

## Firebrand 301

### Chapter 301: His Own Choosing

#### His Own Choosing

Mandays had started to feel almost reassuring to Martel. Unlike the harsh training of the three previous days, or the often troublesome affairs he spent his Soldays on, Manday reminded him of when he had first started. A lesson with Master Fenrick, teaching him the lore of the continent, and a second with Master Alastair, learning elemental magic.

"Good," his teacher told him as Martel's bolt of earth struck the battlemage on the shoulder. "Still some ways to go before it really makes me quiver in my boots, but you're getting there."

"Thanks, master." Such a strange experience to train in magic with a teacher who gave him words of encouragement and treated him with respect. For a moment, his displeasure flickered across his face.

"You don't seem particularly thrilled?"

"I was just thinking about my Sindhian exercises," Martel quickly replied. "It's my next lesson with Mistress Rana. Alchemy, that is." He knew there was no point in proclaiming his woes about how the other teachers at the Lyceum conducted their lessons.

"I admire your willingness to learn beyond what you must, but perhaps you should consider letting alchemy rest," Master Alastair suggested gently. "Once in the legions, you'll rarely have time to gather supplies or spend half a day brewing potions."

Martel imagined stepping aside on the battlefield to stir his elixir. "I'm sure, but I'm not ready to give up. I really want to understand this." Abandoning his attempts at alchemy meant that Martel would only learn magic intended to fight and kill. He needed something else, practising magic with a purpose of his own choosing.

"You remind me of Master Fenrick. Which is a compliment. Always eager to learn and know more." The Master of Elements smiled. "But for now, let's focus on this lesson. When it comes to magic, distractions are dangerous."

"Yes, master." Martel took a deep breath and pulled up another lump of earth from the ground to send it flying against his teacher.

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Mistress Rana placed the coltsfoot in Martel's hand. "Let me see."

As always, Martel closed his fingers around the herb. He did as he must have done a hundred times before, reaching out with his magic. Yet this time, something was different. He thought about Sparrow, how the grains of earth lit up and flew towards her, as if pulled the way an arrow inevitably is pulled towards the ground. He remembered as a child, how any flame would obey his will and float to him. He had done it so easily, so often, he thought of himself commanding the fire. Exerting his will, dragging it towards him. A response to force rather than sympathy or understanding.

Feeling the dormant kernel of magic inside the plant, Martel did not pull or push. He simply touched it and otherwise let it be. Taking his time, trying not to feel any pressure from Mistress

Rana's presence, Martel waited. Slowly, like the tide gently moving waves up the beach only to retract them, Martel felt the magic within the herb respond. But he did not force it or let his impatience interfere. He let the power move to its own accord.

When he finally sensed no further change, he opened his hand. The herb glowed; if not as strongly as when Mistress Rana did it, then certainly a vast improvement to his previous attempts. He could not keep himself from grinning.

"Very good. Keep practising, and if you also do well during the distillation process, we'll consider a new recipe next Manday," his teacher told him.

"I'll practice every day," Martel promised. The thought of this repetitive, monotonous task no longer seemed so dreadful, now that signs of progress spurred him on. The idea of adding a new recipe to his repertoire also served as great motivation to improve. He would learn alchemy yet.

"Alright. Get to work. You know what to do."

Smiling, Martel gathered up all the ingredients for his elixir and moved to the fireplace. Once the water boiled in his pot, Martel took the reagents, one by one, and activated their magic before throwing them into the bubbling liquid.

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Two and a half hours later, Martel finished stirring. He looked at the glowing power in the cauldron, diffused through the water. It cast an orange light onto his face. During the brewing process, he had tried to connect with it in preparation for the last step, but the boiling of the water and his own need to keep stirring made it difficult.

Practice was one thing; now came the crucial moment that would see his efforts rewarded or wasted. Mistress Rana took the pot and prepared to pour.

Martel tried once more to connect with the magic. As he nodded for her to tip the water into the awaiting bottle, he did his best to remember how it had felt before with the herbs. Instead of trying to grasp the magic, slipping like water through his fingers, he allowed it to gently rock back and forth, like a boat on the tide. Carefully and with closed eyes, he steered the boat closer and closer ashore with every wave.

He heard Mistress Rana stop pouring, putting the pot back in the fireplace. Opening his eyes, he saw her put a stopper into the bottle with its glowing contents. Not as impressive as her work, but from what he could tell, a functioning potion of warmth.

"Not bad. Not quite as effective as could be, and probably not with the same duration, but it'll still feel good on a cold day." She gave what almost looked like a smile as she handed it over to him.

"Now clean up your worktable."

"Straightaway, mistress." As his fingers closed around the bottle, Martel sensed the power contained within the glass. Weaker than how its predecessors had felt, but still present.

A little while later, Martel left the laboratory with five silvers in his pocket, his wages for the fiveday, and his first elixir brewed entirely by his own hand.

Chapter 302: A Fox in the Henhouse

A Fox in the Henhouse

While working in the apothecary Solday morning, Martel could not help but demonstrate his newest ability. Rather than chopping up the lungwort, Martel awakened the magic within the Sindhian way and showed the glowing result to Nora.

"Well, someone's come a long way."

Martel shrugged, trying to look casual about how satisfied he actually felt. "Just took some practice." In his hand, the herb slowly lost its light as the magic dwindled away.

"Still room for improvement, I see."

"Of course. I don't intend to stop."

"While I'm sure both your current achievement and your commitment to further excellence is a thrill to Mistress Rana, she'll be even happier if you get to work on chopping up that lungwort. All that whooping cough going around wiped out our stores."

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Spending his shift in the workshop making ink, Martel experimented with the ingredients there as well. He quickly discovered that the origin of the material made a difference. Honey, coming from bees, was harder to awaken; he wondered for a moment if it affected the taste as well, but he restrained his curiosity. Charcoal, used to provide the black colour, did not respond at all to his Sindhian ways. As for cobalt, which gave a magnificent blue ink, Martel was unsure if he actually made much impact on it or not.

It made him speculate if an earthmage would have more luck with a metal, similar to how Mistress Rana had given him coltsfoot to practice on, since that herb was connected to heat and fire. On the other hand, one might consider charcoal to be nothing but the product of heat, and it seemed entirely dead to his attempts.

"Everything well in here?" Master Jerome's voice came boisterously across the mostly empty space of the laboratory.

"Yes, master!" Martel hurried to move the mortar and pestle around again.

"You got all you need? We haven't run out of resin yet, have we?"

"No, not yet."

The artificer nodded to himself. "Good, good. Finish up this round and clean up. Dinner is soon."

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At the meal, Martel had the company of Eleanor for once. It was different than with Maximilian, who could keep the conversation going by himself. But Martel did not mind any silence between himself and her; it was the comfortable kind, born of familiarity.

Even so, a question occurred to him that she might be the right person to answer. "Do you know what a masquerade is?"

She looked up from her stew. "A specific kind of feast. Strictly speaking, it involves a play being performed by the guests at the party. They are given masks and a role to act out on the stage, usually under the directions of seasoned actors."

Martel hoped that Lady Pearl did not expect him to do any such thing. Ten silvers would not cover his discomfort. He had only been on a stage once, working with Regnar and Weasel's gang, which turned out to be nothing more than thievery. Being chased by an angry mob, discovering their money gone, had not endeared Martel to the life of an actor.

"Nowadays, some simply hold a feast giving everyone a mask, with no play involved, and call it a masquerade as well," Eleanor continued.

Martel felt a little better hearing that; in fact, wearing a mask at Lady Pearl's party would keep him anonymous, which he greatly preferred. Though he wondered why anyone else wanted that; it would make it impossible to know who your friends were at the celebration. "Why does anyone want to have a party where you don't know who the others are?"

"For some, their name carries responsibilities. Expectations. Putting on a mask might let you escape all that for a night and be someone else. Which is perhaps the kind of freedom you want at a celebration."

That sounded like the thinking of rich people. Enough money that they never need worry about a thing, and they spent it trying to be somebody else.

"What makes you ask?" Eleanor looked at him with the hint of a smirk.

"Heard someone mention it, and it made me curious."

"Who would you be, if you could put on a mask?"

The question caught him off-guard. "I'm not sure. I'd have to think about it. What about you?"

"I will tell you when you tell me."

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Thanks to Maximilian's generous donations, Martel did not lack for clothing. He chose one of the doublets without any insignia, just in case someone at The River Pearl had seen him elsewhere wearing those with the tree upon it. Since he would be walking, he kept his normal boots and brought his shoes with him in a bundle; he would have to change once he arrived. As the last thing, he used some of the oil given to him by Eleanor for his hair. Once the seventh bell rang, he left the Lyceum.

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Even some distance away, Martel could tell that tonight was different at the Pearl. Besides the increased traffic leading towards it, he noticed carriages that actually stopped outside the establishment; usually, they simply drove past on their way in or out of the city. He did not steer towards the main entrance himself this time, but entered through one of the backdoors that led to the kitchens. A wave of heat met him from the ovens and stoves, all of them churning out food while cooks, kitchen girls, and servants hurried around.

Feeling a little lost, Martel glanced around. Lady Pearl had told him to come this way, but not what to do after. He did not wish to change his shoes yet, but he removed his cloak, already feeling hot.

One of the serving girls stopped abruptly, taking in his expensive clothes. "Are you the wizard?"

Her question made several others hold their activity to look at him with varying expressions. "Yes, I am."

She nodded. "Ruby said to leave your things in there. There's also a mask on a shelf for you."

Bowing his head in thanks, Martel followed her gesture and entered a small storage room. In between barrels and crates, he left his boots and cloak. Picking up a piece of cloth, Martel saw that it had straps to lock over his ears. It was dyed red and orange. Igniting a small flame to better see, Martel realised that it was in fact made to look like a fox. Not the worst thing to resemble. Placing it on, Martel left to join the party in the common room.

## Chapter 303: Masquerade

### Masquerade

The common room of The River Pearl was transformed. Decorations of all sorts filled the walls and tables. Some of them reminded him of the masks from the Western Isles that he had seen in Maximilian's home; others looked almost Tyrian or perhaps Sindhian, portraying strange shapes or symbols unknown to him.

As for the guests, some were dressed as him, while others wore far less. In fact, Martel could not always tell the difference between the serving girls and boys of the Pearl and some of the guests; all wore masks, regardless of status. The only tell-tale sign would be the great amounts of jewellery that some, especially the female celebrants had upon them; the staff of the Pearl usually wore only earrings and a simple necklace.

Music played in the corner, though the clamour of voices and laughter gave it few chances. Food stood scattered on tables, and cups with various spirits were constantly being emptied and refilled. Near the beleaguered musicians, the empty floor allowed about two scores of people to dance, though it was far different from how such took place in Engby or the marbled halls of the nobility in Morcaster. People intertwined their bodies closely without thought of scandal or decorum.

Remembering his task, Martel walked around the room while letting his magic sense extend around him. It told him of heat, countless people with blood pumping, far too much information that he could discern anything useful from that alone. But he also met cold pockets where gold jewellery killed his magic. Quite a lot wore such tonight, giving him a strange sensation of an irregular pattern with warmth and cold stretching throughout the great room, like a chequered board becoming fluid.

Focusing, Martel looked around for the particular masks he had been told to investigate. He searched around, finding their wearers and letting his magic examine their belongings and whether they portrayed themselves to be something other than their appearance; masked face aside, of course.

He noticed nothing unusual in that regard, but something else caught his notice. Besides food and drink, many of the guests had small pouches, which they opened and withdrew pinches of powder from, sprinkling it on their tongue. Strange in itself, the brown powder almost seemed to have a little spark of its own. And while some guests seemed to have brought their own, Martel also noticed the scantily clad servants of the Pearl bringing it to their customers, giggling as they performed the same method of delivery into the other person's mouth.

Confused, but not really eager to investigate, Martel continued his assignment.

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When done, Martel grabbed a cup of wine, grateful that his mask did not cover his mouth as well; he noticed quite a few having troubles, as their chosen disguise filled their entire faces.

He wondered how long to stay; Lady Pearl had told him to otherwise enjoy the party and come back another day with his findings.

"Am I in the presence of the powerful wizard who serves Lady Pearl?"

Martel almost flinched at the teasing voice, feeling caught. He relaxed as he remembered that he was not actually doing anything wrong, and instead, he looked towards the speaker.

A woman met his eyes. A mask of blue with red suns covered her face; her lips had the same colour in a darker hue. Compared to the serving staff, her clothing was practically modest, if still sitting close to her body.

"Not tonight," Martel replied, thinking about what Eleanor had told him of masquerades. "With this mask, I am nobody you have ever met."

"Is that so? Am I likewise unknown to you?" Her red lips formed into a smile.

"On this occasion, I guess so. Though any other night, I'd recognise my favourite gemstone."

Ruby laughed. "Favourite? Such easy flattery will not convince me of anything."

"Not flattery at all. Rubies are born of fire, didn't you know? Just as I was." Martel raised a hand and let a weak flame run across his fingers.

She caught his wrist and pulled his hand down. "What about dancing? Does this mysterious guest indulge in that?"

Martel looked towards the open area with the men and women contorting themselves across the floor. The boy from Engby would have said no; under these circumstances, so might the acolyte from the Lyceum. As for the fox, he nodded. "Yes. Yes, he does."

With a smile below her mask, Ruby pulled him towards the troupe of musicians, already swaying to the music.

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In the halls of the nobility, dancing had been formal, delineated by strict rules and placements. On the streets with Regnar's travelling troupe, it had been rhythmic and exhilarating. At the Pearl, it was wild and intoxicating. Martel moved as the music took him, unsure of the rules; there did not seem to be any. Ruby approached and distanced herself, always with a teasing smile when her face looked at his. Martel was unsure what he felt about all of this, but his heart beat at a frantic pace, trying to keep up.

Eventually, the musicians stopped. Loud protests could be heard along with demands that they resumed playing. Martel found himself wishing the same.

But instead, a single player stepped onto the pedestal. He carried a lute, and Martel doubted that his music could reach through the room with only that, considering the noise. It took him a moment to realise the man was not some bard, but rather, a skáld. Besides his physical appearance, marking him as Tyrian, his instruments carried runes marked upon the wood.

He had only begun strumming the strings and sung a single word when a hush fell over the crowd. Martel doubted any of them understood the song; nor did he. As the skáld continued, it proved irrelevant. Martel forgot time and place. He felt himself wandering through a forest, rain falling rhythmically against the leaves above. His heart became calm before it soared with joy. And the song continued.

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Into the early hours of the night, as the celebration still continued, Ruby slipped into her mistress's study. "Some of your guests are wondering where you are."

The bald woman, standing behind her desk, looked up with a smile. "Just placing the gift from our northern friend somewhere safe. He is already on his way. And our wizard?"

"He went home as well. Poor boy has school tomorrow, after all."

"You kept an eye on him?"

Ruby pursed her red lips below her mask. "Of course."

"And the Friar's spy?"

"He didn't glance twice at the mage. He won't expect anything."

Pearl unlocked a drawer in her desk. "Even so, once the fun begins at the Friar's, you won't have much time before they guess your presence."

The slender woman shrugged. "I'll be fast. And the northern bard? Will it work?"

The proprietress held out her hand, which carried a stone marked with runes. To those with magical sight, it glowed with power. To the women present, it looked simply like a pebble with scribbles.

"I'll ask our mage friend when he comes back. But if it doesn't, I suggest you make a hasty retreat." She carefully placed the rune token into the drawer and locked it.

## Chapter 304: Flaming Wagers

### Flaming Wagers

Martel woke with scant rest in his body, yet pleasant dreams in his mind. Dancing with Ruby had been exhilarating in a way he had not felt in a long time. And the music of the skáld had touched him, nearly moved him to tears. It seemed a wonderful example of what magic could be like, what it might be used for. He wondered if he had been born north of the Frosten river, would he have become a skáld as well? Last night, for a brief while, he had almost wished so.

The price for last night's entertainment came this morning as he dragged himself to the Circle of Fire. He did not feel up for two bells of duelling and casting spells under Moira's wrathful gaze, but fate lent him a hand – at least so it appeared at first.

"You'll be working on your flame wall," their teacher told them. "Some of you badly need this practice, whereas others may produce something reasonably effective by tomorrow when you face the mageknights again." She glanced at Harriet, who presumably had done well the other night, after Martel had left.

As for himself, he was not concerned. He knew that he could perform the spell suitably for a skirmish. He felt almost embarrassed that it had never occurred to him using it during previous training, but it had just felt outside the rules of the class, somehow. He had also only used it to escape fights rather than in this more offensive capacity, though he easily saw the advantage of controlling the battlefield. Come tomorrow, Martel would make the most of it.

"Your fire-touched comrade appears confident, judging by his face," Moira continued.

Martel sighed inwardly. She always had to poke at them, causing a rift.

"I say we put that to the test. Tomorrow, when you fight the mageknights, I'll be lenient. Even if you lose, you don't get detention." She looked from the others towards Martel with the hint of a cruel smile, and he guessed her next words. "Except for Martel. You lose, he gets punished. You better hope your flame wall can do the trick, boy."

Martel exhaled slowly. Probably best for him to spend these lessons today practising the spell.

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After two bells doing nothing but casting the same spell over and over, Martel felt about ready to spend his evening doing nothing but playing cards or going out for a drink. As Maximilian joined him at supper, he figured the mageknight had come to suggest the latter by his expectant look.

"Are you going to the Chamber of Earth tonight?"

Martel figured wrong, apparently. "I wasn't planning to. Feeling a bit worn after classes today."

"I only mention it because another mageknight has been speaking poorly of your performance, especially after last Malday. He reckons that he could handily beat you in a single fight."

Martel blew out his breath. He was not in the mood for a duel. But they usually went fast, and this might be an opportunity to practice his flame wall spell in action before tomorrow when it mattered. Also, Martel felt a slight attachment to his reputation. Nobody would be calling him Scarecrow after he beat them in a duel. "Alright. I'll make an appearance."

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One bell later, the acolytes of the Lyceum – those minded towards brawls, at least – gathered in the Chamber of Earth as they did every Pelday evening. As Martel emerged from the dark stairs, his own little flame illuminating his path, he thought he noticed the murmur of voices increase. In addition, most of those assembled turned to look at him, some of them adding gestures or whispers. This felt different than how it usually was, as if people anticipated his coming. In fact, it felt much like stepping into the ring at The Broken Crown.

Martel wondered if this was Maximilian's doing. Perhaps it was not chance that the mageknights gossiping about the fire acolyte had reached his ear. Instead, he suspected that his friend had put this into motion, and apparently spread the word to build some excitement. As such, it did not bother Martel. The more people who saw the arrogant mageknights lose their bluster, the better.

Maximilian appeared, handing over a staff. "There is the fellow." He nodded towards a mageknight.

Martel vaguely recognised his opponent from training, though he did not know his name. Nor did he care. He would fall all the same. Probably easier than usual, considering he had made a poor choice of weapons. Rather than the typical shield and a one-handed weapon, this warrior stood



wielding a hammer with both hands. Even if made from softer material than metal, such a blow would hurt. Striking the head was forbidden during these sparring duels when using such a weapon, but accidents might happen. In a place like this, without supervision, they might even be provoked.

Not that Martel felt concerned. He did not anticipate his opponent would have time to land a single blow. In fact, he would make the warrior regret his choice of weapon. They took position opposite each other, standing some four paces apart.

"Fight!"

Martel held out his hand, and a ray of flame shot out to strike the mageknight in his chest. Without a shield to protect himself, he took the full brunt of the spell. He struggled forward one step, and another. All the while, Martel kept the spell going, pouring his power into the flames bridging the gap between them.

Finally, the warrior sank to his knees with agony written across his face. Martel lowered his hand, keeping the spell aimed at the same place. "I give up," he gasped, dropping his hammer.

Martel ended the spell, and he heard some cheer or applaud. Others, most of the mageknights, looked with disdain or discomfort at the fire acolyte. Savouring their expressions, Martel gave the staff back to Maximilian and left the chamber. He only regretted that there had been no reason to try out his flame wall, but on the other hand, this left it as a surprise up his sleeve for future combat lessons.

The defeated warrior struggled to get back on his feet, and Maximilian sauntered over to him. "I told you."

"Yeah, yeah. Look, you will get your money, all right? I don't have it on me."

The viscount smiled. "That is fine. I imagine every time you see a fire acolyte, you will remember your lost wager." He turned towards his other peers, some of them already digging out their coin purses. "Who else bet against Martel?"

## Chapter 305: Failing Walls

### Failing Walls

Martel felt a tinge of nervousness entering the arena for his second lesson. Being the only one threatened by detention, should they lose against the mageknights, the other fire acolytes had much less motivation in the upcoming skirmish. One might think that avoiding being hit should suffice, but it had not proven so in the past. Perhaps he could take a lesson from his teacher and use spite instead.

"I trust none of us want to give the mageknights the satisfaction of victory?" he asked.

Harriet gave a scornful smile. "You would say that, wouldn't you. Scared of spending an extra bell with Mistress Moira?"

Martel could not deny this; he had been lucky to get out of his last detention, though it had also deepened the rift between him and the other acolytes. Regardless, he doubted that Moira would be so lenient next time. "Sure, today, it's me at risk. What about next fiveday? And the one after that? Until we learn to win, all of us are at risk."

"I hate when they hit me," Edward complained.

"The mageknights are already insufferable," Willian assented.

Martel looked at Harriet, who made no further objections. "So we use our new spell. I'll be on the right, stepping in front of Edward, raising the flame wall down the flank. Harriet, you're second-best with this spell, so I think you should take the front line on the left, with William behind this time." He looked around at the others.

Nobody disagreed or voiced any complaints. Meanwhile, with Moira sitting in the stands, the mageknights had taken position opposite them. Eight in total, spread out across a single line.

"Begin!"

Fire bolts flew through the air. It disrupted the charge of the mageknights, though most of them continued unimpeded. As he stepped in front of Edward, Martel meanwhile pointed at the dirt behind him and ran his finger forward in a gesture. Flames erupted to the height of a man, and Martel saw the sudden confusion or even fear in the eyes of his opponents. Unable to outflank them and hemmed in, the warriors got in each other's way as they tried to attack Martel all at once. Behind him, Edward continued his offensive spells, hitting everyone now that the mageknights stood so closely together.

Sensing victory, Martel allowed himself a smile. It disappeared as an axe cut into his shoulder from the left side. It pushed him off balance, and the other mageknights seized the opportunity to swarm him and knock him down.

Coughing dust and raising his hands to protect his head, Martel looked around to see his fellow defenders likewise overwhelmed. As his concentration broke, dispelling his flame wall, he jerked his head towards Harriet. He realised what had happened; either her spell or her defence had failed, giving the mageknights their entry into the formation of fire acolytes.

As the warriors laughed and congratulated each other, Martel got on his feet and stalked over to Harriet. "What happened?" he asked in a sharp tone.

"They crossed my firewall. I guess it didn't frighten them like you thought." She seemed entirely unapologetic about her failure.

Martel narrowed his eyes. "You did that on purpose." He had not seen what happened, but he imagined she deliberately kept the spell weak, allowing the mageknights to circumvent or simply jump through.

"Doesn't make much of a difference, does it?" Harriet gave a sweet smile. "We still lost."

"Alright, it looks like the fire folk need some more time practising their spells," Reynard bellowed, eliciting smirks from the mageknights. "We shall continue with regular training." Out on the stands, Moira got up and left.

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In the evening, Martel had an errand to run and money to collect. With a note written by his own hand, he left the Lyceum and walked east to the bridge district. In comparison to his last visit, The River Pearl looked almost subdued. It still had customers and merriment, but nothing like the grand party he had attended. This time, he walked through the front doors, though he kept his hood up. As he walked through the common room, he glanced around, just in case he might see Ruby, but no such luck. Instead, he continued to Lady Pearl's study and was admitted shortly after.

"Master Martel, you have come, true to your word." Her face lit up in her customary dazzling smile.

"Here's the list of everyone I looked at during the feast." Martel placed the scrap of parchment in front of her. "A few surprises, I suppose."

She picked it up to let her eyes glance over the names and Martel's brief descriptions of whether the gold had seemed for show. "Very good. And this is for you." She opened a drawer and counted out ten silver coins, stacking them on the desk in front of him.

"Much obliged." He collected the money, placing it inside a pocket.

"Before you leave – if you would indulge my curiosity." Lady Pearl reached down to pull out a flat stone. Even from across the table, Martel saw the light of magic emanate from it. "I bought this from the northern bard who played at the party. He claims it brims with power, but as you know, a simple woman such as I cannot tell the difference." She extended her hand.

Martel accepted the rock, looking it over. He saw Tyrian runes etched into the surface, no doubt the source of the magic. Unfortunately, he had no clue what they meant or did. He thought about the rune token given to him by Regnar; in contrast, it seemed dormant, if it held any magic at all. "Well, that claim is certainly true."

"Do you know what the signs do?"

"Unfortunately, I've yet to learn that," Martel admitted.

"No matter." She held out her hand, and he gave the stone back. "Thank you again, darling. I'm sure we'll be seeing each other."

Martel inclined his head; money in his pocket, he left the Pearl, already thinking about what to buy for his alchemy workshop.

## Chapter 306: A Lesson in Leadership

### A Lesson in Leadership

The loss against the mageknights, especially given he would be punished for it, weighed on Martel's mood. Sleep did little to improve that; he faced Glunday feeling irritable the moment he left his bed. Entering the Circle of Fire for his first lesson of the day, he wondered if the other acolytes could sense his foul demeanour, or if their reserved behaviour simply reflected the typical atmosphere of the classroom. Certainly none of them seemed anguished that Martel would spend his evening getting roasted by Moira.

The aforementioned woman entered, glancing around. "Still a lot left to work on. Your performance was possibly even more pitiful than last, despite me providing you the perfect spell to remedy this."

"A spell is only as good as the caster," Martel mumbled, wanting to snipe at Harriet but still hesitant to start an argument. He knew his teacher would not care about excuses or whose fault it was that they lost.

"You will be practising your flame walls next lesson, maybe this one as well," Moira continued, giving no indication whether she had heard Martel. "But first, your form could still use some polishing. So, we will begin with individual duels. Harriet and Martel, Edward and William. Get in position."

A smile tugged at Martel's lips. A chance for revenge. Harriet was good, swift to evade and often with a sure aim, but Martel was especially motivated to land every spell. He did not care if he took any himself; she would get to feel his magic.

"Attack!"

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At the end of the first lesson, Martel was satisfied. He had beaten Harriet in several duels, inflicting more hits than she had. While his legs and stomach hurt, he knew she would feel worse. The furious looks she gave him as they left the chamber only confirmed this.

Second lesson began as expected, all the acolytes practising their flame wall spells. While dull, Martel admitted that his speed could use improvement. In a fight, every moment counted. Raising the wall sooner rather than later could make all the difference. In his skirmishes fighting alongside others, such as with the Night Knives, Martel had never paid much attention to tactics. He had done as commanded and otherwise simply sought out the best targets for his spells.

But even if yesterday was a failure, he understood the tactical value of spells such as this. He had seen a hint of this, during the ambush in the Undercroft, when Flora had raised a wall to separate their group before the attack while also preventing their retreat, forcing them to fight in the open. It could be used for much more than simply blocking off escape routes or preventing pursuit. So, although Martel was loath to give Moira any recognition, he kept his head down and practised the spell.

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Two full bells in the Circle of Fire felt tough enough in itself. After the supper bell had ended, Martel dragged his feet up the stairs for a third; detention awaited him. Moira was already present – eager to dole out punishment, it seemed.

She had her back towards him, but as he entered, she turned around. "Why did you lose yesterday?"

Martel had not expected to be questioned, but any conversation that stole time away from his detention was good. And he was more than happy to answer this particular question in detail.

"Harriet failed on the flank. Her spell was weak, allowing the mageknights to outmanoeuvre us. And since I'm confident she did better during our own lessons, I think she did it on purpose to make us lose."

"That was my observation as well. Why?"

Martel looked at her, unable to keep annoyance from his face. She had to know why. "Because she would not be punished for a loss. Only me. She did it to hurt me." As his teacher cracked a sardonic smile, Martel realised something else. "Which is what you wanted. You created this situation."

"Indeed I did. And why, do you think?"

He hesitated before speaking, but he was tired of pretending he had any respect for her. "To have a reason to punish me."

Moira gave a shrill laughter. "I don't need excuses for that, boy! No, I'm trying to teach you a lesson about leadership, which is not an easy thing."

Martel suspected she simply told herself that to justify her actions. "What lesson? What about leadership?"

"When you join the legions, you'll be granted the rank of prefect. Sure, you're not supposed to lead any cohorts, but you will find yourself in situations where soldiers, who hate you for being more powerful and privileged than them, are your only chance of surviving a skirmish with the enemy. Having some inkling of how to motivate them would be a useful lesson, so they don't simply desert you. Or worse, offer up your head to the Khivans for a nice bounty."

"How was I supposed to know any of that?"

She slapped him across the face. "Why did I have to tell you in the first place? Why are you not using all your wits to fight these battles? If you keep putting your pride before survival, boy, you won't last a month at the front."

His cheek feeling the sting, Martel badly wanted to pour all his spellpower into a fire ray and let loose.

"And today, rather than seek to make amends with Harriet, you jumped at the opportunity to make matters worse between you. The Stars really do give the most talent to those least deserving."

"But that's your doing! You're constantly pitting us against each other, trying to make matters worse!"

"Yes, I am. Because outside these walls, you'll be tested a hundred ways. You will be frustrated and under threat, you'll disagree on everything with your fellow soldiers, and you need to learn to put all that aside. And until you do, I'll make this lesson stick the only way I know. Prepare yourself. We are fighting."

Martel spent the remaining bell experiencing the power of a battlemage.

## Chapter 307: The Cunning of Perel

### The Cunning of Perel

Master Fenrick's classroom was a pleasant alternative to the outdoor gymnasium or the Circle of Fire. Martel could sit down, and nobody placed any demands on him other than listening. His only complaint was that learning Archeon had started to bore him. Even if he knew that potentially it might come in useful, knowing the language, it gave him little motivation in the moment.

"And that concludes our work on irregular verbs," Master Fenrick told the class. "Furthermore, with that we approach the end of this course. I'm sure like me, you're thinking that this is far too soon to end for any comprehensive knowledge of the language."

Stealing a glance at the mageknights in the room, Martel felt convinced nobody thought that, not even himself. He was only too happy to move on to another subject. Eleanor might have been an exception, although she was already far ahead on learning Archeon thanks to her childhood tutors.

"Therefore, your final task for this course beckons. You have all been assigned a chapter in Master Philips's treatise *On the Nature of Constellations*," their teacher continued. "You have until our lesson next Manday to present a fluent translation into Archeon. If anyone should be tempted to repeat their mistake from last year's astronomy examination, I shall delight in finding ways to punish you for it." Master Fenrick let a stern gaze from behind his spectacles sweep across the

classroom. Martel thought back on when all the mageknights – again with Eleanor as the shining exception – had bought their star charts, thinking they could pass astronomy this way. He almost hoped some of them would be foolish enough to try the same again; Master Fenrick seemed to know exactly how to catch them.

While Martel did not look forward to the assignment – it would take him hours and hours, probably, and his time was scarce these days – he did feel curious about what came next. He had not received specific information about his schedule in that regard; he only knew that he would have a few courses with Master Fenrick during this bell on Mandays to cover what else a mage should know before graduating from the Lyceum. But before he could ask, his teacher had already left.

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Elemental magic with Master Alastair felt like the only course where Martel progressed as expected; where he did not worry about what he would have to do or learn next, and whether he could keep up with his accelerated schedule. There was alchemy, of course, which he had finally cracked, but he did that of his own volition. Of everything the Lyceum threw at him, Martel felt most comfortable in the Hall of Elements.

"Very good." His teacher nodded in acknowledgement as Martel imbued a rock with his magic and hurled it across the room to strike Master Alastair's magical shield. "With a little more practice, you should be able to handle stonework and even metal for this spell."

"That's good to hear."

The Master of Elements gave him a look. "Last fiveday, you were concerned about your alchemy. Does that still trouble you?"

"Not at all, master," Martel was happy to report. "No, I am advancing finally in that area. I'm able to make my own elixirs now."

"So, what's troubling you?"

"I am happy to learn this spell, this magic," the acolyte began by saying; he did not want Master Alastair to think him ungrateful. "I'm just not sure when I'll need it. No matter how much I practice, I can tell that for this spell to really have an effect, I'll have to draw on my spellpower. It just seems an unwise choice compared to something as simple as the fire bolt, which I can cast at will."

His teacher nodded a little. "You are right to think this way. In battle, you want to conserve your strength. But you also want to have weapons at your disposal that'll take your enemy by surprise. Let me tell you of a time when this particular spell came in handy for me."

Martel smiled. Hearing war stories from his favourite teacher was always fun and a pleasant little interruption to the schoolwork.

"This was more than twenty years ago. I am with a centuria tracking a Tyrian raiding party. We are making good speed and catch up to them at night," Master Alastair related. The lamps in the hall became extinguished, making the chamber dark. "We get ready to attack, except our quarry has met up with another war band, doubling their numbers. Unless we want an even fight with lots of casualties among our own, we need to attack now before sunrise, catch them unaware in the dark."

The battlemage raised up a section of the floor to resemble a few tents, adding a ring of earthen figures around the encampment.

"The Tyrians aren't fools. They have guards surrounding their camp. And if I use fire magic, it'll light up the night sky. But fortunately, I have other methods. One after the other, I hurl my elemental bolts into the guards, taking them down quietly and invisibly in the dark." Master Alastair stepped his foot down to squash the small figures. "A few moments later, our centuria storms their camp and eradicates them."

Martel let his foot trample down one of the Tyrian guards. "I see what you mean."

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The bell rang, dismissing Martel from the Hall of Elements. He did not have to go far, following the northern corridor to reach the infirmary, pass through it, and enter the apothecary. Nora greeted him briefly before resuming her work. Shortly after, Mistress Rana appeared. "Come along," she told the acolyte, who followed her through the back door towards her laboratory. "Have you practised?"

"Yes, mistress." A little, which meant his answer was technically correct.

"Good. If you do well today, I think that should do for all these potions of warmth. And maybe for next Manday, we can think about teaching you a new recipe."

Martel smiled hearing that. It only motivated him further to get better at alchemy. "I'll do my very best, mistress."

## Chapter 308: Dazzling Gems

### Dazzling Gems

Checking his messages the next day, Martel received an envelope with a script he recognised by now.

Dear Master Martel,

I should ask for the pleasure of your visit one of these coming days.

Lady Pearl

Brief and to the point, but Martel assumed it was for more of the same. If so, he saw no reason to decline. It was perhaps the easiest money he had ever earned; not the fastest – nothing came as quickly as the prize money for winning a fight in the pit at The Broken Crown – but definitely the easiest. Last time, he had spent most of the night enjoying himself with music, food, and company of the most pleasant variety.

Since today was Solday, he had the rest of the day to himself. Excluding his schoolwork, of course, which he had to do in his own time rather than during any assigned bell; the chapter translation for Master Fenrick loomed in his mind. But he might handle two errands now and spend the remaining evening afterwards to deal with his scholarly pursuit. freewebno vel.co m

Satisfied with his plan, Martel left the castle, though not before he made one return journey to the dining hall, grabbing the last slices of bread available from lunch.

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Martel went to the docks first. He went the direct route; he had not seen any sign of inquisitors in ages. Their methods of investigation seemed haphazard; he was surprised that they ever managed to catch anyone. Of course, whether those caught were actually guilty, that was another matter entirely.

Reaching Julia's chamber, he gave a quick knock and was admitted inside. He dug out the food and gave it to her, noticing her underfed frame despite his efforts. She wore decent clothes now rather than rags, but he imagined her ribs would be visible underneath the skin. At least she had thick socks on her feet, which he presumed she had spent his coin on. "Do you need more money?" Thanks to his work for Lady Pearl, he had enough to spare.

Julia shook her head. "I still got some left in George."

Martel looked at her doll, serving as a hiding place for her wealth. If she still had any left, that meant she either stole or scavenged for food. He disliked the thought, but he could not see a way to force her to stop and only buy proper food with his money. He was hardly available to provide that level of supervision of her activities and eating habits. "Alright. But I have enough. So just let me know if you want more."

She made a gesture somewhere between a nod and a shrug.

"In fact, I think I can get my hands on some supplies for alchemy. At least enough to brew a handful more potions. Did you drink the one I gave you?"

Julia stuck her hand into George's innards and pulled out the small bottle. It remained full.

"You can go ahead and use it. I will make more."

"Alright." Her curt reply came with a monotonous tone of voice; he could not tell if she meant it or simply humoured him. Probably her habits from living on the street made her hoard everything and only use it if utmost needed.

"I'll ask Mistress Rana what else she might teach me of recipes."

"What about the girl you found? Who has magic. Swallow."

Martel frowned a bit. "Oh, Sparrow. I offered to bring her to the Lyceum for training, but she refused. She would not leave her home in the copper lanes."

"Can't you just train her there?"

"I have no idea how."

"Someone trained you. Just tell her to do what your teachers told you."

Martel wanted to object; the idea of him training anyone felt preposterous. But as he thought about it, he could not say why. Hedge mages existed, after all. It would never be as good as what the Lyceum offered, but any training in magic might be better than none. The only obstacle would be time, considering how strapped Martel was these days – and Weasel, likely to present an obstacle. "I'll think about it. If I have time. For instance, I better get going, as I have another meeting today."

"Thanks for the bread."

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It was a bit of a journey from the harbour to the bridge district, but including his trip to and from the Lyceum, it was not much worse than going to the copper lanes and back home. Seeing The River Pearl brought pleasant memories of the feast he had attended. He still felt ambivalent about the place in general; when he had first seen it, he knew it was exactly the kind of establishment he should never mention to his mother, or she would have a fit at the thought of him stepping foot



inside. And certainly, some of the looks and suggestions sent his way made him feel uncomfortable or awkward at best. But he saw no harm done to anyone, and he had enjoyed himself more than most places in Morcaster.

"Master Martel, my favourite mage." The proprietress greeted him with a flash of her teeth.

He inclined his head. "Lady Pearl. You wanted to meet?"

"Indeed I did. Please, take a seat. I did not expect such a rapid response to my letter."

Sitting down in her study, Martel shrugged to seem casual. "I had errands to run anyway."

"Well, I'm happy to get this decided. You see, next Solday, Ruby is attending a celebration in the temple district. It is a bit of an unusual affair."

"Yeah?"

The bald woman nodded. "It takes place inside a convent. The Sisters of the Sun hosts a ritual feast, you might call it, three times a year. They are usually rather select about visitors, so this is an opportunity for Ruby to speak with some of the other guests under quiet, neutral conditions. I would like you to accompany her and do your usual routine. Take notice of anything that seems odd about the others present – magically speaking."

"Sure. I can do that." Besides payment in silver, spending the evening with Ruby at a party seemed a reward of its own.

"Excellent. You will receive your usual compensation. If you arrive here at, say, seventh bell, my carriage will take you and Ruby to the convent."

"I'll be there." Martel inclined his head and got up, receiving a wide smile in return.

Once he had left, the expression faded from the bald woman. "Amber," she called out.

The guard outside the study peered inside. "Yes?"

"Find Ruby. Tell her that the mage agreed. She must make sure she's ready."

"Yes, Lady Pearl."

## Chapter 309: Paths of Friendship

### Paths of Friendship

A new fiveday began as Pelday rolled around, and two lessons in fire magic loomed over Martel. It had barely been a month; he could not fathom going through this for a whole year. As much as he felt sorry for himself, he briefly pitied the other fire acolytes, who had to stomach this for two years. He wondered if they had gotten used to it, or if they simply suppressed the anger at being treated this way, the fury at being helpless against it. Looking around the Circle of Fire, seeing their downcast expressions, he guessed at the latter.

"Listen up." Moira strode into the chamber, barely glancing at her students. "I've decided to be lenient."

They all straightened up a little after hearing that.

"Tomorrow, you'll fight the mageknights again. But this time, I won't deal out detention if you lose. If the motivation of surviving on the battlefield doesn't work, I can't care either. Win or lose, it's up to your own devices."

The acolytes looked almost relieved at this, though Martel felt sceptical. He had come to understand that even if Moira's methods seemed wantonly cruel, she usually did everything with ulterior motives. He did not look forward to finding out what might be behind this, but if it really meant less detention, he would try to appreciate that little bit of good news. Especially with everything else he had going on.

"Alright, enough time standing around gawking like fools. You'll fight in pairs. Harriet and Martel, you're against William and Edward. Take positions."

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"Nordmark, my old mate, it has been too long since we last went out," Maximilian declared, falling upon Martel in the hallway.

Suddenly beset, one heavy arm slung over his shoulder, Martel slumped down under the weight of his friend. "Sure," he managed to say. "It'll be a while before I got time though. Certainly not tonight."

"You sure? I was thinking you could swing by the Chamber of Earth, do your customary routine of annihilating an opponent with a spell or two, and as a reward, I will buy the first round," Maximilian suggested.

"A great idea, but I just can't."

The mageknight tightened his grip around Martel's shoulder. "Do not disappoint me so, my comrade-in-cups. There are fools to lay low and bottles to empty! Surely your other pursuits can wait until tomorrow."

"I wish, but sadly not." Martel wrenched himself loose. "It'll have to be another night."

"Nordmark, you are breaking my heart."

"It'll heal, I'm sure." The fire acolyte hastened down the hallway, leaving the mageknight to stare at his back.

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Safely in his room, Martel sat down to consider his schedule. Besides all his classes, he began to realise everything he had added to it.

Working for Lady Pearl; while only a few evenings here and there, it still ate many hours away on those particular days.

Pursuing alchemy; besides one full bell every single day working for Mistress Rana, it would also take an evening here and there to actually set up a workshop in Julia's chamber to properly practise. Not to mention, he only worked for Lady Pearl to afford the supplies. And he still needed to find time to do his Sindhian exercises if he ever wanted his potions to be half as potent as those of a real alchemist.

Possibly training Sparrow; just the trip to the copper lanes and back would eat up a whole evening. He could make the girl come to him, of course, but it felt wrong to demand a small girl cross half of Morcaster. Especially when she had already once been taken by a maleficar.

In addition, Martel had other pursuits that might occasionally make demands of him. Maximilian's latest suggestion contained two of them. A night out in the city with friends seemed frivolous. As for sparring in the Chamber of Earth, while not particularly time-consuming, it was also unnecessary.

Going through the list in his mind, Martel sighed. This did not feel sustainable. He had promised Lady Pearl to do one more task, but it would have to be the last. Even if the thought of seeing Ruby again enticed him to reconsider, he had to stand firm. If it meant less money for alchemy supplies, Martel would just have to adjust his efforts accordingly. He would still learn, after all, just have fewer opportunities to practise his brewing skills.

As for Sparrow... The girl deserved to learn. To gain the power to defend herself against the monster that showed up in the copper lanes, and any other who might harm a child.

But, a voice said in Martel's head, even if it meant she used her newfound skills to rob or worse? Opening locks was one thing. An elemental bolt brimming with spellpower, hitting the right place, could kill a person. If Martel showed her the path to such powers, would he be culpable for how she used them?

Feeling the beginnings of a headache, Martel decided to postpone the ethical quandary. Perhaps he could ask someone for advice. Plenty of teachers in this place who must have considered the same question during their career. For now, Martel had to cross off another task of his list.

Gathering all his notes from Master Fenrick's class, Martel left his room. He made his way to the library just as its caretaker was about to leave, who grudgingly opened the door to the second floor. As Martel ascended the stairs, he saw a welcome sight awaiting him by their usual table.

"There you are." Eleanor smiled at him. She had her own stack of parchment in front of her along with two copies of a hefty tome entitled *On the Nature of Constellations*. "I thought we might work separately on our individual chapters, but compare whenever we come across an unusual sentence? There is bound to be some repetition, given it is the same book and all."

Martel sat down opposite her. "Sounds like a good plan, commander."

"You tease a lot for someone who seemed relieved at my offer of cooperation."

"No teasing at all. I'd follow you anywhere," Martel declared with half a smile.

She narrowed her eyes, apparently not entirely convinced, before she demonstratively opened one of the books and began reading.

## Chapter 310: Teamwork

### Teamwork

Stretching his neck from side to side, stamping his staff a few times into the ground, Martel prepared for the skirmish about to happen. The other fire acolytes stood nearby, likewise steeling themselves. Some distance away, the mageknights assembled, feeling confident based on their expressions.

Moira entered, which was expected; she always observed when the elemental mages fought as a single group against the mageknights. However, Martel did not expect when she called his name and beckoned for him to come over. His heart sinking in his chest, he complied.

"Listen up, boy."

Reluctantly, he did so.

"Remember yesterday, I said that even if you lose, you lot won't get detention? Well, you're the exception. No leniency for you, boy. If those preening mageknights beat you, you can expect two hours in the Circle of Fire tomorrow night."

She turned around and stalked away to find herself a seat on the stands, leaving Martel crestfallen. Where was the justice in that? What had he ever done to be singled out like that?

Walking back to the other fire acolytes, Martel took a few deep breaths. No reason to let the others know; Harriet might repeat her betrayal from last fiveday.

"What did the old hag want?" William asked.

"She just mocked us," Martel replied. "Said she didn't think we could win."

"Strange she only told you. She's usually not shy about letting us all have it," Edward considered.

"Never mind that. I don't want to lose to those bastards. What's our strategy?" William looked at the others.

Martel hesitated to speak. He worried that any tactics he might suggest would only anger Harriet, and she would sabotage their efforts. On the other hand, they needed something, or they would surely lose.

As nobody spoke up, William continued. "How about same as last, except I take the front position, and Harriet behind me? That gives you more time to raise your flame wall." He glanced at the female acolyte. "Meanwhile, Martel and I fight defensively, and you still raise the wall for the right flank." He turned his eyes on Martel.

As good a plan as any. Nobody objected, and the fire acolytes turned around to face the eight mageknights some twenty paces away. Martel recognised Eleanor among them and quickly chided himself; now was not the time to get distracted.

"Begin!" Reynard bellowed, and eight warriors dashed forward.

After releasing his initial fire bolt, Martel stepped in front of Edward. He raised his magical shield to buy him some time while immediately also casting the flame wall spell to close off their right flank. Behind him, he sensed as much as saw fire bolts being released by his fellow acolyte. Ahead, a sword smashed against his head, but was stopped by his shield. Raising his staff, Martel prepared to deflect the next attack the old-fashioned way, saving his spellpower.

For a moment, they held. Several of the mageknights fell out, taken down by multiple hits.

An axe struck the back of Martel's knee, making him fall to the ground. Before he could recover, a kick sent him all the way down in the dirt. Spitting dust, he raised his head to see the same had happened as yesterday; their left flank had crumbled.

Getting up, he looked at the defeated expressions of his fellow acolytes, while the mageknights cheered and laughed. Unlike the last fiveday, Harriet did not meet his gaze. She seemed angered – perhaps even embarrassed at her failure. Martel wanted to chew her out, release some of his frustrations and repay her some of the insults she had once thrown at him, but it felt futile. It would change nothing.

"Still some way to go for the elemental mages," Reynard remarked.

"As long as they're eight against four," Harriet mumbled, to which the other fire acolytes murmured in agreement.

If the Master of War heard them, he chose to ignore the comment. "Back to the usual sparring!"

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Trying to forget about the defeat and his impending detention tomorrow, Martel left the Lyceum and went to the market. It took him a while to gather everything he wanted, having to visit different stalls and vendors. A cauldron along with a few pieces of wood to serve as a foot, and the different herbs he needed. Glass bottles turned out to be prohibitively expensive; Martel ended up buying only one.

When he finally had all that he needed, he continued to the docks. Julia let him inside, and he placed his purchases on the ground. "Ready to do alchemy?"

She nodded with her serious expression; a smile from that girl came more seldom than snow in summer.

They set to work. The plants needed to be prepared; Martel's knife, given to him by Master Jerome, served as their tool for that. It turned out that Julia's offer of help had not been idle; she deftly handled the knife to chop and cut as needed.

"You must have been a great help to your parents in their workshop."

The girl simply shrugged, continuing her work in silence.

Filling the cauldron with water, Martel used a bit of magic to make it boil. In went the ingredients, out came his newly bought ladle, and the stirring began.

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About two hours later, magic glowed in Martel's cauldron. He had used the ringing of temple bells to keep track of time, though he was not sure exactly how long had passed; he wished that he had his Khivan clock with him. Looking down into the pot, the liquid seemed to be as it should, mostly; the light glowed with less intensity than in Mistress Rana's laboratory. Probably because he could not awaken the herbs as well as her, or maybe it had not been boiled and stirred as long as it should.

Regardless, Martel had run out of patience. He also needed to get home from the docks and get some hours of sleep before what promised to be a long, exhausting day tomorrow. "Get the rags," he told Julia.

Using her old clothes, the girl took the handles of the pot and began to tilt.

Wiping his brow, Martel placed the glass bottle on the ground and focused. He was sweating not only from the heat of the cauldron, but also the effort of using his magic to keep the liquid boiling. Now he reached out to connect with the bubbling magic and direct it into the vial.

Cautiously, like stroking a cat until it allowed him to pick it up in his arms, Martel guided the glowing magic into the bottle before corking it.

"Did it work?" Julia asked.

"I believe so." He held up the vial, looking at its orange colour.

"What about this?" She held up the cauldron with the remaining water.

"You can get rid of that."

Resolutely, she moved over to the window and tossed the contents outside. Hopefully nobody stood below on the street. Julia turned back towards Martel. "What will you do with that?"

He glanced at the potion again. He had thought about offering it to her; she could use it more than him. But he realised that as an unproven apprentice, giving his homebrewed elixirs to an orphan child would reflect poorly on him, should anyone ever find out. While he felt certain the potion was safe to drink – it was a simple recipe that he had made several times while supervised by Mistress Rana – it nonetheless sounded bad. "I'll take it home with me, make sure I did it right before I ask anyone else to try out my potions."

"Alright."

"I'll get going. Thanks for your help, Julia."

She nodded, serious as ever. "It was my pleasure."

He left. Once outside the insula, Martel looked at the small bottle in his hands. Before he lost his nerve, he opened it and drank the elixir.