

Firebrand

Chapter 30: Moving Parts

Moving Parts

"Today, we will discuss necromancy." Master Fenrick let his eyes sweep over the students. "What is a necromancer?"

Martel tasted the word. "Someone who does evil magic?"

"Partly correct, though not the exact term. That would be maleficar, which means to do evil. Not all of them are necromancers, though all necromancers would be considered maleficar and thus hunted by the Inquisition," Master Fenrick explained.

"So what is a necromancer?" asked a novice.

"A mage who deals with the dead. The living dead or undead, as they might also be called."

The children looked at each other. Even Martel felt a touch of discomfort.

"A necromancer studies how to reanimate the dead, for whatever fell purpose they might have. Though at times, due to other evil kinds of magic or curses, undead may occur without the intervention of a necromancer. Ghosts lingering on the site of battles, for instance," their teacher continued.

"How do you fight ghosts?"

"You don't," Master Fenrick told them pointedly. "Inquisitors have that dubious honour. The Archeans did train wizards specifically for this purpose, among them the spellbreakers – we have a statue of one out in the courtyard, even. Yet their powers far exceeded ours, and our magic seems impotent against such dangers. You cannot set a ghost on fire or strike it with your blade."

"Forgive me, Master Fenrick," said one novice more polite than most, "but why are we learning this if we can't do anything?"

"So you understand. So you are not tempted to play hero when tales of sinister creatures reach you," the teacher impressed upon them. "And who knows? Perhaps one of you will be inspired to study this field and improve our weapons against such evil creatures."

Master Fenrick looked around. With no further questions, he continued.

"As mentioned, the undead are a result of reanimation. Someone dead returned to a mimicry of life. If you remember our lesson last five days, a human being consists of three parts. They are?"

"Soul, mind, and body," Martel replied, earning him a nod from the teacher.

"The most basic form of necromancy is reanimating the body. The shell that remains when mind and soul are gone. These are the weakest kinds of undead. Walking corpses, skeletons, and such. Yet still you should beware." Master Fenrick's stern gaze moved from one student to another. "Reanimated by magic, even these creatures are resilient to magic."

"What are the others?" asked a novice.

"There are many kinds, alas. I have mentioned ghosts, which are the remains of the mind only. As necromancy most commonly reanimates the body first, such spectres are, as said, rarely the creation of a necromancer, but rather some disturbance of magic."

Martel sat ensorcelled. He had heard plenty of stories about evil creatures, including the undead, but hearing them discussed so clinically was another matter. He could not imagine what kind of evil mage would wish to disturb the dead and violate them in such a cruel manner.

"Vampires, who are fortunately rare if not extinct, seems to have been the result of both body and mind reanimated intact," Master Fenrick explained.

"Is there any undead with body, mind, and soul intact?" someone asked.

Their teacher paused before answering. "The lich. A mage made undead, thereby cheating death while retaining their spellcasting abilities. Be thankful those seem to have disappeared when Archen did."

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After lunch, Martel went to the market district. Even at early afternoon, it had plenty of visitors trading for the many unusual wares on offer during the faire. Weaving through the crowd, he reached the theatre. The stage stood empty, and people crossed where the benches lay; the next performance would not be until tonight.

Walking around the back where the troupe had the wagons that served as their home, Martel found some of the players eating. The storyteller looked up. "Back again, lad. Interested in a job?"

"No. I just wanted to see if Regnar was back."

The mood, already subdued, became tense. Some of the actors exchanged glances; others looked down. The boy in the bright clothes who collected payment began to sniff.

"He isn't. He won't be. So if you want his place, it's yours," the storyteller said.

"What happened? Why won't he be back?"

Again the tension could be felt, and the players seemed visibly uncomfortable. "He's been taken," one of them finally explained.

"Taken? Who took him?"

The storyteller shrugged. "Someone he owed money, I would think. A man came after last night's show. He wanted a ransom to give Regnar back."

Martel felt overwhelmed, struggling to grasp the situation. The old hedge mage had seemed nothing but friendly. That someone would abduct him and hurt him seemed inconceivable. "What kind of ransom?"

"Ten gold crowns." The storyteller spat. "He might as well have asked for the emperor's crown."

"You won't pay?" Martel asked, a little shocked. It sounded like a lot of money, certainly, but a life was at stake.

"Lad, we can barely spare ten silver pieces, let alone gold. Besides, are you so naive to think they'll let Regnar go even if we pay?"

"Well, why not? If you pay, what reason do they have to keep him?"

The storyteller shook his head. "If we pay, what reason do they have to let him go? There's a good chance he's already dead, and they're just trying to milk some coin out of us."

"Well, what about the city guard? They're supposed to protect people."

The actor playing Roland gave him a look of pity. "My young friend, at best, the city guard considers people like us to be troublemakers. At worst, they think of us as thieves and criminals."

Martel frowned in thought. "What if a nobleman told them to help?"

The storyteller laughed without mirth. "You have one of those up your sleeve?"

"I do. The son of one, anyway."

"It won't make a difference. You don't understand, boy. The only thing guards despise more than travelling actors is a hedge mage," the storyteller claimed.

"Half the time, they're ready to call the inquisitors to have him strangled. Someone who is both? They won't lift a finger."

"My friend will persuade them. If he can't – we'll go ourselves. We're mages. We can take care of a few bandits." Martel said this with a lot more confidence than he felt, but he assumed Maximilian knew how to handle himself in a fight.

"Even so, what can you do? Neither the guards nor you know where Regnar is," argued 'Roland'.

"We can figure that out," Martel declared. "You must have a way to pay the ransom, yes?"

"That thug returns tonight expecting it, though he'll be sorely disappointed," the storyteller explained.

"Pay what you can, and tell him you'll pay more tomorrow night. Buy time," Martel suggested. "He'll return with the money you already paid to where Regnar is held. We follow him to his hideout. I'll get the city guard to free Regnar."

The actors looked at one another. "Look, lad, for all his faults, Regnar is one of ours. Stars know we're not likely to find a mage to replace him," the storyteller spoke. "Unless you...?" As Martel shook his head, he continued. "But you're asking us to hand over our silver on the slim chance that any of this will work out. That's a lot of trust to put in a boy we hardly know."

Martel straightened up a bit, standing taller than the storyteller. "I'm not a boy. I'm a mage." Flames began to play around his hands, summoned on instinct rather than conscious will. "If this fails, I'll compensate you for your silver. But it won't. I'll get Regnar back."

"Who's going to follow the thug with the money back to where Regnar is stashed?" asked 'Roland'. "We're not exactly inconspicuous." He pointed at the other actors in their bright garb. "Nor are you."

An idea struck Martel, and the flames vanished from his hands. "I know someone. Invisible. They'll do it right."

The storyteller took a deep breath. "Alright. I have my doubts, but I guess we owe it to Regnar to try. On one condition."

"Yes?"

"You do his work for our performance tonight. If we're going to pay even a small part of this ransom, we'll need to perform our best. Earn all the silver we can."

That left him no time to get back to the Lyceum and tell Maximilian about the plan beforehand; he would just have to find him after the play. "I accept."

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Martel hurried through Morcaster to enact his plan. He ran through the details in his mind meanwhile. Follow the brigand who took the ransom money. Find where Ragnar was kept. Get Maximilian to use his status and alert the city guard to free the hedge mage. Several steps, but none of them complicated. Just one detail that needed to snap into place.

It took Martel several attempts to retrace his steps. The other night, he had been running frantically, pursuing another who set the course. But finally, he reached the right alley. In daylight, it looked like another, but Martel recognised it. Before his feet were the cobbled stones where his silver had struck.

"I'm not here to fight," he called out to the debris and refuse stacked along the house walls.

"That's smart," came a voice from behind a crate. From a few places, several street children appeared. "It won't go well for you."

"I'm here to offer you a job. Simple and easy for someone like you. It pays three silvers." Martel stuck his hand in his pocket with the coins he earned last night; all he had left. While his promise to compensate the players for paying the ransom had been genuine, Martel had not told them how long it might take.

The scowl on the street boy's face eased, but his eyes remained suspicious. "What kind of job?"

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Martel spent the performance feeling anxious; not about missing any cues or failing in his task, but about what would happen after. From his platform, if he stood up, he could look over the shielding canvas to see the street children scattered around the crowd.

Once the play had ended and the audience departed, Martel watched a man approach the storyteller. He was tall and thin with a trimmed beard and small braids. He carried a dagger in his belt and glanced over his shoulder every other moment.

Words were exchanged, which Martel could not hear, but he saw the storyteller hand over a pouch. As the thug turned to leave, Martel stood up

and caught the street boy's eyes, giving a signal. The child nodded in return and took off.

Climbing down from his perch, Martel did not waste time talking to the actors. As soon as the children found out where Regnar was kept, they would have the city guard storm the place. He just needed to find Maximilian and make him use his influence.

Returning to the Lyceum, Martel ran up the stairs of the boys' tower. He reached Maximilian's floor and ran over to knock on his door frantically. No response.

Thinking him asleep, Martel continued. "Maximilian, wake up!"

The neighbouring door slammed open. "Will you be quiet!"

"Sorry," Martel stammered.

Distant singing reached them.

"Stars, people are trying to sleep!" the angry acolyte said before shutting his door.

Recognising the voice singing, Martel felt hope rise. He went over to the stairs to see Maximilian stagger upwards with a poor rendition of some tavern ditty.

"Maximilian, I need your help!"

"Martel, my boy, fancy seeing you here." The mageknight stumbled past him, moving towards his room.

"Someone is in danger. I need you to come with me."

Maximilian gave a loud yawn as he unlocked his door. "That sounds serious. Just one moment." He yawned again. "Let me close my eyes, and I will be right with you."

"No, there's no time. Maximilian, listen to me!"

"I hear you, I hear you. Danger. No time. Just a few minutes." The mageknight lay down in his bed.

Martel followed him over to grab his collar and shake him. He received no response except for a snore. As he let go, Maximilian sank back into his bed, fast asleep.