvred them to attack twice in succession, landing a blow somewhere painful.

Martel knew that complaining to Reynard would lead nowhere. Not because like Moira, the teacher believed he knew best, but simply because he did not care. He could ask Reynard to spar with him instead of fighting the other students, which would certainly provide the challenge he lacked. Unfortunately, Martel suspected that Reynard would take umbrage at this, perceive it to be a slight or challenge of some sort, and use the sparring to thrash Martel. Despite his success against the acolytes, Martel knew he stood no chance against the Master of War in a contest of arms.

So Martel continued, defeating the other three again and again, earning spiteful looks and mumbled insults in return. After a full bell, each of them had bruises and aching spots. They should be grateful for the opportunity to learn from a better fighter, but instead, they only seemed to be resentful towards him. Whatever understanding had been found on a previous Malday, uniting the fire acolytes against the mageknights, it seemed to have been short-lived.

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The second lesson fared much the same. They performed practices and duels with the mageknights left unsupervised; as long as they took their positions as Reynard dictated, he did not care about their performance.

The only change Martel noticed came from some of the black-clad acolytes rather than those in red robes. Julian glared at him from time to time when their eyes met; his humiliation last night did not sit well with him, obviously. Others among the warriors likewise glanced in his direction, exchanging words. Martel imagined most were insults; they had plenty to choose from between his Tyrian blood, village upbringing, and elemental magic, all of which these noble-blooded mageknights seemed to find inferior.

Martel cared little, though he was surprised to see Maximilian stray into their conversation. But he gave his friend the benefit of the doubt; if nothing else, Maximilian was earnest in his dealings and would not act like a friend to his face while slandering him behind his back. Maybe he was telling the other mageknights they were wrong in their assessment of Martel, or at the very least that they underestimated him at their own peril.

Too concerned with his own affairs to worry about theirs, Martel went to the baths after training and enjoyed the warm water. After supper, where he scavenged some of the food to take with him, he went to the harbour district.

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Julia let him in and accepted the food. While she chewed her way through the boiled vegetables, Martel stood by the small window that allowed light into the room. A shutter kept the cold at bay, though it did not close perfectly, leaving little gaps where wind crept through. "I brought something different. In case it gets really cold one night." Martel withdrew a small potion of warmth from his robe and placed it on the floor next to her water jar. "This is an elixir with a bit of magic to it. It will keep you warm if you really need it, though it only lasts one night and one day. Sorry I don't have more. I'd bring you one for every night if I could."

Julia picked up the vial, examining its contents.

To Martel, the liquid inside glowed orange, much like a flame inside a lantern. Yet remembering his conversation with Lady Pearl and Ruby, he realised others would not see it that way. "What colour is that to you?"

"Not much colour at all. Brown? Hard to see without more light."

Julia's mother might have been an alchemist, but it did not seem to have been inherited. Which fit with what Master Fenrick had told him; none could predict who was gifted with magic. Certainly blood did not seem to matter at all.

"You made this?" Her big eyes turned from the vial towards him.



"I did. Well, with help from my teacher. That's why I can't make more. I'm still learning," Martel admitted. He dearly wished he had his own little workshop where he might practice. It was already taking him ages to learn how to suffuse the magic in the ingredients; if he could only practice the distillation process once a fiveday, he would be dead on a Khivan battlefield long before he made his first potion by himself.

"My mother did alchemy."

"I remember you told me."

"I helped her. Prepared the herbs and such. Cleaned her tools."

"If I had a workshop of my own, I'd be glad to employ you as my apprentice." Martel smiled at the thought.

While she finished eating, the idea slowly crept into his mind. He already paid for this chamber; presumably, Julia would not mind if he used it for the purpose of practising his alchemy. It would not involve other people, after all, nor should it draw much attention. It lacked a fireplace, of course, but he was a fire acolyte; he could heat up the cauldron directly if need be. The only hindrance, besides his lacking skills, would be the tools and supplies. Spending half his income just on the rent left him with little money. But as he had learned, for a mage, you could always find ways to earn coin. Only, given his troubles with Duke Cheval and the inquisitors, he just had to do it legally, for once.

## Chapter 295: Unexpected Light

### Unexpected Light

"Since the hours seem to fit us both, I decided to make our switch of lessons on Mandays permanent," Mistress Rana told him. "You will need to practice alchemy regularly, after all, so we might as well have a fixed day for it."

Martel inclined his head in agreement. "Sounds good, mistress." He definitely agreed that regular practice would be needed. He still felt far from any hope of actually brewing an elixir on his own.

His teacher left, and Martel resumed his work in the apothecary. Next to him, Nora glanced in his direction. They had not returned to the easy manner of their first months together, but at least they were on speaking terms. "How's your efforts with the reagents?"

He figured she did not ask about the batch of seeds he currently ground into powder. "Same as last, I guess. It's like reading a sentence in the book where I understand the words, yet I can't make meaning of it. It just escapes me."

"It's difficult to change how your mind sees something. Like finding out someone is fire-touched, and you have always been told they are dangerous people without control over their magic," Nora remarked lightly. "Sometimes, it takes time spent in their company to see them differently. And there's no grand revelation. It's just moment after moment, hours of them, that slowly fill up like drops in the water clock until it's full."

"What's a water clock got to do with alchemy?" Martel asked, making sure to sound confused.

As Nora turned to look at him and saw the laughter on his face, she jabbed her elbow into his arm and resumed her work.

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In between meals and fire magic, Martel considered the question of earning money. The more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea of having his own little workshop where he could try recipes and practise his alchemy. As long as he stuck to what Mistress Rana taught him, he anticipated no danger. He could make potions of warmth for Julia every night while winter lasted.

He should probably ask his teacher whether there was such a thing as potion poisoning before convincing Julia to drink them daily.

But first, he needed silver, obtained through means that did not conflict with the laws of the city or the rules of the Lyceum. Martel made a mental list of all the ways he had made money so far.

Working for Master Jerome. Always an option, though the work seemed sporadic, especially in winter, and only paid one silver per bell. A last resort, but unlikely to yield enough for his purposes.

Using magic to cheat at gambling. No.

Using magic to win prize fights in the city. No.

Working as a mercenary with the Night Knives. Not always illegal tasks, but definitely something that would get him in trouble with the Lyceum. And given he nearly got caught by inquisitors the last time, the prospect was simply too dangerous regardless of legalities.

While he had not made money from it as such, his knowledge of herbal remedies could earn him an income as an apothecary. Unfortunately, against the law and his promise to Mistress Rana. He doubted she would defend him a second time in front of the Apothecary Guild.

Martel needed to think of new ways. He was by now rather skilled at preparing ingredients and the like. If he simply sold the labour of his hands rather than the fruits of his knowledge to any apothecary or alchemist short on apprentices, that might not ruffle any feathers. Of course, Martel already did this for a full bell just about every day working at the Lyceum's apothecary, plus another bell on Soldays working for Master Jerome; the thought of doing it during his spare afternoons or evenings felt gruelling.

Perhaps he simply needed inspiration. Possibly a walk among the workshops and craftsmen of Morcaster would give him ideas where his magic could provide a shortcut and be worth him selling his services.

He could do that on Solday when he had the afternoon off. For now, he grabbed the nearby coltsfoot to do his Sindhian exercise. No use having an alchemy workshop unless he could do alchemy.

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Looking at his Khivan clock showing the hour to be ten in the evening, Martel gave up on the exercise. It was time for sleep, and he had not made much progress regardless. He hoped that Nora's explanation proved true; that if he simply invested enough time, continued to try and try, it would eventually work out. Still, a little confirmation that he was improving would do much to bolster his confidence and motivation.

Giving it one last go, Martel closed his fingers around the herb. By now, he was so accustomed to how it felt in the palm of his hand, he barely noticed it. Which might even help; rather than his physical sense of touch, Martel focused on feeling the plant with his magic. Not looking for fire or

heat, not water or the lack thereof, not its connection to earth. Only the magic within, dormant but awaiting.

Martel let his magic flow into the herb. He could do anything to it now. Raise it into the air and float it around. Ignite it and burn it to a crisp. Instead, he slowly pulled his sensation of magic back into himself, trying to drag what force lay inside this dry twig along with it.

As he opened his hand, Martel saw the faint glow surround the plant, as much an effect of his own power as whatever lay inside. Once again, it struck him as strange how ordinary people could not see this. In some ways, they lacked a sense as if deaf or blind compared to him. The healing elixir stolen from Cheval, so expensive and so potent, had brimmed with power to Martel's touch. Yet to Weasel, it must have looked like swamp water or something.

Thinking about that, Martel suddenly felt bothered. Not about Weasel, but the vial with the healing liquid. Martel had not seen it used, but he had asked the urchins about it. It had worked as it should, yet a thought nagged him; something he had overlooked. Who had told him about it? Sparrow, the little girl who was taken by the maleficar last year. She had described it to him. Mentioned how the potion had glowed. Something that should have been invisible to her – unless she had magic.

## Chapter 296: The Power of a Potion

### The Power of a Potion

The next day saw Martel back in Mistress Rana's laboratory. Stepping inside and looking at the shelves lined with ingredients, he felt a little envious that she had the knowledge, skills, and equipment to pursue her alchemy while he lacked all three. And although every bell spent in this place ostensibly helped to remedy that, they remained outside his grasp; the last in particular, unless he could think of ways to earn more coin. Though before he went down that path, it might be wise to ask Mistress Rana first for any aid; she was his teacher, after all.

First, the little ritual of Martel failing to awaken the magic in the reagents. Mistress Rana made no remark but simply did the task herself, making every ingredient light up with power. Quietly, Martel set to work, lighting a fire and starting the brewing process.

While stirring, he glanced at the alchemist. She seemed to do rather basic tasks such as preparing reagents, except she used strange tools, and she did not work on plants or herbs, but rather what looked like pieces of animals. For a while, she stood grating a horn into powder, and later, he watched her wield a black knife to cut a stone into bits. He wondered why she did this herself rather than have her apprentice attend to such labours; perhaps the rarity of the ingredients or the tools meant she would not allow others to do it.

Waiting until the alchemist paused between tasks, Martel decided to ask. "Mistress Rana, I was wondering..."

"What?"

"I think the more time I spend working, the quicker I'll learn. I wondered if I might borrow a pot and some herbs, so I can practise more often."

"No. You are not anywhere near ready to attempt to make an elixir on your own," she replied sharply. "A small misstep can turn a potion into poison, and you are not even aware of the possible pitfalls. You will only work under my direct supervision, is that clear?"

"Yes, mistress." Even as he said it, Martel saw no harm in working on his own, as long as he only did exactly as he had been taught. If in doubt, he could always throw the results of his brewing away. His main intention was to improve his skills, after all.

"Keep stirring."

Martel swirled the ladle swiftly.

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Mistress Rana walked over to look at his progress. The boiling and brewing were done; now came the hardest part. "Connect with the power in the cauldron," she told him. "Guide it to where you want it to be." She grabbed the pot from the fireplace while he attempted to do as told.

Letting his magical senses extend, he felt the magic broiling around easily enough. But trying to contain it went the same way as before, as it slipped through the tendrils of his power.

Mistress Rana began to pour. Rather than directly control the magic in the water, Martel imagined his own power like a pair of hands pushing the glowing liquid where he wanted it to go. Drops of it followed, but not nearly enough.

Suddenly, the rest of it followed. Martel stood surprised for a moment until he realised his teacher had stepped in.

"No reason to let your hours go to waste. Did you use the last one I gave you?" she asked.

Martel nodded. While he had not drunk the potion personally, he had found a use for it. And he had purpose for this as well.

"Very well." She handed it over. "Your wages for this fiveday are on the table over there. I will see you next Manday."

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Potion in his pocket, Martel walked towards the copper lanes. His money lay in the drawer in his room; he probably had enough to buy the necessities for this kind of basic alchemy, but he was reluctant to spend it straight away. He needed fifteen silvers by the end of the month to pay for Julia's room. While that was still several fivedays away, Martel had learned that emergencies could easily occur and require all of his available coin. He would feel more comfortable spending what little he had if he knew how to replace it swiftly.

Reaching the home of the urchins, Martel went inside. He noted with satisfaction that a fire burned from the fuel he had bought for them. The children greeted him happily as always.

"I am happy to see you as well." The mage looked around, especially towards the stairs leading up. Usually, Weasel appeared as soon as he entered. "Where is your fearless leader this evening?"

Some of the children laughed. "Weasel is on a job. Stalking a mark," Badger informed him.

That probably made this easier. "What about Sparrow? Is she home?"

"She always is. What do you want with her?"

"I just have a simple question for her. Could one of you fetch her for me?"

Someone ran off, scurrying upstairs, while Martel sat down by the table. Using the waiting time, he pulled out the potion from his robes. Holding it between his thumb and index finger, he showed the small glass bottle to the children. "What colour is this?"

They had all looked with interest as he pulled it out, but their attention quickly waned. "Just looks like dirty water."

"Gray?"

"Sort of brown."

One of the children returned with Sparrow. "What's going on?"

Martel held out the vial towards her. "What colour is this?"

The little girl gave it a curious look. "Kind of yellow. Looks a bit like the fire." She glanced at the flames burning in the cooking hearth.

"Why does it look different to her?" asked Mouse. "What does it mean?"

Possibly many things, though Martel could not say what exactly. And he needed to be certain before filling the girl's head with ideas. Find a more reliable way to test if Sparrow had magic. He realised that he should have looked more into this topic, prepared himself better before rushing down here. "It means I'll be coming back." Martel gave what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

## Chapter 297: Trampled

### Trampled

It would be obvious to ask his teachers how exactly children were tested for magic. After all, they had to do so regularly to find their next students. If nothing else, the overseer had to know everything worth knowing. Yet Martel hesitated to ask her or anyone else at the Lyceum. Even if Mistress Juliana, or Master Alastair for that matter, had been willing to keep Martel's secret hidden from everyone, he could not assume anything about how they might treat Sparrow.

In their eyes, perhaps all with the gift of magic belonged at the Lyceum no matter what, and Martel felt that the choice should in the end belong to the girl herself. Especially if she proved to be adept with fire; Martel saw no reason to risk that she suffer the same fate he had.

But first, the question remained whether he could be mistaken. This time, he did not hesitate consulting the library. It contained only a single volume on how an aptitude for magic could be discerned in children; presumably, the lore masters of Aster cared more about what could be done with magic than necessarily how it was discovered.

Reading through the book, Martel realised that most of this did not help him. The text referenced a variety of tools or equipment unavailable to him, spoke of strange measurements he did not understand, or involved spells and experiments that frankly seemed dangerous.

Putting the tome to the side, Martel thought back on his own entrance to the Lyceum. Thanks to his knowledge acquired since, he could look back and understand what had happened. Mistress Juliana had simply checked whether he could exert direct control over any of the elements. Being fire touched had allowed him to do so, and that had been the end of it. No need for more testing.

But Sparrow's talent might not be so easily revealed. She was much younger than Martel had been. Perhaps rather than gifted with elements, she might be adept with empowerment. Martel had no idea how to look for that. Maybe it showed itself as her being faster or stronger than other children her age, but that seemed rather difficult to measure.

On the other hand, even Martel's meagre skills in arithmetic told him that if Sparrow did possess magic, odds suggested it would manifest itself as elemental. He would begin by making the test that Mistress Juliana had given him. If nothing happened, he would have to re-evaluate. As a very last resort, he could ask one of his teachers, but he would exhaust his other options first.

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Walking once again down to the copper lanes, Martel considered what he would do if Sparrow did possess magic. Depending on her gift, he could tell her of the possible careers she might have if she joined the Lyceum. Other than becoming a battlemage, he assumed any of them would be preferable to how her future currently looked. Besides everything that learning magic would do for her, it would also immediately mean a warm home and regular meals every day. He could not imagine she would turn such an opportunity down.

Just before Martel reached his destination, he bent down and dug up some of the dirt from the ground. Stamped hard by hundreds of feet, it took some effort, and it remained a solid lump in his hand. Using his magic, he turned it into a loose pile, assuming that would be easier for someone untrained to affect with their raw skill, if she had any.

Continuing inside, the children greeted him. "We didn't realise you'd be back already tonight."

Martel placed the pile of earth on the table, eliciting strange looks. He withdrew an empty bottle containing only air from a pocket and placed it next to it. "Fetch me a cup of water, please. And ask Sparrow to come down."

His hosts quickly complied, though several of them exchanged curious glances and mutterings. Meanwhile, Martel took a twig and set the end on fire.

Sparrow appeared. "What's this?"

"A game of sorts. I want to see what you can do," Martel told her. "For instance, just by thinking about it, concentrating really hard, can you make this flame move?" He held the burning branch a little closer to her.

"Of course I can't," she replied, almost indignant.

"Even so, please try. For my sake."

"Can I try?" Badger asked.

"If you do so silently."

Sparrow stared at the flame, but nothing happened. She was not fire-touched, at least. Martel felt a touch of relief at that. He placed the twig in the fireplace and turned back at the items lying on the table. "What about the cup? If you try, can you make the water inside move?"

The girl gave a defeated shrug. "I don't know how."

"Even so, just try."

Sighing, Sparrow stared with open eyes and a slightly exasperated expression. Martel walked over and glanced down in the cup. The water remained undisturbed. "Alright. What about the dirt. Can you move it?"

"This game is not fun at all."

"We are halfway done," he promised.

Hands on her hips, Sparrow looked towards the small pile. And Martel saw it. Like the flimsiest sparks. The grains of earth glowed and flew through the air to hit Sparrow in the face. All of the children watched with open mouths.

"What happened?" the small girl finally asked.

Martel knelt down to look her in the eyes. "You can do magic, Sparrow."

"What's going on here?" Despite his young age, Weasel spoke with anger that belied his small stature. "Don't enter my house and talk to my people when I'm away!"

Martel rose up. "They are not your prisoners. And Sparrow has some opportunities she deserves to know about."

"That's not for you to decide. I'm keeping them safe," Weasel retorted. "Sparrow has suffered enough from you wizard lot."

While that last barb felt unfair, it stung nonetheless. Martel had not forgotten about the maleficar, or how he had taken Sparrow. "I just want to help."

"Yeah, like we've never heard that before. Get out." Weasel stared at him with hard eyes.

It felt almost comical; the boy was half Martel's size. Add his magic to the equation, nobody here could make the mage do anything against his will. But going against Weasel right now might lose him Sparrow's trust. This was not a battle he would win regardless of all the power at his disposal. Glancing around at the children, most of whom looked disturbed, Martel finally left the ramshackle house.

## Chapter 298: School Interview

### School Interview

Despite a busy Pelday ahead of him, Martel was not going to let the matter of Sparrow rest. She could this very night be safe and warm inside the Lyceum with a bright future ahead of her. The only question was how to speak with her and present this opportunity without Weasel interfering. Martel had an idea that might work, but first, he had to attend his classes. He would have to go tonight as soon as the supper bell rang, foregoing the last meal; for that reason, he made sure to eat all he could at dinner.

Checking for messages in the entrance hall, he found one waiting for him.

Master Martel,

I was intrigued by the skills and knowledge at your disposal. If you found our last outing together pleasing, without breaking any of your conditions, I would ask that you pay me a visit at my establishment within the next day or two.

Lady Pearl

Despite the vague wording, Martel guessed this was an offer of work. He could not decipher what the nature of this labour might be, but if anything like their journey to Smallport, it would probably not be onerous. And if it paid well, it might solve Martel's question of how to afford his alchemical supplies.

At the same time, Martel was aware of how these things started. A small task that seemed innocuous became another, and before he knew it, inquisitors were chasing him through the streets of Morcaster.

Had the message come from Kerra, he would have tossed it away. But despite her gaudy clothes and painted face, all of which would have been highly scandalous in Engby, Martel felt that Lady Pearl seemed more trustworthy than her counterpart in the copper lanes. Perhaps it was all deceit, and he was being blind; certainly he had underestimated how devious Kerra could be. But his instincts told him that Lady Pearl was a different sort. He might be wrong about that, but he would do the woman the courtesy of hearing out her proposal.

But first, he would spend the remainder of the dinner bell practising his Sindhian skills; later, another lesson in fire magic loomed.

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His lessons done for the day, Martel went straight to his room and got dressed for the outdoors. Leaving the dormitory tower, he crossed through the common room at the ground level when a voice called out to him. "Nordmark, where are you headed?"

Martel turned around to see Maximilian get up from a table with other mageknights. He guessed that they were gambling looking at the small stacks of coins in front of them. "I have some business in town."

"Before supper? Are you back soon?"

"No, I'm gone for the evening. Why?" Martel looked at his friend inquisitively. It was rather late to be making plans if he wanted to go carousing or such.

"I thought you'd be at the sparring matches tonight."

Right, every Pelday evening. "I can't tonight. Pressing business."

Maximilian grinned. "Are we talking female company?"

Martel simply smiled, letting the mageknight infer what he wanted. It was better than explaining in a crowded room how he had discovered an orphan with the gift of magic and was trying to convince her to attend the Lyceum. "I'll see you tomorrow for class, yeah?" With a quick nod, Martel resumed his departure.

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Despite his ultimate destination being in the copper lanes, Martel hurried towards the docks. The sun was setting, which added to his urgency. Not because he feared the cold, but because his opportunity to speak with Sparrow would not be long at the harbour after dark.

Hoping he had made it in time, Martel steered towards one of the few ships that had made berth today and was in the process of being unloaded. As the dockworkers hauled crates from the hold of the ship, stacking them on the piers, Martel watched a shadow darting in between.



As he approached the shipment, some of the labourers glanced in his direction, but none of them spoke or barred his way; his clothing made it clear he was not a thief. Taking a seat on one of the crates, Martel looked out on the waters. "How's business, Mouse?"

Behind him, he sensed movement, but only because he used magic to feel the heat; the little girl moved silently. "Would be better if you let me to work."

"I'll do you even better than that. I got a silver bird for you if you do me a favour. Come along with me." Martel got up and walked from the pier to the harbour itself.

Soon after, a small shape appeared by his side. "How did you find me?" Mouse crossed her arms, giving him a sceptical look. "Did you use magic?"

Martel laughed a little. "You once told me these are your hunting grounds. I do listen when you tell me things."

"What about my silver?"

He pulled out a coin. "This is yours if you will go with me to the copper lanes and deliver a message."

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An hour later, Martel sat on some debris at the corner between a busy street and the alleyway that led to Weasel's home. Being in the copper lanes, the only illumination was the moon, occasionally clouded.

"Mouse said you'd give me a bird if I spoke to you."

Martel looked up to see Sparrow in the alley, and he pulled out his second silver coin of the evening. "Certainly." He extended his hand.

"You can just throw it."

He could not fault the small girl for being cautious. "I'll talk first, in that case, and throw it to you after."

"Alright. Get started."

"You have the gift of magic, Sparrow. You could be a wizard like me. Right now, we could go to my school together. They'd give you a room, food, and you'd learn how to do amazing things."

"And what'll it cost me?"

Martel was about to say nothing, but that would be wrong. She would have to serve the Empire. How to explain twenty years of servitude to a girl perhaps six or seven years old? "You will have to work for them. Use your magic to make roads, or build walls." What else did earthmages do? Martel had not really paid attention during those lessons.

"That sounds boring."

"Well, my friend Flora, you remember her? She can do the same as you. One time, we were running away, she just put up a big wall behind her, making all our pursuers look like fools trying to climb over." The last bit was Martel's invention, but it had the intended effect of making her laugh.

"There's one thing I can do already," Sparrow revealed, stepping closer. "I just didn't know it was – magic, like you can do."

"What is that?"

"If I put my hand on a lock, I can make it open. Comes in real useful sometimes."

"I bet."

"Weasel told me never to tell anyone though. He said if people found out, they'd take me away." She looked up at Martel, still keeping her distance. He got the impression of an animal ready to bolt at any sign of danger. "Like you want to do."

"Only if it's what you want. You can think about it, and I'll be back tomorrow same time. And if you need more time, or got more questions, I'll answer them all," Martel promised.

The pensive expression of a six or seven-year-old met him. "Alright. I'll think about it."

Before leaving, he flicked the coin to her.

## Chapter 299: Painful Observations

### Painful Observations

Another Malday, another lesson spent whacking the other fire acolytes with his staff. He could do it purely on routine, giving Martel time to think about his meeting tonight with Sparrow. If she refused, should he keep trying to persuade her? It seemed an obvious decision to him, choosing education and safety over her current precarious situation, but he could not fault her for being afraid of wizards. Perhaps he should have Flora speak with her. Meeting another mage, a woman who shared Sparrow's particular affinity, might work better to assuage the girl's fears.

On the other hand, perhaps Sparrow would jump at the chance, and Martel would not have to think more about it. He would find out tonight.

Before that, his second combat lesson awaited. As Martel and the elemental mages stood waiting for the class to begin, he heard Edward groan.

"What is it?"

The other acolyte simply nodded, and Martel looked in that direction. Moira had appeared, taking a seat on the stands. Another round of elemental mages versus mageknights awaited, with the threat of detention if they failed, if Martel remembered correctly. He did not have time for that, neither tonight nor any other. Besides meeting Sparrow, he had the invitation from Lady Pearl, and any remaining evenings were best spent working on his Sindhian magic.

"We should do like last time," Martel told the others. "William and I provide a defensive line. You two handle the offence."

"Fine." Harriet sounded irritated, but she agreed to the strategy all the same.

Reynard bade them take positions. "Begin!"

Eight mageknights rushed forward. Several of them took direct hits, stopping or slowing them down. Martel stepped forward with his staff, using its reach to provide a threat alongside his

defensive shield spell as needed. Behind him, fire bolts flew through the air when an opening presented itself.

Yet despite Martel's best efforts, his skills in weapons could not compete with those of a mageknight. And rather than focus all their efforts on him, one of them simply closed the distance and pushed all the way up against Martel. It did not knock him out of the fight, but it hemmed him in while other warriors slipped past him to engage Harriet and Edward behind. Their strategy outdone, the fire acolytes quickly lost.

With expressions ranging from defeat to fury, the elemental mages stared at each other. "So much for your defensive line," Harriet sneered at Martel. She had a bruise on her forehead where the pommel of a sword had taken her down.

"Judging by earlier today, you would not have done any better," he snapped back.

"It was always going to go this way," William declared. "They're twice our number. As soon as they figured out what we were doing, it was simple for them to outmanoeuvre us."

"Well, I don't hear any ideas from you," Martel retorted with frustration in his voice.

"I can't handle detention again," Edward whimpered. He held his hands on his stomach as if it ached, perhaps in anticipation of future agony. "I get it every five days."

"It's a wonder you haven't gotten used to it by now," Harriet scoffed.

"Enough talk!" Reynard shouted, interrupting them. "Ready to go again!"

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Regardless of his troubles with his lessons, Martel had a promise to keep. He would deal with detention when it actually happened; Moira had not said anything to them after the lesson had ended.

Thus, he set out from the castle, walking towards the copper lanes. As he did, he considered how exactly to go about bringing Sparrow in. They would want to test her, of course; he could not expect they would simply take Martel's word for it. The right person to see would be Mistress Juliana, presumably. By the time they got back, hopefully she would still be awake. Martel could take Sparrow straight to her chamber and explain the situation.

Reaching the alley, Martel found himself the same spot to sit as last night. He might have to wait a while. He should have brought a herb to practise his Sindhian magic, come to think of it. He wondered if he plucked one of the weeds growing in the dirt, he might use that instead.

"Hey."

That was fast. Perhaps she had been waiting for him. Martel turned to look at Sparrow. "Hey yourself. Did you think about my suggestion? Or do you have any more questions for me?"

Even before she answered, Martel could tell from her expression that he had failed. "I'm staying here."

She spoke nothing further but immediately retreated. Martel got on his feet, but before he could say anything to change her mind, another small shape appeared from the dark.

"You heard her. And don't ever try to steal one of my people again." Weasel spoke with such frost in his voice, Martel could scarcely believe someone so young could express cold hatred in this manner.

"She's not a dog you own. If you cared about her at all, you'd want her to take the life the Lyceum offers."

"But that would turn her into a dog exactly, wouldn't it? One of the Empire's hounds." Weasel looked up and down at Martel's robes as if offended by the red clothing of a battlemage. "No, Sparrow belongs with me."

"You knew all along she has magic," Martel shot back. "I bet she's the best at picking locks in your whole crew. Just one touch, and she can open anything. No wonder you want to keep her for yourself, even if it means she must starve and freeze."

"She gets food and a place to sleep in safety!" Weasel's voice and expression flared with fury. "And what she brings home helps provide the same for the others. But you don't care about any of them, do you? You never gave them a thought. You'd let the rest of us starve to death if you could get your hands on the one person you think has value." He spat on the ground.

Martel's retort died in his throat.

"Don't ever come back here, wizard. You're not welcome in our home." The little chief turned around and marched back into the alley.